Revolt Against Modernity

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The Crisis of Modernity

The common denominator of the two preceding chapters is the emphasis Voegelin and Strauss placed upon the emerging belief that humans could control their destiny and transform the world. Only when the world became plastic, and humans alienated, could this belief and aspiration become possible. Whether one places the emphasis upon a cosmos purged of gods or on the transformation of nature from a normative order into a physical realm ripe for human manipulation, the modern world becomes the location of human-directed transformation. Humans, meanwhile, go through a radical redefinition. They become alienated but come to believe they can ameliorate this condition. Knowledge, the fulcrum upon which this complex of ideas rests, seems able to transform humans and, in turn, the world. Knowledge brings power, and an empowered human is a creator—we are back to Eve. The creator-human will try to make right what is wrong, will try to transform the malleable world into a proper home, and will try to end forever the anxiety of alienation. Because knowledge played so central a role in this process, moderns had to make especially sharp epistemological judgments. Only that about which they could be certain would they call knowledge. The certainty of their knowledge created great confidence that they were entering a new and luminous age, but even with a plastic world and the human power to mold it, the question of ends remained problematic. By whose lights should humans construct their new world? Do they operate in a world grounded in any transhuman standard? If humans find themselves possessed with Promethean power, do they have wisdom concerning ends?

The modern project of creating a new world and a new "man" de-
pended upon and facilitated a belief in the saving power of human knowledge. As God grew more distant and traditions took on the taint of superstitions-emerging as they did out of the dark past of unenlightened human experience-knowledge became the only acceptable guide to human action. When God withdrew, the empirical sciences expanded. New and workable ways of understanding the physical world reinforced faith in human knowledge until nothing seemed beyond the human ken. "Reason" was the symbol for this human capacity. In all things—in ethics, politics, cosmology—"reason" became the true and reliable guide. The corresponding devaluation of habits, customs, and traditions opened a new space for ever more radical change. A new theodicy pitted the rising power of "reason," ahistorical and abstract theorizing, and universalism against the waning evil forces of an unenlightened past: religion (superstition), tradition, and local particularity. So long as belief in this certainty remained intact, modernity would be immune from any real challenge.

But knowledge was a secondary or facilitory goal; it was freedom (power, creativity, will) that rested at the heart of the Enlightenment project. In subtle but important respects these two goals worked at cross-purposes. The search for truth—so central to Western and Christian self-identity—supposed something beyond human control (e.g., nature). Strauss detected this tension in Machiavelli, who turned nature into a technical problem. Voegelin emphasized the willful heart that sought freedom through knowledge. The differences between the two are matters of emphasis. Nonetheless, Strauss more accurately emphasized the power of the triumph of will over knowledge that has come to characterize the contemporary late modern era, as Strauss's thinking was always more occupied with the crisis of the West. This crisis emerged from the well-spring of Western thought, the search for truth, and as the Enlightenment version of this theme began to dissolve the Christian doctrinal structure, and then Semitic cosmology, it eroded the myths that sustained that search. Without the defining beliefs of the West the personal beliefs concerning moral and political matters were dangerously exposed. Or as Strauss emphasized, borrowing from Nietzsche, Christian morals must eventually go the way of Christian metaphysics.

"The crisis of modernity," Strauss wrote, "reveals itself in the
fact, or consists in the fact, that modern western man no longer
knows what he wants—that he no longer believes that he can know
what is good and bad, what is right and wrong. The disorientation
that characterizes the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries is
the "end" or the logical conclusion of modernity. This part or phase
of modernity occupied much of Strauss's attention because his own
experiences and his early philosophical commitments reinforced in
his mind the danger of the morally empty space left by the failed
project. The danger was great because moderns had cleared the phil-
osophical ground to construct their own edifice—once it crumbled,
the newly homeless had no philosophical structure in which to seek
shelter. They had razed a cathedral to build a rational, efficient
highrise; now only rubble dotted the landscape.

Although one may, with some justification, write about the
"end" of modernity, one cannot write about the path to this end in
the singular. The unraveling of the project is an enormously complex
subject with numerous and apparently unrelated assaults upon En-
lightenment beliefs. We must isolate the more prominent themes in
this process, but nonetheless, the focal point remains the crisis that
Strauss articulated—a culture unable to defend its very principles or
to articulate a clear moral center. "If you will not have God you
should pay your respects to Hitler or Stalin."

The fragility of human knowledge proved to be the Achilles' heel
of the modern project, a point the great philosophers understood.
The period from Descartes to Kant is marked by an obsession with
certainty, by a continuous effort to delimit the area of the knowable
as a means of securing an epistemological grounding. This concern
crossed the great rationalist-empiricist divide. Whether it was Des-
cartes working deductively back to some unquestionable epistemo-
logical ground or an empiricist putting together countless bits of evi-
dence into larger and more comprehensive constructions, the
Enlightenment philosopher worked toward the indubitable. And
then came Hume. When the great Scottish skeptic challenged the
knowability of causation he threatened to tumble the entire house of
constructed knowledge. Most at risk was the epistemological dar-
ing of the age—science. The empirical methods that had evolved in
the most successful areas of inquiry (the physical and natural sci-
ences) largely rested upon some conception of causation. The ability
of scientists to claim predictability as a reasonable goal of their work
was especially vulnerable in this connection. Without predictability the findings of scientists could never serve as a sure means of transforming the world. Similarly, predictability in the world of human behavior was all but hopeless. The modern project, it appeared, had greater limitations than expected.

When Hume’s logical puzzle awakened Kant from his dogmatic slumber, a new phase in the quest for certainty began. In many important respects Kant forever crushed the hope for an all-encompassing knowledge (even as a heuristic ideal) because of the inherent limitedness of the human perspective. Out of the complicated conversation that attended Kant’s work, one can, with some abuse to the subject, discern two broad responses. For some people the search for objective and indubitable knowledge became a moral obligation and, perhaps, an existential imperative. This group included such diverse people as the liberal positivists of the John S. Mill variety (and their successors down to the logical positivists) and the more ideologically charged work of Comte and Marx (both of whom largely ignored Kant’s claims). Others emphasized the historical nature of knowledge and thereby cast into doubt the very possibility of the enterprise occupying the first group. Consequently, the epistemological field of battle was occupied by two groups, one moving toward a hardening ideology and the other toward relativism. The former sought to maintain the dual goals of the Enlightenment, but to do so, they had to supply a non-Christian teleology. The others understood the foundationlessness of all knowledge, which could be either liberating or incapacitating.

Like Voegelin, Strauss detected in the ideological closure of the first group a danger, and perhaps some responsibility for the ideological wars of the twentieth century. Yet the danger posed by the nihilism of the historicists loomed much greater. Strauss considered historicism to be the logical modern response to the limitations of ideology, and as such the final, bankrupt conclusion to the dialectic of modernity. The real challenge to the West, he believed, sprang from historicism.

The focus of the present section is Leo Strauss’s account of the final stage of modernity. The hard core of the modern project, articulated by Machiavelli, was the turning of moral and political problems, once considered part of the human condition, into technical problems. Or, to put the matter another way, Machiavelli rejected
nature as a standard in favor of nature as conditions to overcome, the raw material for human creativity. The manipulative possibilities of a nature turned on its head became evident in the physical sciences (in the work of Francis Bacon, for instance) and political science, in which Hobbes drew out Machiavelli's logic.

But the rejection of the "ancients" (for Strauss moderns are those who reject Platonic-Aristotelian science) by moderns was not exhausted by Machiavelli and the people who followed him. A more radical rejection came with Rousseau's anthropology. Drawing on the social contract theorists, Rousseau radicalized the state of nature. A person in this state was not human, being prerational but full of unlimited potential. Humanness comes through history, or through the process of cultural development. Most important for Strauss was Rousseau's denial of human nature. Rousseau collapsed the good into the rational, and his general will was the expression of the process of rationality. The particular wills of individuals, who must live in societies for reasons of survival, slowly conform to the general will. The universalizing of particular wills through the experiences of social and political life becomes the standard of goodness. "Therefore," wrote Strauss, "the moral laws, as laws of freedom, are no longer understood as natural laws. Moral and political ideals are established without reference to man's nature: man is radically liberated from the tutelage of nature." Human nature is nothing other than historical development up to that point, which is to say, the history of human choices.

The complications of Rousseau's thought make simple reduction impossible. His emphasis upon the freedom in nature, which he contrasted to history, society, morality, and reason, makes the subject treacherous. What is important here is that Strauss stressed Rousseau's effective removal of nature as a standard, even as Rousseau otherwise worked at cross-purposes to the thought of Machiavelli and Hobbes.

The development of a historical consciousness, which came at the expense of "nature," made all of the moral (and hence political) and epistemological bases of Western civilization problematic. In the short run, following the first great historicist, Hegel, the historicity of human thought did not trouble thinkers who retained a strong faith in rationality. Nonetheless, the very nature of historicism undercut this faith, and "Nietzsche was the first to face this situa-
tion. This historicism is the "end" or logical conclusion of modernity. For Strauss, who took his bearings from nature as understood by the ancients, the transformation of nature begun by Machiavelli had finally ended, by the late nineteenth century, in making nature unbelievable to most sensitive thinkers. Strauss's understanding of this philosophical climate becomes clear as we follow his exploration of the thought of two men: Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Strauss used the work of those men to represent two responses to the historicist insight: theoretical or skeptical historicism and existentialism. The distinction is decisive. To understand the contours of Strauss's comparison we turn to the first chapter of *Natural Right and History—or*, more precisely, to the last several pages of that chapter. The majority of the chapter explores historicism in the broader context, but beginning with paragraph twenty-three, Strauss concentrated on the "radical historicists." No names or specific references clutter his analysis, and the historicism he described ends up being logically self-contradictory and, as such, not particularly threatening. Radical historicists avoid this flaw, which presented Strauss with a formidable challenge. In his largely descriptive account of this nemesis one detects clues that point to Strauss's response.

In paragraph twenty-two, Strauss opened up the grand possibility presented by the historicist experience (historical consciousness). He wrote: "Thought that recognizes the relativity of all comprehensive views has a different character from thought which is under the spell of, or which adopts, a comprehensive view. The former is absolute and neutral; the latter is relative and committed. The former is a theoretical insight that transcends history; the latter is the outcome of a fateful dispensation." The insight that all comprehensive views are relative does not demand an incapacitating fatalism—indeed, Strauss hinted at the liberating potential of this discovery—but one catches a whiff of something premodern here.

