Two Paths from Neo-Kantianism, Two Political Consequences

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David McIlwain's book, *Michael Oakeshott and Leo Strauss: The Politics of Renaissance and Enlightenment* (2019), is a fascinating account of two key and complex thinkers, their relations and mutual criticisms, and of what we may take to be two radically different accounts of the history of political thinking and of Western political life itself. It is also a survey, necessarily selective, of the vast secondary literature, especially on Strauss; a literature which is contentious and often puzzling, as Strauss himself is. And it is laced with shrewd observations. My comments are partly complementary, but partly in tension with the text. They are only suggestive, but they provide a different perspective on the overall relation between the two thinkers.

There is a sense, not often preserved in the style of writing on political philosophy that the book exemplifies, that all philosophy is local. Philosophy does not operate only in texts, but in verbal dialogue and personal asides—in the talk of philosophy students and their most telling interactions with their teachers, which illuminate the texts themselves. At the time of both Oakeshott's and Strauss's intellectual formation, this generic fact about philosophical education co-existed with a style of philosophy in which the history of philosophy could be and would be brought into play in philosophical discussion. But the history was nevertheless refracted through the local sensibility and present concerns, and used as a local weapon. Hobbes' familiar comment that "The praise of Ancient Authors, proceeds not from the reverence of the Dead, but from the competition and mutual envy of the Living" is perhaps harsh, but is close to the same thought (Hobbes 1651, Review and Conclusion p. 395).

One aspect of the contrast between Strauss and Oakeshott McIlwain does not explore, but which is in a sense philosophically fundamental, is the divergence between their relations to neo-Kantianism. Both were brought into philosophical consciousness in the period Hans-Georg Gadamer described as the "dissolution of neo-Kantianism" ([1976] 1981, p. 40), and indeed in the later part of this period when there were a few hard-core neo-Kantians, like Heinrich Rickert, still prowling the halls, but their successors ruled German philosophy. Each may be said to have rejected neo-Kantianism, though there was not much left to reject. But like the other rejecters, they carried more than a little neo-Kantianism in their philosophical DNA. They nevertheless took different paths from neo-Kantianism, with different results.

The simple story is that they both rejected it. But as McIlwain shows in his discussion of their divergent interpretations of Hobbes, there is always an interesting prob-

lem with rejections: the rejections are never as complete as the rejecters imagine or intend. There is always a trace of dependence on the tradition being rejected. What this trace might consist of, or whether it is more than a trace, amounting to a secret continuity, is a potential matter of dispute, as it was in the case of Hobbes' relation to the classical tradition.

ESCAPING NEO-KANTIANISM

The two basic strands of neo-Kantianism, the Marburg version best represented by Hermann Cohen (2018), and the "Southwest" version represented by Kuno Fischer (1887), differed in a decisive way that is relevant to the relation of Oakeshott and Strauss. Both strands were concerned with the conceptual character of experience, which is what made them Kantian. But both were also concerned with difference—differences between forms of thought, such as law and physics, but also, crucially, with the problem of relativism, which obsessed the neo-Kantians and which they invented many ways to avoid or overcome. The obsession was justified: neo-Kantianism led to relativism.

The tragedy of neo-Kantianism was that it was self-defeating. It began with the idea of affirming the validity of various organized fields of concepts, from theology to history, by showing the necessary presuppositions of each. It ended with a multitude of systems of philosophy which defined the domains differently and attributed conflicting presuppositions to those domains it attempted to analyze. The lesson that one could get the same laws of physics using different mathematical presuppositions killed the neo-Kantian project in physics. The sheer diversity of systems and solutions to the problem of relativism killed the rest of it: the point of the project was to get the presuppositions that were uniquely necessary.[1] What they got was the opposite of uniqueness: a multitude of philosophical systems each working in a different way.

Strauss was not only exposed to this as a student at Marburg, where the legacy of Cohen was still strong, but by his *Doktorvater* Ernst Cassirer who attempted to salvage the project in his philosophy of symbolic forms, the idea of which was to preserve the Kantian notion of the necessary presuppositions of experience by locating them in a symbolic realm which individuals accessed partially, thus keeping the realm non-relativistic, but allowing individual difference, and insisting that such things as knowledge of causality depended on a prior concept of cause located in this symbolic realm. Strauss simply repeats this argument, in simplified form (See Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, [1953] 1965, pp. 89–90; see also Burns 2015, p. 104) This is far from a dead idea even today: a current form is the idea that causal relations are "normative," along with the rest of thought (Rouse 2002).

What survived the debacle of neo-Kantianism was the idea that presuppositions were necessary for thought, though not the idea of presuppositions that were themselves necessary. This idea morphed into enframings, epistemes, conceptual schemes, paradigms, the new realism, and Carl Becker's "climates of opinion" (1932): all this justified Foucault's comment that we are all neo-Kantians now. Whether these survivals are coherent is an open question. The concept originally depended on a notion of "logic" as something other than a matter of formal relations, holding in a netherworld of non-psychological experience-forming concepts. Strauss did not emancipate himself from this generic survival of neo-Kantianism, which was the necessary basis of his critiques of social science for the supposed unstated assumptions he attributed to it.

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1   Beiser paraphrases Cohen as follows: "How do we know the a priori? How do we distinguish this mode of knowledge from its opposite, from a posteriori knowledge? The immediate answer is that the distinctive feature of the a priori is absolute universality and necessity, which is distinguished from the comparative universality and contingency of a posteriori knowledge. Absolute universality admits no possible exceptions, whereas relative or comparative universality does" (2018, p. 65). Divergent claims about what was presupposed, in short, undermined claims about absolute universality and necessity.

One sees the importance of non-textual, oral moments, in Strauss's own reflections on the , such as in his paper on "Philosophy as Rigorous Science" (1971), when he recounts comments by Husserl on the neo-Kantian tradition, which Husserl says starts at the top, while he starts at the bottom, and mentions the idea of the foundation of the foundation. By the top, he meant the governing presuppositions of an existent body of thought. By the bottom, he meant the conditions for the possibility of thinking at all. This is a crucial insight into the Weimar era philosophical muddle, which was formative for both Strauss and Oakeshott.

Neo-Kantianism was followed by *Lebensphilosphie*, which was a revolt against the idea that the experience of life, constantly changing and varying, could be characterized in terms of its constitution by concepts, which were by definition timeless and rigid, placed in and defined by the conceptual logic of their relation to other concepts. *Existenzphilosophie* was an attempt to characterize the experience that lay beyond rigid concepts; the ontological turn was a related attempt to discuss what is—though in both cases it was acknowledged that there was no such thing as direct access to real experience, now thought of as flowing and disordered, and only accessible through flawed enframings or arbitrary decisions. This was a description of a philosophical situation which one wanted to escape. Strauss also wanted to escape. The logical positivists did so by dumping the idea of conceptually ordered experience in favor of raw data, and the Kantian idea of logic as conceptual connections in favor of logic as pure formalism.

By Strauss' own testimony, he considered Heidegger to represent "present-day philosophy in its highest form" (Strauss and Klein 1970, np). The thing he wished to free this philosophy of was a particular thing it "presupposes" namely "the so-called historical consciousness." And he took it as his responsibility to "understand the partly hidden roots of that consciousness." But this was a critical task: what was his own alternative to Heidegger and the radical relativism it implied?

The answer can be seen in the phrase "soiled fragments of the pure truth" (Strauss 1953, p. 124). Cohen had defended Judaism from the common nineteenth century Protestant view that it was a primitive religion: prior to and lower on the evolutionary scale than Protestantism. His defense was framed in terms of the idea of a future evolution in religion toward a rational religion, in which the irrational elements of each religion would be washed away and their distinctive contribution would be preserved. The Jewish contribution was to be the idea of atonement, and the *Noahide*: particularly the idea of a responsibility to the stranger. The general idea of religious differences being overcome through a process of contact and rationalization was in the air: Émile Durkheim had alluded to it in the conclusion to *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* ([1912] 1915); his early death left his successor Celestine Bouglé to complete the task of writing up the idea.