Strauss did not argue that the discovery was modern as such; in the next paragraph (the paragraph that opens the section on radical historicists), he even hints at the ancient character of the insight. Nietzsche is the crucial or pivotal character in the story—though Strauss only mentioned him once in this chapter. Nietzsche takes his place among the select few whom Strauss designated as true, or truly great, philosophers. Emerging at the end of Enlightenment op-
timism, with the naive progressive hopes of Hegelian historicists and positivists still largely intact, Nietzsche punctured the progressive conceits. Europe was not at or near the end of history, though perhaps the end of a civilization was near. No hope emerged from recent scientific progress because Nietzsche exposed science as only one among many competing ideologies constructed on foundations of sand. The rock of a normative order was simply not exposed to human view. Nietzsche understood this truth to have potentially dire consequences, leading to the destruction of "the protecting atmosphere within which life or culture or action is alone possible." Strauss told the reader that Nietzsche had two options. He could follow Plato and insist upon "the strictly esoteric character of the theoretical analysis of life," or he could "conceive of thought as essentially subservient to, or dependent on, life or fate." The reader learns, therefore, that Plato and Nietzsche possessed the same insight, exposing Strauss's argument that the historicist discovery is not modern but available to humans (or certain humans) at all times.

Nietzsche's choice appears stark, but Strauss leaves room for some maneuvering. "If not Nietzsche himself, at any rate his successors adopted the second alternative." Heidegger, in other words, believed thought to be a function of, and bound to, a historical horizon-or to fate. The existential variation of historicism, which Nietzsche made possible but a renewed interest in Kierkegaard consummated/ emphasized the unavoidability of committed thought, i.e., thought connected with and dependent upon a comprehensive view given to each person as a function of one's place in a cultural and historical horizon. The epistemic context, in other words, provides the necessary but arbitrary ground of all thought.

The modern context provided the ground for the historicist's "fundamental experience which, by its nature, is incapable of adequate expression on the level of noncommitted or detached thought." Like all truths, it depends on fate. The historicist claim is exempt from its own verdict because it "claims merely to mirror the character of historical reality. . . . The self-contradictory character of the historicist thesis should be charged not to historicism but to reality." Fate may close the window to this truth in the future, making it unbelievable, but Strauss argued that the truth that all comprehensive views are relative does not necessitate that one-or a few-
cannot escape them or that this truth is accessible to moderns only. At the center of the section on radical historicism, Strauss explored the relationship between philosophy as classically construed and historicism. He emphasized that historicism rests upon two claims: one, the impossibility of "theoretical metaphysics and of philosophical ethics or natural rights" and two, the insolubility of "the fundamental riddles." 10 Philosophers, on the other hand, conceive of their task to be the understanding of fundamental riddles, and it is because these riddles or problems are fundamental that they represent a permanent or natural structure of human reality. The struggle to understand them requires that one transcend the particularist construction to a more theoretical and abstract level. The reader must assume or believe that these riddles are universal, however, because Strauss only asserts it.

The most formidable challenge historicists pose to philosophers is the claim that philosophy, as the quest for knowledge of the whole, presupposes a whole not in evidence. To the "being" of classical philosophy the historicist counters with "becoming." Strauss does not pursue the complicated issue in the first chapter of Natural Right and History except to suggest that the challenge requires an "unbiased reconsideration of the most elementary premises whose validity is presupposed by philosophy"-i.e., the aim of the book. Still, Strauss emphasized "those simple experiences of right and wrong which are at the bottom of the philosophical contention that there is a natural right." These experiences serve as the prephilosophical source for theoretical analysis, and they point to the universal problems of human existence concerning, especially, the social and political matter of justice. Wrote Strauss: "In grasping these problems as problems, the human mind liberates itself from its historical limitation. No more is needed to legitimize philosophy in its original, Socratic, sense: philosophy is knowledge that one does not know; that is to say, it is knowledge of what one does not know, or awareness of the fundamental alternatives regarding their solution that are coeval with human thought." 11 Thus, Strauss limited the necessary and sufficient condition for philosophy to there being fundamental problems exposed to philosophers as such. 12 One of the premises of historicism is the insolubility of the fundamental riddles, and the insight into this truth gained by the "historical experience" led radical historicists to add another "truth" not logically
entailed by the first: the impossibility of grounding either theoretical metaphysics or philosophical ethics. Strauss rejected this dogmatism and chose to remain a skeptic on such matters.

A careful reader cannot come away from the brief text under examination with any clear understanding of Strauss's thinking. On the one hand, Strauss validates, if not exactly in the open, the core of the historicist experience, i.e., that all comprehensive views are relative. On the other hand, the reader detects his deep concern that historicism leads to (or has led to) a life-denying nihilism. What is most clear is Strauss's contention that radical historicism blinds people to the import of their own experiences of right and wrong, leaving no means to transcend the particular in search of the human and no political will to defend right. Consequently, both philosophy and political philosophy become problematic. What is unclear is how the truth that Strauss affirmed as being as old as philosophy itself becomes life-affirming.

Nietzsche, Strauss believed, both prepared the way for these dire, historicist consequences and pointed the way out. Nietzsche was a historicist who believed in nature, an atheist who sought to vindicate God. To make sense of this paradoxical quality of Nietzsche's thought one must keep in mind the political and social requirements for human (i.e., genuinely human) life. Strauss explained the problem Nietzsche faced.

History becomes a spectacle that for the superficial is exciting and for the serious is enervating. It teaches a truth that is deadly. It shows us that culture is possible only if men are fully dedicated to principles and thought and action which they do not and cannot question, which limit their horizon and thus enable them to have a character and style. It shows us at the same time that any principles of this kind can be questioned and even rejected.¹³

Civilization requires artificial or created metaphysical boundaries that operate like the glass walls of a greenhouse. Compromise the boundaries or walls and you jeopardize the delicate life inside. When the members of a society recognize that their principles rest upon a comprehensive order that cannot be established as right or true, they find themselves unable to defend their most cherished and defining
beliefs. What becomes of justice? Without the promise or hope or idea of justice, what becomes of human civilization?

The apparent solution-life-giving delusion or myth-is hardly satisfactory, or so Strauss would have us believe. At the very least, such myth making is impossible for the philosopher (or for "men of intellectual probity"). The answer rests in the nature of human society. Nietzsche "transformed the deadly truth of relativism into the most life-giving truth.... he discovered that the life-giving comprehensive truth is subjective or transtheoretical in that it cannot be grasped detachedly and that it cannot be the same for all men or for all ages.\textsuperscript{11} By so understanding nature-Le., the nature of political life-Nietzsche had escaped or transcended the realm he studied, joining the other philosophers in a sort of timeless communion of mind. But all of these philosophers transcended only the beliefs necessary to the social and political order, they did not transcend the need for that order. Indeed, by exposing the nature of the political realm to which they were not intellectually or existentially attached, they recognized the requirement that they support it. Does this situation not amount to advocating the unsatisfying solution of the noble lie?

We are well placed, now, to understand what Strauss meant when he wrote that Nietzsche's "doctrine of the will to power ... is in a manner a vindication of God."\textsuperscript{15} In Strauss's last book, the chapter on Nietzsche ("Notes on the Plan of Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil") catches one's attention because it is placed between a chapter on the tension between philosophy and religion and a series of chapters on Maimonides. Moreover, with the exception of a final chapter on Machiavelli, no other chapter in the book deals with a modern thinker.\textsuperscript{16} Nietzsche seems a strange subject for a book that bears the title Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy, but no stranger than Strauss's claim that Nietzsche's will to power is a vindication of God. Still, these arresting details have their purpose.

One might be justified in looking for some clues to the chapter on Beyond Good and Evil in the chapter preceding it. In "Jerusalem and Athens," Strauss explored the creative tension between philosophy (or the life of reason) and biblical faith (the life of obedience). "Western man," he wrote, "became what he is and is what he is through the coming together of biblical faith and Greek thought." What should the reader make of this statement in light of Strauss's claims
elsewhere that in the modern era philosophy has become the history of philosophy and biblical claims no longer operate as unquestioned assumptions? Nietzsche is the modern exemplar of a genuine philosopher who recognized and respected the sources of Western civilization. "Nietzsche has a deeper reverence than any other beholder i.e., one who truly understands! for the sacred tablets of the Hebrews as well as of the other nations in question," but Nietzsche understood that these tablets contradicted the commandments of other cultures. His respect, therefore, did not extend to believing in or being bound by the culture. As a philosopher he sought "the oneness of truth," and he "sought therefore for a culture that would no longer be particular and hence in the last analysis arbitrary. The single goal of Mankind is conceived by him as in a sense super-human: he speaks of the super-man of the future. The super-man is meant to unite in himself Jerusalem and Athens at the highest level."117

Jews and Athenians—or the tension that exists between their ways of seeing—supply "Western man" with his peculiar character, his genius. Strauss's silence regarding Christianity is loud, and the meaning of his silence is not presently clear. What is evident is that Strauss understood Nietzsche in the light of the two traditions to which Strauss himself felt connected. The nature of Nietzsche's attitude toward these two ways of living is complicated, but Strauss placed Nietzsche as a respectful outsider concerning Jerusalem.

In the chapter concerning Beyond Good and Evil, the reader finds numerous comparisons between Plato and Nietzsche. One learns that Beyond Good and Evil is Nietzsche's most Platonic book in terms of its form, by which Strauss meant that unlike Nietzsche's other books—especially Thus Spoke Zarathustra—he wrote esoterically in this one, employing the "graceful subtlety as regards form, as regards intention, as regards the art of silence."118 So in this book, if not in other Nietzsche texts, one must read between the lines. Like Plato and Aristotle, Nietzsche assumed a close relationship between philosophy and religion. Yet while Plato and Aristotle put the choice between the political or philosophic life, Nietzsche emphasized that either philosophy will rule religion or religion will rule philosophy. Since, as Strauss pointed out, Nietzsche "intimates that his precursor par excellence is not a statesman nor even a philosopher but the homo religiosus Pascal," one is led to conclude that religion should rule philosophy or that philosophy must serve the needs of reli-
gion. But Strauss also wrote about one of Nietzsche's precursors, someone who represented an earlier time. The issues confronted by Nietzsche, who lived with the death of God, had been confronted earlier by that precursor, Pascal, within the Christian horizon. The conclusion to which one is drawn applies only to the past; to the ages when God lived. But Nietzsche lived in an age of transition from Christianity to something else, and he wrote *Beyond Good and Evil* as a precursor of the philosopher of the future. Although he was one of those precursors, Nietzsche was nonetheless an heir of Christianity. For Strauss, this was a decisive fact.