Philosophically, this was a solution to the problem of relativism that bedeviled neo-Kantianism. Everyone was both right and wrong, but we did not know yet which parts were right and which wrong. But it depended on a certain optimism about progress, progress toward a universal culture, that the Great War destroyed. By the time Strauss was developing philosophically, a great pessimism—well represented by Spengler, had taken hold. Strauss thus found another language for speaking of difference: one that not only replaced the notion of progress or future evolutionary convergence but turned it upside down, so that the history of philosophy could then be seen as regress, a from the classical "living in accordance with nature" thinking he attributed to the classics into the shards of the enframings revealed by Heidegger's account. This implied a method: a distinctive, natural right or classical, way of dealing with difference and therefore of defeating relativism. By treating difference in terms of doxa, doxa as soiled fragments of the pure truth, and difference as something from which we can ascend through philosophical dialectic to the truth, we could overcome the obvious empirical and historical fact of radical disagreement.

Oakeshott took a different path out of this problematic. Experience, in the most comprehensive sense of the word, was his central concept. In his notebooks of 1931, writing about sex, he wrote "What we want is experience, not knowledge about the facts. …What is dangerous, deadening, monstrous, is knowledge *in place* of experience" (2014, p. 207). This was the lesson of *Lebensphilosophie*. In *Experience and its Modes* (1933), he divided the totality of experience, the province of philosophy, into modes—not so different from what Eduard Spranger did about the same time in his *Lebensformen* (*Types of Men*) ([1914] 1928), from

whence Wittgenstein took the term "forms of life." Oakeshott preserved something of the notion of presupposition in the term "platforms" in *On Human Conduct* (1975). These were never absolute, always temporary. There was no escape from relativism or historicism, but the problem lost its spiritual punch: both were mundane features of all thought, not a surprising and disturbing discovery about the instability and non-necessity of our deepest presuppositions, as it was for the neo-Kantians. This was not a new thought for Oakeshott: already in his notebooks of the 1920s he mention's, in relation to theology, Vaihinger's philosophy of "as if" and notes the close relation (but differences) between dogma, hypothesis, and fiction (2014, p. 129).

In *On Human Conduct* his political theory described the antinomies within a specific tradition: the West. Rather than philosophical alternatives, the antinomies were between the ideal expressions of practical orientations which resulted from intrinsic ambiguities or contradictions in the tradition itself in which an element of each of the antinomic pairs was preserved, at the level of practice, in the other member of the pair: one cold not have one without a tincture at least of the other. Ironically, Strauss—who dismissed Weber's antinomic examples as dilemmas which could be easily resolved on the practical level—made an antinomy, between Athens and Jerusalem, fundamental to his thought: between the theology of the denial of God and the philosophy of the denial of philosophy. But this was not a practical antinomy faced in political experience, like Oakeshott's and Weber's: it was a stark and ungroundable existential choice between fundamentally incompatible alternatives.

This points to a basic difference in their approach to the Heideggerian problem of the inadequacy and falseness of all enframings, and its implications for any politics based on one. Oakeshott never leaves the world of experience, though he includes religious experience. He has no interest in the best regime, or a return to the roots of the western tradition in order to either save it or overcome it. For him, experience, the tacit, and the contingent choice of platforms or as if mental constructions had priority over, and a continuous life beyond, explicit theories, which were abridgements. There was no such thing as the higher rationality: there was only the continuing intellectual quest for coherence, a task that could never be completed, and like politics itself, was not directed to a final end.

To theorize is to arrest the ongoing flow of experience, to produce an enframing that is inherently limiting, but at the same time revealing. To philosophize in the sense of producing the right theory of something in the world of experience was to produce an abridgement rather than the whole truth. Nothing could be farther from Strauss and the idea that one could synthesize the results of these enframings and return to the unfragmented source of political philosophy and put the shards back together. For Oakeshott, in a political crisis, "salvation" can only come from the unimpaired resources of the tradition itself (1962, p. 126), and not from "a model laid up in heaven" (1962, p. 127). But they are both responding to the Heideggerian problem. Oakeshott gives a path around it; Strauss embraces it and seeks not so much to resolve it as to preserve the promise of resolving it through the return to "nature," in a sense that Heidegger had already ruled out.

POLITICS

One of the merits of McIlwain's book is that it recounts some of what is jarring about both Strauss and Strauss's thought. I can add to and confirm his discussion by reference to these non-textual moments. Strauss certainly did flirt with fascism. In conversation, J. P. Mayer, unprompted, told me of meeting Strauss in a library in Germany, presumably in Berlin, and Strauss telling him that he regarded Mussolini's fascism as a model for a solution to the problem of politics. Mayer, to whom I will return, is a useful contrast case. He also wound up in London, became close to Tawney, was a Jew, but on the Left: as the archivist for the SPD (Social Democratic Party) he had discovered the early Marx manuscripts and edited them, and was welcomed in England by the Labour party. But his thought developed in a different direction from Strauss's, and the difference is revealing.

At the end of his wartime book on Weber *(*[1944] 1956*)*, and after forming friendships with R. H. Tawney, a prominent Christian Socialist Christopher Dawson, and T. S. Elliot, his editor at Faber, who was producing *Christianity and Culture* (1949) at the time, J. P. Mayer commented that: "Weber had only a glimpse of the underlying values of the west—in spite of the *Protestant Ethic.*" Mayer took these underlying values to be Christian even if secularized, and said that Weber "failed to understand that these values inherent in and interwoven with Western world were not yet destroyed by the impact of rationalization…" 1965, p. 105). One must ask whether this lack of understanding is equally true, or more true, of Strauss. As I will explain, I take this to be a significant issue, and indirectly but importantly connected to Oakeshott as well.

Stanley Rosen once startled me by commenting that Strauss and Marcuse, whom he also knew well, "didn't know what country they were in." He went on to say that Strauss and Jacob Klein would rush from his seminar to watch "Gunsmoke" and "Perry Mason" on television, and analyze them in terms of the categories of Aristotle's *Poetics.* They even followed Raymond Burr to "Ironsides," which they were less enthusiastic about. Whatever Strauss absorbed about the United States was limited by the fact that he could, and did, continue to live in an academic and personal extension of the German Jewish milieu they had left. I grew up in this milieu myself. As a young child I was cared for by a Jewish couple from Hamburg who had barely escaped. Adjustment to American life was difficult. The husband, Theo, had taken a job with a jewelry maker, but could not adjust to the casualness of his American co-workers who left diamonds unattended on the bench to go to lunch. This was a level of social trust he could not comprehend or adapt to. The émigré experience was different for intellectuals, but also, in many cases, separated them from these kinds of shocks and allowed them to ignore the "country they were living in"—a country they had been trained in Germany to despise and condescend to.

Much of the secondary literature on Strauss discusses the ways he changed. But he understood the world through concepts and in the light of prior experiences that effectively precluded his understanding the country he was living in. What were the formative experiences? Edward Banfield tells about Strauss discussing, in class, his father's dealing with the peasants who went to him to sell grain.

> Strauss's father, an orthodox Jew, was a prosperous grain merchant. Once, illustrating the thought that a man's demeanor may be an artifact of a bargaining strategy, Strauss told how as a boy he watched his father deal with the peasants who came to his office to sell their grain. The merchant held a newspaper before his face while a peasant stood first on one foot and then on the other before him. After a rather long wait he suddenly lowered the paper and announced the price in a take-it-or-leave-it tone (Banfield 1991, p. 493).