Because, as Strauss argued, Nietzsche replaced the Platonic eros and pure mind with the will to power, "philosophizing becomes a mode or modification of the will to power: it is the most spiritual (der geistigste) will to power; it consists in prescribing to nature what or how it ought to be ....; it is not love of the true that is independent of the will or decision." The life-giving creativity of the will to power supplies truths and gods. But to what god could Nietzsche bow? None. He discovered the one detached and deadly truth that the "world in itself ... is wholly chaotic and meaningless." Gods and truths emerge out of human creativity (i.e., the will to power), and meaning and purpose—which ground human civilization—do not depend upon some truth that is independent of human will. As creations they are fictions insofar as they cannot reflect "the world in itself," but in circumstances in which the object is unknowable and all we have are interpretations, a fiction functions much like the truth. The distinction between the world we live in and the world in itself becomes meaningless. Nietzsche rescued truth by defining it as life-giving belief, and life-giving belief issues from the will to power.

Strauss emphasized Nietzsche's praise for the Old Testament. Keeping in mind how Nietzsche had thoroughly oriented human life to interpretations of the world, Strauss's emphasis on Nietzsche's vindication of God comes into perspective. Strauss made the connection this way: "For Nietzsche 'the great style' of (certain parts of) the Old Testament shows forth the greatness, not of God, but of what man once was: the holy God no less than the holy man are creatures of the human will to power." The Jews had (or created) a proper god—the sort of god one could respect. The Jewish god was a rich resource for social and political order, to say nothing of his exis-
tential resources. Nietzsche the atheist could not believe in this god, but as a detached observer he could provide an atheistic vindication of God.22

If God were dead, the need for one like him was not. Strauss emphasized the religiosity that Nietzsche thought characterized an atheistic age (i.e., the age when god is dead). Strauss wrote that Nietzsche's "atheism is not unambiguous, for he had doubts whether there can be a world, any world whose center is not God." The paradox Strauss pointed to is important, though not especially clear. Nietzsche the atheist recognized the necessity of God, without whom no "world" is possible.23 The search for the only important knowledge-self-knowledge-leads to a contradiction, or at least to an impenetrable barrier. Characterizing Nietzsche's position on the seeker of self-knowledge, Strauss wrote: "Precisely because he [i.e., the seeker of self-knowledge] is concerned with the freedom of his own mind he must imprison his heart (Beyond Good and Evil, aphorisms 87, 107). Freedom of one's mind is not possible without a dash of stupidity 19). Self-knowledge is not only very difficult but impossible to achieve; man cannot live with perfect self-knowledge (80-81, 231, 249)." 24 In the aphorisms Strauss cited one notes the relationship between freedom and restraint and between change and the unchangeable. "But at the bottom of our souls," Nietzsche wrote, "quite 'deep down,' there is certainly something unteachable, a granite of spiritual fate, or predetermined decisions and answers to predetermined chosen questions" (aphorism 231).

One begins to detect the reason Strauss argued that Nietzsche pointed the way back to nature. The burden of establishing this claim more firmly falls on the second half of Strauss's chapter (paragraphs seventeen to thirty-seven). Nietzsche's fifth (and central) chapter, "Toward the Natural History of Morality," serves as the point of departure. Strauss noted that the earlier chapter on religion was not titled "a natural history of religion." The reason, he emphasized, was that religious experiences are inaccessible to the one examining religious beliefs.25 A taxonomy of morals is possible without recourse to the hidden world of private experience (much less numinous experience). Still, Strauss noted, Nietzsche argued that no such knowledge provides the means for a "philosophic ethics, a science of morals which teaches the only true morality." The problem plaguing such a science is the false belief that morals belong to
the natural order, which human reason discovers. In sharp contrast to rational morality, Nietzsche affirmed that, in Strauss's words, "every morality is based on some tyranny against nature as well as against reason." The imposition of a moral order is, from the standpoint of reason, arbitrary, but not for that reason undesirable. The coercive conditions of a moral code provide the necessary condition for "everything of value, every freedom." But if these desirable results emerge from a revolt against nature, how is it that Nietzsche pointed the way back to nature?

To understand Strauss's answer to this problem, we consider briefly one of Nietzsche's most important aphorisms (188). Strauss noted it, and pointed out that within the aphorism Nietzsche always used nature in quotes, except for his final reference to it. Nature, Strauss suggested, "has become a problem for Nietzsche and yet he cannot do without nature." Nietzsche's aphorism turns on the paradox that freedom rests on coercion, greatness on stupidity; all great achievements owe their existence to the "tyranny of arbitrary laws." Nietzsche wrote: "The essential thing 'in heaven and earth' is, apparently ... that there should be long obedience in the same direction; from this there results, and has always resulted in the long run, something that has made life worth living; for instance, virtue, art, music, dancing, reason, spirituality-anything whatever that is transfiguring, refined, foolish, or divine." A human, totally free and unencumbered, lacks the conditions, the restraints, the context, to be genuinely free and creative. The conclusion of aphorism 188 warrants a lengthy quotation:

It ("nature"!) teaches the narrowing of perspectives, and thus, in a certain sense, stupidity as a condition of life and development. "Thou must obey some one, and for a long time; otherwise thou wilt come to grief, and lose all respect for thyself"-this seems to me to be the moral imperative of nature, which is certainly neither "categorical," as old Kant wished ... nor does it address itself to the individual ... but to nations, races, ages, and ranks, above all, however, to the animal "man" generally, to mankind.

Nietzsche found in nature a moral imperative not to live by "nature." One sees, I think, what Strauss meant when he wrote that na-
ture "has become a problem for Nietzsche and yet he cannot do without nature."

Nietzsche, as Strauss understood him, believed he lived between two noble ages (though any future is unknown and unpredictable). The will to power had acted unconsciously in the past to create gods and moralities, and thus the tyranny and "slavery" that are the "indispensable means even of spiritual education and discipline" (aphorism 188). The awful truth of God's death, which springs from "the historical sense," is also the contemporary generation's greatest virtue. The philosopher of the future will be the "first man who consciously creates values on the basis of the understanding of the will to power as the fundamental phenomenon." In this sense the philosopher of the future will be supplied with the knowledge of nature lacking before, thus putting him in a position of giving humans what they have heretofore lacked - a nature ("for the nature of a being is its end, its completed state, its peak").

The creation of "natural man" - which is the highest freedom and creativity and, as such, represents the conquest of nature - does not solve the problem of nature that, Strauss thought, plagued Nietzsche. Nature, not reason, made human achievement possible because "all thought depends on something 'deep down,' on a fundamental stupidity." The struggle against "non-sense and chance," against the chaotic and meaningless world, is the necessary condition for the creation of the natural man. The conquering of the natural world (of inequality, chance, and nonsense) destroys the very ground for the "moral imperative of nature," which requires a "narrowing of perspectives," and a recognition of "stupidity as a condition of life and development" (aphorism 188). The modern condition, when the natural conditions were being ameliorated and a herd morality was replacing older, more noble, and life-affirming moralities, required that heretofore natural conditions be henceforth willed. Strauss wrote: "Nature, the eternity of nature, owes its being to a postulation, to an act of the will to power on the part of the highest nature."

Strauss's essay is ambiguous and, I think, evasive. Most significantly, Strauss left vague the confusing array of meanings he and Nietzsche gave to the word "nature." In some places it referred to the natural conditions, i.e., chance, nonsense, struggle, inequality (nature one), but he also used the word to mean the end or peak of a
being (nature two). Also, nature refers to that unteachable deep down, that fundamental stupidity (nature three). In what sense, then, did Nietzsche point to nature? One must focus on Strauss's claim that for Nietzsche, nature became a problem but that he could not do without nature. "Nature ... has become a problem owing to the fact that man is conquering nature and there are no assignable limits to that conquest. As a consequence, people have come to think of abolishing suffering and inequality. Yet suffering and inequality are the prerequisites of human greatness." Nature two depends on nature one. Nature three, meanwhile, has a special character as the individual source of all thought—the authentic self. "Stupidity," Nietzsche wrote, is a "condition of life and development" (aphorism 188). This quotation comes in the context of nature teaching the "narrowing of perspectives." The will to power is this narrowing, the creation and affirmation of beliefs by a people (a tribe). It is particular and, in a sense, arbitrary—but life-affirming. The nature here is the deep down that seeks to create the world in its image; philosophy is "the most spiritual Will to Power" because philosophers seek to create a world out of their stupidity (aphorism 9).

In all these senses, then, Nietzsche affirmed nature as the condition for greatness and creativity. Nonetheless, he wrote Beyond Good and Evil for the philosophers of the future—as a prelude to the philosophy of the future—because Western civilization stood in need of a spiritual will to power. Modernity had killed God but had affirmed nothing life-giving to replace it. The terrible truth enervated moderns who had nothing in which to believe except a weak morality shorn of the God who issued it. Yet as Strauss suggested, Nietzsche transformed this truth into an affirmation of life because he detected the natural foundations, or conditions of nature, necessary for noble thought. Strauss ended this difficult chapter on Nietzsche with a sentence written in German, but not, so far as I can tell, a quotation: Die vormehe Natur ersetzt die göttliche Natur ("the noble nature replaces divine nature"). God, created by the will to power, had died, and any fresh expression of that will must take into account that death.