Just telling this story implies a certain tone-deafness, or worse, both on Banfield's part and on Strauss's. The scene recalls the Mississippi custom of the settle, in which cotton grown by sharecroppers was weighed, and the powerless producers were cheated and kept in debt. The view of the world in which this was an acceptable bargaining strategy is not liberal, and is devoid of aristocratic honor as well, not to mention Cohen's focus on Noahide. Yet it is a world which Strauss approved of. He recalled as a child hearing of pogroms in Russia, He comments that

> At that time it could not happen in Germany. We Jews there lived in profound peace with our non-Jewish neighbors. There was a government, perhaps not in every respect admirable, but keeping an admirable order everywhere; and such things as pogroms would have been absolutely impossible ([1962] 1997, p. 313).

Admirable order everywhere, profound peace assured by it: this was a good enough state, even the best of possible actual states, given Strauss's own view that no actual state could overcome its contradictions, and that imperfection was the intrinsic feature of all states.

It is important to see how this connects to his political philosophy. As Robert Howse has argued (2014), on the basis of the texts, Strauss was a "man of peace." But the peace he sought in politics was intercommunal peace. He thought there was no such thing as genuine assimilation for Jews. He had no use for the idea of Christian Europe in the sense of T. S. Eliot or Christopher Dawson: a largely tacit inheritance that existed not in formal religion but in, as Henrik DeMan put it, explaining the ethical impulse behind socialism, a precapitalist disposition grounded in their social experiences, "which can only be understood with reference to the days of feudalism and the craft guilds, to Christian ethics, and to the ethical principles of democracy," which DeMan thought had "traced deep furrows" of affect in the European working man ([1927] 1984, p. 39). This idea of the West did not apply to Jews, who lived under the law—something explicit, and the product of revelation and study, not experience. Perhaps out of revulsion against Heidegger's idea of *Bodenständigkeit* (attachment to the soil or rootedness) and its implied alternative, Jewish deracination, Strauss was equally dismissive of the idea of deeply rooted pre-political conditions for liberal democracy and modern freedom. For him, liberalism did not grow organically out of Anglo-Saxon individualism, as Alan Macfarlane (1978) and many predecessors back to Edward Augustus Freeman, would have had it. It grew out of a philosophical error.

What the story about his father together with his praise of a state which produces admirable order reveals is a particular political model: intercommunal peace between groups that do not share a morality or culture, ruled by order-keepers who also do not share their morality or culture. The morality needed for such a state is the morality of the admirable order-keepers of the state. In this case it was: rule by incorruptible Prussian bureaucrats recruited from the impecunious nobility, for whom honor mattered above all, and who had no morality in common with the people they administered over and whom they looked down upon and distrusted. This was indeed a political model admired by many other people, most consequentially by Woodrow Wilson. It proved not to be the safe harbor for the Jews that it seemed to be at the time. But only because it succumbed to democracy. This was Strauss's formative political life lesson.

Philosophizing on the basis of this experience took some odd paths. Was Strauss's idea of returning to classical natural right as a justification of this political ideal more or less determined by his membership in the *Bildungsbürgertum*? Returning to the classical Greek philosophers was utterly conventional for this class. Even Marx studied Democritus and Epicurus for his dissertation. The tyranny of Greece over Germany, discussed by Butler ([1935] 2012), extended to politics. Jellinek, Weber, Schumpeter, and countless others took their bearings from ancient politics. There is no surprise here. Nor was Strauss's affection for Plato. His childhood political model was an imperfect approximation of Plato's Republic.