Nietzsche is a special case. Strauss associated Nietzsche with the third wave of modernity in the same way he associated Machiavelli and Rousseau with the first two waves. In this sense, Strauss consid-
ered Nietzsche modern. But for Strauss, Nietzsche also pointed the way out of modernity, i.e., he pointed in the direction of the ancients, and this ambiguity is perhaps the richest source for speculation in Strauss's thought. An attempt to resolve finally this tension would do a terrible injustice to his thinking, for the question as to whether Strauss was Nietzschean or not is, simply, the wrong question.32

The ambiguity of Strauss's interpretation rests primarily on the fact that Nietzsche was a historicist who pointed to nature as the answer to the modern problem. His historicism provided much of the intellectual groundwork for the development of the most radical form of historicism, what Strauss designated existentialism. Nietzsche saw the emptiness of modern rationality, and his withering critique "cannot be dismissed or forgotten." His critique cannot be dismissed because it was entirely correct, and for moderns (in this case, those blinded to the ancient alternative) who see his point, the moral and political landscape must appear as bleak as Hiroshima on 7 August 1945. The point, if we are not careful, can get lost. The danger Nietzsche poses is the naked truth about the core of modernity—"this is the deepest reason for the crisis of liberal democracy." One remembers that Strauss defined this crisis as the inability to believe in anything—at least in anything concerning the social and political good. To the degree that a society is committed to the modern project it is vulnerable to Nietzsche's critique.33

"Nietzsche," wrote Strauss, "is the philosopher of relativism: the first thinker who faced the problem of relativism in its full extent and pointed to the way in which relativism can be overcome."34 The optimism that still pervaded post-Hegel historicism was the final gasp of a nonpositivist modernity. Nietzsche recognized that the truth of historicism—its radical relativism—destroyed a belief in progress, which was so much a part of nineteenth-century thought. Most important, knowledge, truths, and beliefs are all products of premises that themselves cannot be questioned. Humans (qua social beings) must be committed to some way of looking at reality, but the historicist recognizes that all such commitments are groundless. Strauss wrote: "History i.e., historical consciousness! becomes a spectacle that for the superficial is exciting and for the serious is enervating. It teaches a truth that is deadly. It shows us that culture is possible only if men are fully dedicated to principles of thought
and action which they do not and cannot question, which limit their horizon and thus enable them to have a character and a style. It shows us at the same time that any principles of this kind can be questioned and even rejected.  

The principles one may reject are those historically limited principles that historical consciousness has exposed as such. The multiplicity of values and truths, like those encountered by Socrates who found different gods giving different revelations, may send one into a nihilist despair, or it may spur one to transcend the multiplicity of truths. "What man did in the past unconsciously and under the delusion of submitting to what is independent of his creative act, he must now do consciously." 

This transvaluation of values is made possible through an understanding of the nature of things, i.e., that values and truths are human creations. The truths built upon this foundation are sturdier for the recognition of the nature of things. As philosophers committed to knowledge but convicted by ignorance, Strauss and Nietzsche saw what people committed to other goals could not. They had, as it were, a detached perspective with regard to the moral truths that ground others, but their commitment to knowledge is, in the Socratic sense, a mania that limits the perspective of the philosopher. The moral or religious truths are inaccessible to philosophers qua philosophers because those truths rest upon a different epistemological foundation. The contents of these beliefs are unbelievable to the philosopher, but not the fact and social necessity of them in their many forms).

Strauss argued that Nietzsche had come to accept the superiority of nature over "history" and that in this way he had "transformed the deadly truth of relativism into the most life-giving truth." What should one think about Strauss’s remarks? More is here than first meets the eye. Notice what Strauss wrote immediately following the above quotation: "To state the case with all necessary vagueness, he discovered that the life-giving comprehensive truth is subjective or transtheoretical in that it cannot be grasped detachedly and that it cannot be the same for all men or for all ages." Strauss went on to suggest the problems inherent in Nietzsche’s philosophy, most important whether the will to power is a "subjective project." The natural and universal quality of Nietzsche’s doctrine first impressed Strauss with the importance of reason and nature. Here was the beginning of Strauss’s journey back to the ancients.
Nietzsche failed to break free from modernity, and by exposing the utter failure of modern philosophy, he buried philosophy. Nietzsche had not challenged his philosophical tradition radically enough and thus found himself trapped by the tradition he tried to overcome. More specifically, Nietzsche's historical understanding of human nature (i.e., it "is essentially historical") meant that he and the overman must be heirs of Christianity.

Not only was biblical morality as veracity or intellectual probity at work in the destruction of biblical theology and biblical morality; not only is it at work in the question of that very probity, of "our virtue, which alone has remained to us"; biblical morality will remain at work in the morality of the overman. The overman is inseparable from "the philosophy of the future." The philosophy of the future is distinguished from traditional philosophy, which pretended to be purely theoretical, by the fact that it is consciously the outcome of a will: the fundamental awareness is not theoretical, but theoretical and practical, inseparable from an act of the will or a decision. The fundamental awareness characteristic of the new thinking is a secularized version of the biblical faith as interpreted by Christian theology.

Philosophy as understood by the ancients must be overcome by a commitment to faith, to the will to power. The Socratic commitment to theory, to searching for knowledge while remaining skeptical about all claims to knowledge, to the philosophical way of living, would have no place if all thought were committed thought.

Nietzsche's transformation of relativism into a life-giving truth was lost or rejected by the philosophers who followed. Strauss often spoke of Nietzsche's followers, but he meant Heidegger. The specter of Heidegger haunts nearly every page of Strauss's work. Sometimes Strauss acknowledged him in oblique ways, like a poke in the ribs of the initiated; on other occasions he tossed out Heidegger's name as being the greatest and most dangerous modern thinker, but never did Strauss publish an extended study of this greatest of modern philosophers. The only work, excluding some relatively brief remarks, that we have on this subject is the transcript of a lecture with the title "An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism." This difficult
source, however, presents special problems for interpretation. The lecture moves between personal observations, including sweeping characterizations and oblique references, and a historical and descriptive account. The form makes the problem of voice especially difficult. In general, then, Strauss avoided a sustained analysis of Heidegger's work. One senses in all his brief feints a hidden and mammoth struggle to answer a nemesis.

Strauss and Heidegger shared an intellectual heritage. Both men drew from Husserl a common critique of modernity. Husserl argued that scientists fail to understand that their understanding of the world (qua scientists) is derivative of "our natural understanding," and Husserl and Strauss sought to recover those prescientific experiences that make theorizing possible. Heidegger wanted a deeper level. He sought "not the object of perception but the full thing as experienced as part of the individual human context, the individual world to which it belongs." Heidegger wanted to deconstruct Western ontology dating back to Plato, arguing, in Strauss's words, that "the merely sensibly perceived thing is itself derivative; there are not first sensibly perceived things and thereafter the same thing in a state of being valued or in a state of affecting us." The creative freedom of humans replaced the eternal essences of Plato as the ontological ground: existence precedes essence. So one sees that the natural world of prerational experience that Plato, Husserl, and Strauss assumed (and which formed the "objective" basis for theoretical-scientific-investigation) became the personal, individual creation of the "thrown" person.

Heidegger's rejection of Platonism (and hence Christianity as vulgarized Platonism) was more thorough than Nietzsche's. The entire discourse of "nature" bad decentered the individual or, rather, bad cut the individual off from the ground of his being. Modern homelessness (Bodenlosegkeit) testifies to the way modem thought-with roots back to Plato-had abstracted human life. By replacing the ontological universality of forms (nature) privileged in the West with a contextualized ontology (historicism), Heidegger hoped to ground human society in existence. Such a reorientation to the life-world circumvents the old dead-end ontological and epistemological questions while securing the conditions for human greatness that emerges from fidelity toward one's "existence" (i.e., life as experienced as rooted in a particular society-Bodensandigkeit). Heideg-
ger, Strauss argued, could dream of a universal world order once the nihilist ontology inherited from Plato and Christianity had lost all force. The danger of this era was coupled with great possibility. As Strauss put it, "A dialogue between the most profound thinkers of the Occident and the most profound thinkers of the Orient and in particular East Asia may lead to the consummation prepared, accompanied or followed by a return of the gods."47 Thus Heidegger's creative ontology opened possibilities closed by Platonism.

We have touched now upon the primary theoretical differences between Strauss and Heidegger: Strauss accepted the Platonic ontology grounded upon nature while Heidegger denied nature in favor of the creative will of "existing" humans. Nonetheless, the penetration of his philosophy, the admirable and manly search for truth no matter its effect, made Heidegger a worthy opponent for Strauss. Other thinkers had circled around the serious issues raised by modernity, but only Heidegger did not flinch from the abyss that lay beneath. Even if others did not face the real problem as squarely, however, they did experience a growing anxiety and sense of alienation as the ground of objective knowledge crumbled beneath them. For this reason Heideggerian existentialism thrived. The conditions, created by the failure of modern rationalism, convinced Strauss that the West had a fateful choice to make: "The question Plato or existentialism [sic] is today the ontological question."48 In other words, the choice is between the ancients and the moderns (nature or history).

This dualism reminds us that for Strauss, modernity took its bearings from Platonic-Aristotelian science. As the first modern, Machiavelli consciously rejected the ancients in order to create "new modes and orders," and the people who inherited the new thinking lost sight of what they were reacting against. Political philosophers, nonetheless, continued through much of the modern era to ask the question that designates one a political philosopher: What is the good? Words like "good" and "justice" have meaning as long as people believe in human nature, and even when moderns sought to control rather than to live by nature, the constitutive questions of political philosophy remained possible—that is, as long as people argued from an anthropology. Take away, however, people's faith in "reason" dedicated to discovering and articulating these goods, abstract facts from the valuative political reality from which they grew, doubt the truth of civilization's (one's own civilization, that is)
most cherished goals and political philosophy ceases to be a possibility. According to Strauss, once moderns came to believe that human values and ideas emerge from the changing conditions, "justice" became nothing more than a belief made possible by the intellectual conditions of one's own time. The radical subjectivity of Heidegger's existentialism was simply the acceptance of one's fate. Creativity and will take the place of nature and science (philosophy), and the life of faith overwhelms the life of reason.

THE PROBLEM WITH LIBERALISM: LEO STRAUSS

Modernity leads to the blond beast. The traumatic experiences of Nazism and the terror of World War II shaped the work of both Strauss and Voegelin in ways easy to see but difficult to calculate. In such disordered times they struggled to understand and then to transcend. Much like Nietzsche, both sought to order his own soul in resistance to the times. They offered no grand designs, nor did they introduce systems of their own. Political and social order is a function of the orderliness of the souls of the citizens. They were good Plato- nists. But the ideological madness that had gripped Germany and Italy, and which still gripped the Soviet Union and its puppets, seemed not only dissimilar but even the polar opposite of the stable and prosperous democracy in the United States. If modernity leads to ideological madness, either because diseased souls seek certainty or because the loss of faith in reason leaves room for the free reign of the libido dominandi, the United States seemed free from either condition. The United States, according to conventional wisdom, had become postideological.

America, to whatever degree these assumptions were true, was not simply and unambiguously liberal. Voegelin and Strauss, as it turns out, had high regard for the United States and its citizens. The ideological fashions of Europe had struck, initially at least, glancing blows. The "premodern" characteristics retained a strong hold, and the citizens were sufficiently suffused with the commonsense tradition that the few people who did get passionate about political beliefs were powerless intellectuals. These characteristics were changing, however. Liberalism (the use of an "ism" here suggests an ideology) won impressive gains among the educated classes during
the course of the twentieth century. The list of beliefs that became articles of faith among liberals are familiar: an affirmation of equality (in all its earthly manifestations), a belief in progress (both ineluctable and materially oriented), a faith in science and technology to solve human "problems," the instrumentalizing of reason toward the realization of goods understood in exclusively worldly terms, the belief that a social and political order is a matter of free consent (or should be), the centralization of power for purposes of efficiency (and the elevating of efficiency to a good), the privatization of morals, the affirmation of the sovereignty of the individual, and the sacralizing of rights to name only a few. It is not important that these tendencies have precise meaning (indeed, it is important for their social success that they do not), only that we recognize a broad trend that has resonance with the themes identified as modern. We may clarify some of these issues by looking at the attitude of Strauss and then Voegelin toward liberalism, especially as it infected the United States.

Strauss emphasized that the American founding emerged from the first wave of modernity, that is, from a strain of thought associated with Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke. He did not, however, understand the founding by reference to these thinkers alone. Strauss wrote that the United States was the only country "founded in explicit opposition to Machiavellian principles." Thus the character of American liberal democracy is bound up in its partial appropriation of modern thought. One may understand that Strauss believed American liberal democracy was in some sense salvageable; that in the modern context it represented a superior regime worthy of support and admiration. Strauss supported the American regime by calling for an examination and a reaffirmation of the traditional ideals of liberal democracy, and he sought to contribute to American liberalism by reviving political philosophy.

If the American founding took its bearings from the tradition inaugurated by Machiavelli, but not from Machiavelli himself, the transformations wrought by Hobbes and Locke appear decisive. Machiavelli, we recall from Chapter 4, broke from classical political philosophy by offering a critique of religion and morality. Hidden though he was in pious and traditionalist intellectual garb, Machiavelli was irreligious and amoral. Strauss, however, was generally unconcerned, at least by all appearances, with Machiavelli's critique
of religion, which was "not original"; more important for Strauss was Machiavelli's "critique of morality which is identical to his critique of classical political philosophy." Strauss often equated morality with political matters. Thus, the chief political objective, as least insofar as the ancients were concerned, is justice. Or, to put the matter a different way, justice is the highest goal of a political order. One may say that a regime has perfected itself to the extent that its political system had achieved justice i.e., satisfied the demands of justice as an idea). Machiavelli rejected justice as a proper political goal on the grounds that such an objective could never be realized. He agreed with Plato that a just political order requires luck. A just society is so unlikely as to present no reasonable hope for fulfillment.

Machiavelli dropped the ideal of the just society-the political "ought"-from his calculations, which freed him to explore manipulative possibilities with society as it presented itself to him. Unlike the ancients, he would no longer be guided by the highest in humans, by human excellence. "Machiavelli's 'realistic' revolt against tradition [i.e., the classical tradition] led to the substitution of patriotism or merely political virtue for human excellence or, more particularly, for moral virtue and the contemplative life." Strauss argued that Machiavelli's contraction of the political horizon i.e., eliminating the perfectly just order) opened up a whole new universe of possibility. Insofar as Machiavelli no longer felt bound by a restrictive paradigm, he could conceive of new goals and objectives, of new men and new societies. The transformations he envisioned required "enlightenment." Strauss wrote:

Machiavelli is the first philosopher who attempted to force change, to control the future by embarking on a campaign, a campaign of propaganda. This propaganda is of the opposite pole of what is now called propaganda, high-pressure salesmanship and hold-up of captive audiences. Machiavelli desires to convince, not merely to persuade or to bully. He was the first of a long series of modern thinkers who hoped to bring about the establishment of new modes and orders by means of enlightenment.

Two related alternatives in the tradition of political philosophy re-
mained fundamentally unaltered from Machiavelli to the American founding: lowering the objective in order to lessen the role of chance in human affairs and the belief that enlightenment will bring about a better political order. What did not survive during this period was Machiavelli's rejection of justice as the proper political objective.

Thomas Hobbes, according to Strauss, reaffirmed natural right (i.e., justice) by emphasizing ubiquitous human drives and desires rather than the classically understood human end (which only a few people can achieve). Moreover, Hobbes rejected the construction of natural man as being social and, hence, political. He began, along with the Epicureans, with the individual human-unconnected, asocial. Using this understanding of human nature, Hobbes could no longer think in terms of social and political justice but conceived of natural right in terms of the primordial drives of autonomous man. Hobbes's political hedonism, as Strauss labeled it, "revolutionized human life everywhere on a scale never yet approached by other teachings." The "good" moved from the lofty heights of forms to the visceral drives of individual humans. The consequences proved dramatic, the most obvious being that modern natural right disconnects rights from duty. Hobbes left nothing to which humans ought to aspire—nothing, that is, beyond their most basic drives and ambitions. Humans are beholden to their passions, nothing more. By contrast, the ancients lived within a paradigm that called them to human excellence and a social order attuned to the hierarchy of ends. After Hobbes this paradigm no longer had the same purchase; moderns lived disconnected from duties.

In truly modern fashion, Hobbes sought to ground political philosophy on apodictic knowledge, in contrast to the "utopian" dreams of the ancients. He found terra firma, following Descartes's lead, by applying the acid of radical skepticism to the soft rock of human knowledge. What remained had to be indubitable and solid, and upon this rock Hobbes built his political order. He found that human knowledge extends only to those things humans create or cause. Thus, he had not only cast out the classical teleological cosmology but found a mechanistic notion of the universe unable to "satisfy the requirement of intelligibility." The greatest good emerged out of "the most compelling end posited by human desire." Once Hobbes brought the greatest good down to earth, the
method of exploring the subject changed. Social science usurped philosophy as the highest and most needful knowledge.\textsuperscript{56}

If proper human ends emerge from human desires, the greatest (most powerful) and most universal desire serves best to identify human nature, which is the only source for natural right. The most powerful desire, expressed negatively, is fear of violent death (i.e., desire for self-preservation). Society, or more particularly the political order, is a human construct designed to address this need—by lowering, insofar as is practical, incidences of violent death. Society and government serve this prepolitical right of self-preservation. Consequently, "the fundamental moral fact is not a duty but a right, all duties are derivative from the fundamental and inalienable right of self-preservation." In Hobbes's political philosophy Strauss discovered the direct source of modern liberalism insofar as the word liberalism means a focus on rights before duties, on the individual as antecedent to the state.\textsuperscript{57}

The centrality of Hobbes to Strauss's understanding of the crisis of American liberalism is evident. First, Hobbes jettisoned the entire tradition of political philosophy oriented toward human excellence, thus freeing the state from any obligation other than safeguarding individual natural rights. As a consequence, he reduced justice to the protection of rights rooted in nature. Second, Hobbes transformed political philosophy from the search for the highest and best regime (i.e., creating regimes in speech) into a source for political action. Political philosophers in the Hobbesian mode claim indubitable knowledge, universally applicable, that will transform the world. Moreover, the sort of knowledge required in this new age changed, and social science became the science of liberalism to the extent that it exposed conditions as they are. Hobbes presented the vision of a political order, fashioned by enlightened humans, capable of actualization here and now: a just order, created out of mutual consent and dedicated to the protection of natural rights. Political philosophy had become political science—theory had degenerated into techne.

What the bold Hobbes began, the "cautious" Locke completed. Strauss's argument with regard to both philosophers is, in crucial respects, unorthodox. His characterization of Hobbes's religious heterodoxy is not unusual, though in some particulars Strauss's argument is unique. What is more extraordinary is that he found in Locke a
similar attitude toward religion. We must note Strauss's heterodoxy here, not to referee between him and others, but to emphasize the crucial theoretical challenge that the philosophers of liberalism posed to classical and biblical models. Locke presented himself as the most orthodox defender of the faith in order to persuade his readers of unorthodox beliefs. By penetrating to the core of Locke's argument, Strauss hoped to expose the logic of liberalism.58

Locke used Richard Hooker as camouflage. According to Strauss, Locke wasted no opportunity to point to his agreement with Hooker (an undeniable defender of the faith) while remaining silent, with one exception, concerning their differences. Similarly, Locke paraded out the usual natural law doctrines and Christian teachings. After examining Locke's affirmations of orthodoxy, Strauss wrote:

We thus arrive at the conclusion that Locke cannot have recognized any law of nature in the proper sense of the term. This conclusion stands in shocking contrast to what is generally thought to be his doctrine, and especially the doctrine of the Second Treatise. Before turning to an examination of the Second Treatise, we beg the reader to consider the following facts: the accepted interpretation of Locke's teaching leads to the consequence that "Locke is full of illogical flaws and inconsistencies," of inconsistencies, we add, which are so obvious that they cannot have escaped the notice of a man of his rank and his sobriety. Furthermore, the accepted interpretation is based on what amounts to a complete disregard of Locke's caution, of a kind of caution which is, to say the least, compatible with so involving one's sense that one cannot easily be understood and with going with the herd in one's outward professions. Above all, the accepted interpretation does not pay sufficient attention to the character of the Treatise; it somehow assumes that the Treatise contains the philosophical presentation of Locke's political doctrine, whereas it contains, in fact, only its "civil" presentation.59

Locke paid greater attention and homage to the philosophical and religious tradition he inherited than did Hobbes, but Locke followed the path Hobbes blazed.60

Like Hobbes, Locke found no natural law but rather universal hu-
man characteristics that establish natural rights but not duties. Natural law becomes "reason"-or the capacity to secure natural rights. The right of self-preservation still serves as the most fundamental right, establishing the need for peace and security. But whereas Hobbes remained more or less stuck on this right—and was willing therefore to give sovereignty to a single leader—Locke emphasized the right to pursue happiness. Moreover, he connected both rights with property, which helps secure peace and provide happiness.