When one takes the step of returning to the classics, one is more or less compelled to justify it by ignoring the facts of culture, or tradition, and the tacit that undergird explicit political usages and practices. Strauss objected to Collingwood for pointing out that "Plato's *Republic* is not a statement of timeless truths about the nature of politics, but rather the expression of the Greek ideal of the polis" (Collingwood 1946, p. 229; cited at Strauss 1952, p. 575; Culp 2015, p. 153). Yet he also contended that the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides are shaped (and marred) by the "substantialist" and "humanist" presuppositions characteristic of the "Greek mind" of their authors (ibid.). As one commentator explains, "Strauss contends, to the contrary, that a more careful attention to these authors would show that what Collingwood mistakes for an expression of a "Greek ideal" or a tendency of the "Greek mind" is in fact a reflection of the properly philosophic motivations of the author in question (see Strauss 1952, p. 569, for example)" (Culp 2015, p. 153).

But Collingwood had a point. The moral and political vocabulary of the Greeks differed in significant ways from our own, and generated philosophical problems for them that differed from the problems ours, and had a tacit affectual background that is inaccessible to us but obviously quite unlike our own. Oakeshott would have been on the same page: for him concepts had a history, and political concepts referred to actual political realities. J. P. Mayer drew a related lesson. He became a historian of the French lib-

erals of the nineteenth century, and was for many years the editor of the *Oeuvres complètes* of Tocqueville, whose *Democracy in America* ([1835] 2003) was focused on its novel democratic culture. Mayer also quoted Taine, to make the point that

> Underneath institutions, charters, written laws, the official almanac, there are the ideas, the customs, the character, the condition of classes, their respective position, their reciprocal sentiments; in short, a ramified network of deep-seated, invisible roots beneath the visible trunk and foliage. It is they which feed and sustain the tree. Plant the tree without roots, it will languish, and will fall at the first gust (Mayer [1961] 1979, p. 78).

Mayer's reaction to emigration was the opposite of Strauss's: he became a student of, admirer of, and participant in the British political culture he had adopted. People like Strauss, in contrast, like the Frankfurt school, exuded barely concealed contempt and isolated themselves in the conveniently available Germanic bubbles. The fact that during Strauss's time at the New School the French refugees could not stand dealing with the Germans and created an alternative institution is revealing. There was a parochialism to these emigres that Strauss never shed.

To return to these texts of Oakeshott and Strauss today nevertheless raises the Straussian question of which is true? For Oakeshott, there is no truth of the sort Strauss discusses. Moreover, we are, in relation to the Greeks, in the same situation as Strauss was: we don't know what country we are in. We can concoct a sense of the Greek mind from the texts, but this can never be more than an attractive hypothesis. Strauss consistently accused other interpreters of doing just this. But of course he did exactly the same thing. Our cognitive and epistemic limitations, conditioned at least in part by the historical circumstance of our experiences, including our outside the text philosophical interactions and the common knowledge we share with our contemporaries but not with the historical figures we study, assures this.

We can have dialogue, but it is dialogue with our own creations out of Plato, not with Plato. Understanding is a prerequisite for judging truth. And if we think this is about their truth, we need to remind ourselves that we have produced their errors and inconsistencies through our own interpretations, which are bound to our own world. Collingwood grasped this:

> The living past of history lives in the present; but it lives not in the immediate experience of the present, but only in the self-knowledge of the present. This Dilthey has overlooked; he thinks it lives in the present's immediate experience of itself; idea of history ([1939] 1970, p. 174)

So did Oakeshott: "The past is a certain sort of reading of the present" (1962, p. 150). Strauss promises to overcome this kind of historicism, which is to say he promises to overcome the cognitive limitations inherent in being human. But does he? Or does he just produce the same kind of blinkered readings of the texts he accuses others of doing?