It was Locke's view of property that most clearly separated him from Hobbes. The right to property emerges in Locke as an adjunct to the primary right to life. "If everyone has the natural right to preserve himself," wrote Strauss, "he necessarily has the right to everything that is necessary for his self-preservation." The individual who wishes to sustain himself must secure goods. Thus, while civil society sanctions and protects property, the origin of property is the self-interest of the individual. The existence of government alters the rights associated with property. In nature one has right only to the product of one's labor, to that part of nature improved by one's hand. With the introduction of money individuals are free to own much more than their labor can produce, without injury to others. Locke not only freed acquisitiveness from its traditional moral constraints but transformed it into a virtue. Great wealth is only possible in a society in which individuals are free to acquire as much as possible. Strauss summed up the relationship thus:

If the end of government is nothing but "the peace, the safety, and public good of the people"; if peace and safety are the indispensable conditions of plenty, and the public good of the people is identical with plenty; if the end of government is therefore plenty; if plenty requires the emancipation of acquisitiveness; and if acquisitiveness necessarily withers away whenever its rewards do not securely belong to those who serve them—if all this is true, it follows that the end of civil society is "the preservation of property."

Despite Locke's use of natural law as a cover, Strauss found his philosophy to be subversive to both strands of the natural law tradition—biblical religion (or the moral teachings of the Bible) and clas-
sical political philosophy. First, Locke defended unlimited acquisition of wealth on the grounds that such freedom is just. Second, like Hobbes, Locke oriented his philosophy around the individual (the ego)-or, more precisely, around the individual understood in terms of his "natural" and most fundamental drives. "Man's end" played no part in Locke's thinking. Thus modern natural right had become exclusively occupied with rights, while denying duties. "Not resigned gratitude and consciously obeying or imitating nature," Strauss complained, "but hopeful self-reliance and creativity became henceforth the mark of human nobility." 67

Effectively unhinged from a normative order, the fecund if banal human imagination seeks happiness by harnessing old vices. The common good stands for the freedom of individuals to pursue their selfish ends in peace and security. Because the objective of this political philosophy is to achieve the best possible regime in accordance with the most universal human drives and needs, philosophy as understood by the ancients becomes eclipsed by social science. Reason becomes instrument reason-a tool to help reshape society.

To return to the American founding and liberal democracy, Strauss found in the United States a rejection of Machiavelli's dismissal of justice. To clarify the point, let me return to the quotation with which I began this portion of the inquiry: "The United States of America may be said to be the only country in the world which was founded in explicit opposition to Machiavellian principles." If one reads the rest of the paragraph in which this quotation appears, one will understand the point.

According to Machiavelli, the founder of the most renowned commonwealth of the world was a fratricide: the foundation of political greatness is necessarily laid in crime. If we can believe Thomas Paine, all governments of the Old World have an origin of this description; their origin was conquest and tyranny. But "the independence of America was] accompanied by a Revolution in the principles and practice of Governments": the foundation of the United States was laid in freedom and justice. "Government founded on a moral theory, on a system of universal peace, on the indefeasible hereditary Rights of Man, is now revolving from west to east by a stronger impulse than the Government of the sword revolved from east to west." This judg-
ment is far from being obsolete. While freedom is no longer a preserve of the United States, the United States is now the bulwark of freedom. And contemporary tyranny has its roots in Machiavelli's thought, in the Machiavellian principle that the good end justifies the means. At least to the extent that the American reality is inseparable from the American aspiration, one cannot understand Americanism without understanding Machiavellianism which is its opposite. 8

Justice and freedom (two closely related ideals in this context) inspired the American founding, not tyranny and injustice. Moreover, the ideals of the American founding were grounded, as the founders and citizens understood them, in nature understood as an end, so they presented an unchangeable model for a just regime. The American regime was founded upon natural right (albeit more or less modern natural right). Americans have, until recently at least, had such faith in their idea of the good society that even when in action they fell short, they reaffirmed their goal. This idea restricted (or harnessed) the creative freedom espoused by Machiavelli. All teleologies restrict. Nonetheless, the goals of modern natural right suffer from a tendency to self-destruct. In the United States this weakness was not readily apparent because the American regime was founded, not on this principle alone, but on modern natural right as modified (or buttressed) by strongly held beliefs in revelation (both traditional Christian morality and the cosmology that supported it) and republican virtues. These beliefs tended to qualify rights in practice—to emphasize a sort of model for the proper use of one's rights or liberty.

Beyond this point it is difficult to go because Strauss wrote so little about this subject. Nonetheless, with all the lacunae in his work, one detects some of the developments that stripped modern natural right of its countervailing constraints and left the United States to drift toward moral relativism, which looses a people's commitments to the ideals for which they, as a collective, stand.

Strauss began Natural Right and History by quoting from the Declaration of Independence. The question he raised deals not with the failure of the ideals bound up in the Declaration; rather, it reads, "Does this nation in its maturity still cherish the faith in which it was conceived and raised?" It is safe to say, I think, that Strauss affirmed this "faith" and was, to that degree, a friend of liberal democ-
racy, or at least of a modified or protected form. The Declaration of Independence refers not only to unalienable rights but also to their divine source. Thus, the liberalism of the United States—in the beginning—drew sustenance from modern natural right theory: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and also from premodern beliefs in the Christian God and classical republican notions of virtue. The two faiths (modern and premodern) established a regime in liberty—freedom understood as a protected right—in the context of Christian teleology and morality (not to mention republican themes that were largely understood in Christian terms). Still on the first page of *Natural Right and History*, Strauss wrote: "About a generation ago, an American diplomat could still say that 'the natural and the divine foundation of the rights of man ... is self-evident to all Americans.'" In other words, Americans understood natural rights from a Christian perspective, and so long as this protective atmosphere remained, modern natural rights posed no danger and actually supported a healthy social and political order. Unalienable rights were lodged in a larger moral framework that shaped the range of appropriate uses of these freedoms.

Nonetheless, in the first paragraph of *Natural Right and History*, Strauss offered a contrast between the United States and the Germany of a generation ago (from the vantage point of 1950), only to argue that the United States was moving toward a German type of relativism. "Whatever might be true of the American people, certainly American social science has adopted the very attitude toward natural right which, a generation ago, could still be described, with some plausibility, as characteristic of German thought." The introduction of social science so early in the book is important, as the kind of knowledge a people most esteem shapes the kind of society they become. In Germany, with Max Weber and others, social science, with its characteristic fact/value distinction, became the dominant academic and intellectual form. Strauss thought the same transformation was taking place in contemporary America, and the practical effects of this change proved dramatic. Strauss wrote that social scientists in the United States are "dedicated to the proposition that all men are endowed by the evolutionary process or by a mysterious fate with many kinds of urges and aspirations, but certainly with no natural right." Strauss argued, in short, that with the growth in the prestige of the social sciences even modern natural right cannot sur-
vive. This is the crisis of liberal democracy—to be wedded to ideals that are no longer defensible as good. Modern natural right, shorn of religious support, paradoxically leads to relativism.

To unpack the meanings behind the "crisis of liberalism" one must examine the role Strauss believed social science plays in liberal democracy. In Chapter 3, I examined his argument that social scientists (qua positivists) moved, rather like sheep to slaughter, from firm belief in certain values (i.e., liberal democratic values) to an inability to affirm any values. In the present context the politically incapacitating characteristics of social science are most important. Social science has its roots in the modern project of controlling nature, and to the degree that that statement is true, Strauss traced its origin to Machiavelli. Modern understanding of nature led naturally to the elevation of the sort of knowledge useful for controlling or manipulating nature (including human nature). The Platonic/Aristotelian philosophy/science presented too metaphysical an orientation for moderns who chose to separate philosophy and science into distinct forms of knowledge. The success of the nonmetaphysical science—especially in physics—inspired a further devaluation of philosophy. Science represented power, human power, but science could not address the question of how this power ought to be used. In the context of a liberal democratic society, one in which society and government serve to protect natural right (including providing the best possible environment for its unhampered exercise), the question of the wise use of power rests with the individual. Thus, science—including social science—came to occupy a privileged place in liberal democracies as the source of knowledge that individual citizens may use to pursue their personal goods.

By extension, then, political science replaced political philosophy as the source of political knowledge relevant to a liberal democracy. So long as a society retains a strong sense of the common good—despite its grounding in modern natural rights—the elevation of political science does not present an overly threatening prospect. On the other hand, the common good presupposes a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. It suggests obligations. The common good is a value. All of these presuppositions require support (through political philosophy or religious education), which political science and the other social sciences cannot provide.

Strauss, to my knowledge, never applied these general principles
to the history of liberal democracy in the United States. That is, he never traced the history of these developments. What is important is that somehow the "premodern" elements in the American regime were, in the postwar period, losing their force, and to the degree that these trends continued, Strauss suggested, the United States would be left with modern natural right and a privileged form of knowledge—social science—that undermines all beliefs in natural right.

We can understand Strauss's point by reminding ourselves of what he saw as the key characteristics of social science. The social scientists most relevant to the political arena—political scientists—are utterly incapable of understanding their subject. The rich, valuative political and social world is terra incognita for the political scientist who transforms the world as experienced into discrete facts. These "facts" have the advantage of being easily grasped and manipulated; they have the disadvantage of possessing little relationship to the subject. Strauss, in this manner, accused political scientists of distorting the political realm by falsely laying claim to "empiricism." Although political scientists claim to deal with the world as it is jthus denouncing metaphysics), Strauss emphasized how the classical philosophers dealt more fairly, and more empirically, with the political realm. They did not abstract from the messy, evaluative phenomena a scientifically pure language that dealt with the component and abstracted parts assuming that the parts were truly components) of the phenomena. Rather, they remained true to political experience, including the language of the political arena.75

Unable to understand the nature of society, political scientists cannot help liberal democracy. Their devotion to method (or techne) makes them morally obtuse—in incapable of holding one goal higher than another. By reinforcing the individualism inherent in liberal democracy, political scientists depreciate the language of the common good. Moreover, the "dogmatic atheism" upon which modern social science rests erodes the religious beliefs that help make liberal democracy possible—or at least livable. Strauss's argument on the subject of the atheistic grounding of social science bears quoting.

For a few years, logical positivism tried with much noise and little thought to dispose of religion by asserting that religious assertions are "meaningless statements." This trick seems to have been abandoned without noise. Some adherents of the new
political science might rejoin with some liveliness that their posture toward religion is imposed on them by intellectual honesty: not being able to believe, they cannot accept belief as the basis of their science. We gladly grant that, other things being equal, a frank atheist is a better man than an alleged theist who conceives of God as a symbol. But we must add that intellectual honesty is not enough. Intellectual honesty is not love of truth. Intellectual honesty, a kind of self-denial, has taken the place of love of truth because truth has come to be believed to be repulsive, and one cannot love the repulsive. Yet just as our opponents refuse respect to unreasoned belief, we on our part, with at least equal right, must refuse respect to unreasoned unbelief; honesty with oneself regarding one's unbelief is in itself not more than unreasoned unbelief, probably accompanied by a vague confidence that the issue of unbelief versus belief has long since been settled once and for all. It is hardly necessary to add that the dogmatic exclusion of religious awareness proper renders questionable all long-range predictions concerning the future of societies.

Social scientists teach an equality of all ends while they deprecate virtue (i.e., duty) and religious beliefs. Their teaching has the further effect of denying modern natural right a grounding because they find themselves unable to affirm any "natural" right by virtue of their moral obtuseness (fostered by devotion to method). A passage quoted earlier now takes on a special significance: "Present-day American social science . . . is dedicated to the proposition that all men are endowed by the evolutionary process or by a mysterious fate with many kinds of urges and aspirations, but certainly with no natural right."

The points to remember are one, social science has become the privileged form of inquiry, and as such provides sanctioned knowledge; two, social science is an eminently "practical" discipline and thus provides direction to the social and political order; and three, a regime must have something in which to believe in order to survive. One should not, moreover, overlook the example of Germany. In his most autobiographical essay, "Preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion," Strauss examined the weakness of Germany's liberal democracy, Weimar. "The Weimar Republic was weak. . . . On the whole it presented the sorry spectacle of justice without a
sword or of justice unable to use the sword. The crisis of liberal democracy is the failure of will.

Liberal democracy in America, Strauss seemed to suggest, was going the way of Weimar. This claim ought not be taken as a simple comparison between two very different regimes. Rather, Strauss emphasized that the weakness of the Weimar regime was the inability to identify and defend its highest principles. German thinking (a generation in advance of the United States) had so undercut the rational defense of any ideals that no will existed to defend a regime constructed on a "rational" belief in tolerance and individual right. In the United States, Strauss suggested, the same erosion of beliefs about the good threatened to move from social scientists to the American people.

Describing the crisis in this fashion puts one in mind of Walter Lippmann, who made his way from Drift and Mastery to The Public Philosophy. For both Lippmann and Strauss one of the key ingredients for a vigorous liberal democracy (in contrast to a pathological one—i.e., Weimar) is political philosophy. Thus Strauss sought to save American liberal democracy by reviving normative political philosophy—not as a direct support to the regime, but because political philosophy is necessarily edifying to a society. Strauss, one may say, defended liberal democracy, not as the best form of government simply, but as the best possible form of government here and now. He accepted the classical argument that the best regime is rule by the wise. Since the modern circumstances did not allow for such a regime, Strauss hoped to help provide a stronger foundation for liberal democracy. If freedom were to be the goal as opposed to duty or virtue, it needed to be defensible. Of course, from the philosopher's point of view, a vibrant and healthy liberal democracy has many virtues, the greatest being a tolerance for the philosopher: "We cannot forget the obvious fact that by giving freedom to all, democracy also gives freedom to those who care about human excellence. No one prevents us from cultivating our garden or from setting up outposts which may come to be regarded by many citizens as salutary to the republic and as deserving of giving to it its tone."

Even though Strauss defended liberal democracy, he was hardly a cheerleader. His reticence to discuss the subject should tell one something—but what? I am disposed to leave the matter for other people who might be more adept at listening to silence. I am sure,
though I cannot point to many places in his published work to support my claim, that Strauss possessed not an iota of respect for American "popular culture"—or what he called "mass culture." One could use Allan Bloom's invective about music and other "cultural" forms in his *Closing of the American Mind* to express Strauss's own sentiments on the subject. In an essay entitled "What Is Liberal Democracy?" Strauss offered an evasive (it "is said to be" I description of mass culture in a modern democracy that reads much like Bloom's animadversions. Strauss ended the paragraph in which this description appears with a discussion of liberal education:

Liberal education is the counterpoison to mass culture, to the corroding effects of mass culture, to its inherent tendency to produce nothing but "specialists without spirit or vision and voluptuaries without heart." Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant. Liberal education is the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society. Liberal education reminds those members of mass democracy who have ears to hear, of human greatness.

Education, we learn, is a key to saving liberal democracy, but we would be mistaken if we assumed that Strauss considered liberal education to be the answer to the problem. "We must not expect," he wrote, "that liberal education can ever become universal education." Not only does the nature of liberal education limit its appeal and power, but it alone cannot solve modern problems. He noted that both Marx and Nietzsche "were liberally educated on a level to which we cannot even hope to aspire" but that they were not supporters of liberal democracy. Strauss emphasized, in a typically oblique passage, the need for "moderation" to protect society from "visionary expectations from politics and unmanly contempt for politics," i.e., the examples of Marx and Nietzsche. Political responsibility should also be a part of education, though technically not part of a liberal education as such.

Liberal education is, for Strauss, the study of the great books. The question, Which great books? he answered partially by saying "the great books of the West." One person cannot possibly master all the
great books, and Strauss found compelling reason to choose the great books of his and America's tradition. On principle, though, the great books of India would serve a similar purpose, i.e., to introduce one to culture. The word "culture" indicates the cultivation of mind, i.e., the products of a cultivated mind. Because the greatest minds seek to understand the human condition, they explore and define the proper human life, or at least they introduce the problems that attend human life. Collectively, these authors have indicated the range of alternatives available to humans. Thus, by reading the great books and by engaging in a dialogue with the authors, one comes into contact with the greatest minds dealing with the most important issues—issues unbounded by time or place. For some people it is enough to come into contact with these subjects. These students leave formal education aware of the problems and the range of alternatives open to them as humans. For others this sort of education is a prelude to becoming a philosopher—for becoming a full participant in the conversation of the West.

One may say, then, that a liberal education is the proper education for future leaders and for future philosophers. Of course the future leaders of a democracy will, by and large, come from the most prestigious universities, so it is there that a regime should help shape their affections for the regime. They should believe in justice, even if they are unsure of its precise meaning. In other words, they ought to believe that as leaders, they have a duty to something greater than themselves. A liberal education is the proper introduction to these issues, and it has had the effect of turning potential tyrants into republicans, just as Socrates turned Thrasymachus and Glaucon into proper citizens. In brief, through liberal education for the few and religious education for the many, citizens and leaders of a liberal democracy affirm a moral center. The common good has meaning for such citizens in spite of their attachment to rights. Philosophers, who remain outside of politics, nonetheless pay their respects to the society in which they live and have freedom by educating the leaders of "gentlemen" in the language of Plato and Aristotle.

Strauss's hope for liberal democracy rested with two related goals. The first was the resurrection of political philosophy as a bulwark against social science. The second goal required the right kind of education, one that would provide the society with liberally educated leaders who could speak to the needs and desires of a more religious-
minded citizenry. Both of Strauss's goals aimed at restoring a viable understanding of the common good—one that transcends the collective goods of individuals. In his own way Leo Strauss worked very hard to save American liberal democracy—a democracy in which the citizens feel a strong attachment to a moral center anchored in a cosmic order.

THE PROBLEM WITH LIBERALISM: ERIC VOEGELIN

The conclusions above bear a striking resemblance to Eric Voegelin's thought concerning liberalism. Both Voegelin and Strauss began their careers in the new but largely disordered world of post-1914 Europe. Constitutional democracy, even before 1933, appeared fragile, and World War I had exposed the weakness of old truths (ideas) and symbols. The institutions of a democracy rely for their strength upon widely shared beliefs in the assumptions or goals of those institutions; a society must have a spiritual core. "The wars," wrote Voegelin, referring to both world wars, "are symptomatic not only insofar as they reveal a positive will to an orgiastic discharge but also insofar as they must be endorsed because actions that might prevent them have become impossible through the paralysis of the will to order, which can be active only where its meaning is secured in the community myth."

The long catalog of modern horrors, Voegelin never tired of emphasizing, required not only the will to perform them but also the failure of will to prevent them. Both responses relate to the loss of a spiritual core—i.e., a socially dominant conception of the individual and social relationship to the whole or divine that is made real or useful through myth or other symbolizations.

A spiritual pathology, which he too loosely called gnostic, slowly infected Western civilization by heightening people's ubiquitous sense of alienation and persuading them to seek release from or domination over this world. Visions of imminent transfiguration turned into dreams of Prometheus, of immanent transformation. The desire to control "being" channeled understandings of truth into narrow subjects over which humans seemed to have control. The human horizon, which naturally includes the apperception of the mysterious divine ground of existence, suffered an artificial constriction. This process created enormous human power at the ex-
pense of knowledge or wisdom concerning ends. In other words, hu-
mans have lost access to the ordering principles inherent in the
reality of which they form a part. The resulting "second realities," or modern ideologies, provide an ersatz order that fails to supply the
most fundamental human (spiritual) needs.

It follows that the greatest danger for a liberal democracy is the
omnipresent danger that the citizens will withdraw into their pri-
vote world or employ themselves publicly in the defense of the pri-
vate good as the greatest good. The inherent liberal ambiguity about
the most profound and important matters is both a symptom of and
a further corrosive to the spiritual center of a society. Voegelin had
his say on this subject here and there with the occasional and usu-
ally brief broadside against the spiritual bankruptcy of modern lib-
eral society. But since he devoted his energies to exposing the history
and, hence, the source of this state of affairs, and to the arduous task
of reorienting modern thought, he more or less ignored his contem-
porary context. Nonetheless, in those occasional discussions of cur-
rent conditions he exposed a great deal.