Strauss ridiculed Sabine's *History of Political Theory* ([1937] 1973) as a history of error. Sabine, a distinguished philosopher, who wrote the textbook as a parallel to those by Frank Thilly ([1914] 1957) and Charles Ellwood (1938), according to a kind of formula in which chapters provided context and explained the criticisms and how they informed later thinkers, implicitly told a story of intellectual and political progress. But Sabine was not the victim of a teleological doctrine of progress of the kind that Strauss made a show of rejecting. His notion of "progress" was that things that once made sense no longer made sense in new circumstances, and that the critics of the great thinkers of the same era often had a point. It was, instead, Strauss himself who taught the history of political thought as a history of error. The error was falling away from classical political philosophy toward liberalism. Like Marcuse's "On Tolerance" (Marcuse et al. 1965), he turned the tables on liberalism, and insisted that it was liberalism that was intolerant, and that the modern liberal demand for tolerance can turn into a "ferocious hatred of those who have stated most clear-

ly and most forcefully that there are unchangeable standards founded in the nature of man and the nature of things" (Strauss 1959, p. 439; quoted in Burns 2015, p. 97).

But this affirmation of "those who have stated … that there are unchangeable standards" was not a political theory: it was an epistemic claim to the effect that there was, or might be, a discoverable natural "right" or good that the classics had at least pointed to. This was the stick he used to beat his opponents with. The "political" part of the doctrine was that the contingent claim that the putative truth in question was accessible only to a philosophical elite. This produced a nice catch-22: to fail to grasp this showed that one was not of this elite. But not only was Strauss unable to impart this truth, it is questionable that he even believed in it. Public or exoteric doctrine was one thing, and oddly, the doctrine of esotericism was his exoteric doctrine. But there is more than a hint, in his admiration for Heidegger and the careers of such followers of Heidegger as Levinas, that the hidden truth was that there was no hidden truth. And that this truth, the truth that could not be revealed, is what distinguished philosophy from religion.

His "philosophical" position was thus a dogma about dogma, a meta-dogma, rather than a substantive "truth" of any kind. How does this qualify as political philosophy? Only in an indirect way, through the doctrine of esotericism, which is why it has proven to be attractive to a variety of political persuasions. A Harvard law professor told me that they taught their students that judges were policy-makers, that the lawyers who believed in the letter of the law and the rule of law were rubes, and that they, unlike the rubes, had access to a higher morality. Ronald Dworkin believed something similar, and defended it in his philosophy of law (2011). This is disquietingly close to the teaching of Strauss that existing political regimes were based on false premises, but were worth supporting as feeble, but safe and harmless alternatives to the unachievable best regime. This, needless to say, is an exercise in cynical reason.

Whether the cynical contempt for public truth that led the Bush administration into the war in Iraq derived in some way from Strauss is not a question I can resolve. But I can recognize elite cynicism about the premises and affections that make up ordinary people's understanding of the political order. Strauss didn't invent it. But to the extent that he justified it, he is an authoritarian rather than a conservative, or, put differently, the regime he preferred was not the American founding, but the peaceful regime of his childhood, which could not depend on a common morality, and required authority.

A FINAL NOTE

The theorists of post-traditionalism, such as Anthony Giddens, grasped that, on the one hand, communal traditions which preclude assimilation persisted in "post-traditional" society[2], and that the problem of post-traditional society was to find a new kind of accommodation that acknowledged this but at the same time produced intercommunal peace. Liberal tolerance was too weak, too dependent on assimilation to a common culture, and too inconsistent with most of the communal traditions that needed to be pacified, to suffice. Strauss's solution we have seen. Oakeshott's account of political change was to see any crisis as a crisis within a tradition, and any solution as one within the unimpaired resources of the tradition.

Is post-traditional multi-cultural society at best one with a democratic deficit and a managed public sphere, which secures peace through a combination of authority, administrative wisdom, and concessions to the claims of unassimilable communal groupings, who are "empowered" or disempowered in accordance with the higher morality of the elite? Is the tropism to this kind of illiberalism a sign that the time of liberalism is finally over? Or are there unimpaired resources of the political tradition that would allow for a non-authoritarian, non-administrative solution to the problem of intercommunal relations? This is the question that the political thinking of both Oakeshott and Strauss sensitize us to, without answering.

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2   A point Strauss himself forcefully made in "Why We Remain Jews" ([1962] 1997).

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