The most penetrating of these essays, "The German University
and the Order of German Society: A Reconsideration of the Nazi
Era," concerns the failure of constitutional democracy in Germany
to prevent the Nazi regime. Much like Strauss, Voegelin considered
Germany's past illuminating for Western civilization in general.
The essay was originally written as a lecture for a conference on The
German University and the Third Reich. Voegelin pointed out in the
first paragraph that he considered the "underlying idea" of the con-
ference flawed because a "historical description" of the events of
this era could illuminate nothing of importance. He even hinted that
the "idea" of the conference sprang from the same spiritual pathol-
ogy that had tolerated or even engendered Nazism. Voegelin had his
arrogant side.

"Life in the insane asylum of our time has become such a habit for
many that they no longer react in a sensitive manner to the gro-
tesque events on the public scene." Such characterizations sprin-
kle Voegelin's later essays and point to a deepening sense of social
disorder. The Nazi phenomenon can never be understood nor can its
legacy be exorcised by "descriptive history." A full accounting of the
horrible events of that or any era allow the historian and readers to
denounce the evil, but it fails to penetrate to the deeper spiritual
problem. Indeed, the guilt that inspires such an effort is "an expression of genuine pathology." "To be sure," wrote Voegelin, "the consciousness of guilt following the completed act is not the same thing as the sympathizing 'before it happened.' But sympathy and guilt are intimately related to one another as expressions of complicity in the desolation of the spirit. Descriptive history allows one to deal with events at the level of "value judgments, which is to remain alienated from the spiritual dimension of human existence.

The proper response requires a penetration to the spiritual disorder that precipitated the events-what Voegelin called "critical history, which, of course, is both the result of and the process by which one undergoes an "alteration in one's being. Voegelin, then, assumed the role of guide at this conference, which was otherwise filled with expressions of guilt. The balance of his speech exposed the spiritual disorder of the Nazi era and the role of the German university in fostering this spiritual disorder. The merits of Voegelin's arguments are not important here, but certain themes applicable to American liberalism are.

The evolution of the modern German university served as the hinge for Voegelin's argument. To capture the spirit of that university Voegelin concentrated on the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), a prominent figure in the restructuring of Prussian universities and gymnasiums. Humboldt's emphasis on "individual development" unhinged education from the social environment by de-emphasizing the public role of education even as the public lost sight of the normative ground toward which education had once aimed. German education became "narcissistic." Wrote Voegelin:

With the rejection of the question concerning the ground beyond the chain of finite causes and ends, and more still, with the anesthesia against the question as the criterion of human perfection, Wilhelm von Humboldt has found the perfect formula for the estrangement from the spirit. In place of the divine ground of being man emerges as the ground of himself. The narcissistic closure has many consequences for language and thinking, which today in the socially dominant public of Germany are so evident that there hardly exists anymore a consciousness of their existence.
The consequences of which Voegelin spoke are of special interest here because they point to the weaknesses—or potential weaknesses—of liberal democracies insofar as they tend to accept the individualistic ethics Voegelin described. The apotheosis of the individual, and the corresponding emphasis upon "development" (Bildung) of one's uniqueness, elevate the private character of one's existence. One tends to replace virtue, duty, or—more generally—citizenship with freedom and originality. Universities no longer play the role of guardian and dispenser of "knowledge needed for the rational discussion and transaction of public business." Nor does education function to build character or, more precisely, to orient people to being (or at least the nature of human reality as experienced by spiritually sensitive people). Once people lose contact with the spiritual core of their being they no longer have access to "the ordering center of man." The natural "community" of human existence is lost, which creates a vacuum into which men like Hitler and Stalin sweep. For the people who embrace these "ersatz realities" the world takes on an identifiable form, and they are comforted. Those who have lost sight of the divine ground but who cannot believe in these "second realities" are unable to respond.\textsuperscript{89}

It appears that most people—or at any rate most intellectual leaders—in modern Germany and the West more generally—are constitutionally incapable of understanding Voegelin's critique. If one grants his argument, then members of the socially dominant public suffer a spiritual alienation that blinds them to the spiritual dimension of their existence. Of course, no one today would question the empirical claims embedded in Voegelin's critique. Few of the most influential intellectuals of our day try to extend their analysis beyond the chain of finite causes and ends to the divine ground of being. Most either deny such a ground or deny any meaningful contact with that ground, and therein lies a problem. Voegelin must remain on the intellectual margins as long as his apperception of this larger context of human existence remains unbelievable to the larger intellectual community. If one assumes, for the moment, the truth of Voegelin's normative claims, he nonetheless is doomed to the task of showing something to the blind. It matters little how his subjects came to be blind. All that really matters is that they cannot see.

Yet Voegelin did not write without hope. The blindness around him was partial—the sort that sees everything except the most obvi-
ous. The obvious has lost its distinctiveness and, therefore, tends to merge into an undifferentiated background. A refocusing—or a change of perspective—allows the shape of the object to stand out. The spiritual equivalent of this operation requires a return to a spiritually differentiated language. Indeed, the deformation of language into idioms of estrangement provides the means of sustaining an artificial reality, and the language of estrangement eliminates or transmogrifies all symbols of transcendence. The most important estrangement symbols for Voegelin were "objective-subjective," which deal with humans as discrete objects. Moreover, the object/subject dichotomy suggests a severe limit to socially relevant knowledge. "There is a loss of those insights into the nature of reality from which the material ramification of a science of man receives its meaning, and correspondingly, the enormous expansion of material data without control through criteria of relevance.190 This statement clarifies Voegelin's resistance to the language of "values," "value-free science," and "ideas" that is so prevalent in modem political science and other social sciences) because they symbolized for him the knowledge of immanent reality cut off from the transcendental context.

Voegelin was a prophet whose words can mean precious little to the sinners. For all the beauty and complexity of Voegelin's assessment, it boils down to a single point. Either one apperceives the divine ground and understands it to be the criteria for relevance of all things human, or one does not. For this reason Voegelin ended his lecture with the example of the watchman who speaks God's words even though few will respond (Ezek. 33:7-9). Yet a few will respond. But to reach them Voegelin had to create a new symbolic structure representing the noetic structure of existence while exposing the untrue structure and motivations of ideologies.91

Voegelin's task was made more difficult by the problems inherent in a liberal democracy—or at least in a pluralistic liberal democracy—for the tendency of liberals to regard all matters of grave importance as private concerns has the effect of undermining the spiritual foundation of true community. Liberal societies do not depend upon divine sanction for their legitimacy, much less their direction. They emerge in response to human consensus of the barest sort; in the most extreme case, the members of a liberal society would agree only on the greatest evil as represented by Hobbes's su.mmum ma-
lum). But while most liberal societies have a reasonably clear concept of justice, the tendency is to allow beliefs about goods to thin out as a society comes to embrace greater diversity. At any rate, it is very difficult to think that a liberal society—so wedded to the idea of individual autonomy and private goods—can have a clear conception of the greatest good.

Because liberalism does not foster public discussion about fundamentals—about ontology—the communication necessary for the healthy functioning of a society proves especially difficult. Yet constructing the matter in this form may create confusion. Liberalism, as a cluster of beliefs, is not simply the cause of the problem but more precisely a form or product of the problem. To believe, as Humboldt did, that education concerns the development of the individual—that is, one’s distinctiveness—or to accept that society is the bare condition for the actualization of private happiness is to expose oneself as alienated from the divine Nous that provides the means for true human community. In its place one has posited immanent reason, which Voegelin liked to call "ontological reduction." Where once societies existed under God—took their form and their meaning, as well as the meaning of their members, from the divine as symbolized in gods or God—modern, liberal societies understand their existence relative to the immanent goals of their members, which in turn are often understood as products of biological drives (to cite the most reductive example).

Ontological reduction entails a loss of faith, and without faith humans have no purposes except those humans provide. The emptiness created by this ontological reduction produces anxiety, which people relieve in a variety of ways—usually by seeking endless diversions. Voegelin loved to target television, which he likened to drunkenness—though being drunk might be favored. At any rate, the proliferation of the entertainment industry operated as a "quantitative gage of spiritual destruction." The gadgets of modern society allure only as long as people remain alienated from the spiritual dimensions of their existence. Diversions provide escape from the dreadful silence that overwhelms people in their moments of contemplation, but it is the silence that threatens the health of a liberal democracy because the silence signifies ignorance concerning the essentials of existence—those most important questions, Who am I? What kind of world do I live in? and What is my relation in the order of being?
This alienation from the ground means that the common context in which meaningful communication can take place is absent. The pluralism of modern states, therefore, takes on special significance insofar as the absence of a common experiential core leads to such a variety of answers to the most important political questions—even to the questions concerning justice—that the consensus necessary to maintain the political order is precarious.

Voegelin illustrated the peculiarly modern pluralism by referring to the manner of argument employed by Thomas Aquinas. In his *Summa contra Gentiles*, Aquinas emphasized that in arguing before pagans he would have to employ "intellect," which is part of human existence as well as the means of interpreting human existence. Therefore, he could appeal to pagans from a shared perspective. That shared perspective no longer obtains—or at least this was Voegelin's point—and debate is impossible in an intellectually and spiritually balkanized society.93

Voegelin found plenty of signs of spiritual disease in American culture, for most of what now goes under the label "popular culture" stood, in Voegelin's thinking, for little more than mindless diversions from human responsibility. Intellectual trends at mid century, while not without rays of hope, indicated a general inability to deal rationally with issues. In education, Americans focused more than ever upon personal fulfillment, understood in a most private and narcissistic way. Liberal America operated without a metaphysics—or, more precisely, with a decapitated metaphysic. Since Voegelin understood that all social and political orders reflect a shared ontology, liberal America must be understood as an order in revolt against God. Moreover, because political existence requires constant discussion about moral matters, the United States suffers from a decisive flaw. As a society in revolt against the divine ground, and therefore not participating in divine nous, it is incapable of moral action: "moral action without rational action is impossible." In a society made up of individuals who seek their private goods because they accept no greatest good for all, communication is difficult—and maybe in the long run impossible. In a democracy communication is essential.