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ASSESSING JAFFA'S CONTRIBUTION

Harry V. Jaffa: *American Conservatism and the American Founding*. (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1984. Pp. 278. \$12.75.)

American Conservatism and the American Founding continues Harry Jaffa's search for a rationale for modern conservatism. In seventeen occasional essays and reviews (with an introduction by Charles Kesler) Jaffa returns to his "Freeport" question. What is worth conserving in our tradition, he asks, because it is naturally or rationally defensible, and not merely comforting and respectable? Ironically, given the critical thought of the past 400 years, Jaffa finds good counsel in our most venerated tradition, the classical political thought of Plato and Aristotle. It is this tradition, venerable in its greater, if not perfect realism, which fosters Jaffa's rejection of the most radical assumption of our critics: modern politics must repeat in practice the theoretical "self-destruction of (modern) reason." Any political regime founded on modern political principles will inevitably fail as a consequence of the greater logic or comprehensiveness of historicism.

According to Jaffa, the success of American politics results from the conflation of classical and modern natural right. Within the American "experiment" in self-government, a return to the "common sense of the matter," the modern and classical natural right of the Declaration of Independence, has permitted statesmen throughout our history to overcome dangerous and powerful opposition. As Jaffa has taken pains to show, it was not just the South, but Stephen Douglas, the major leader of the major political party, who took the ground after 1854 that chattel slavery was not against nature or reason but was, as horsemanship, a personal (or group) preference. Since 1865 the stream of modernity has continued to flow over American politics (in Joseph Cropsey's phrase). This "progress" of modernity can be found in at least five intellectual-political movements; (1) the right of a master class of white slave owners was superseded by that of the "workers" or the "proletariat"; (2) the right of corporations to property; (3) the romantic self-expression of the individual, usually in libidinal fantasy; (4) the identity of the sexes and the liberation of all sexual tastes; and, finally, (5) the existence of group guilt, and hence, group preference. In response to these intellectual fashions the Declaration's statement of individual equality, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (virtue), within a political order emanating from consent continues to serve as the intellectual foundation of American life. To Abraham Lincoln the Declaration was the "sheet anchor" of American republicanism.

Jaffa's attempt to revive an essentially Aristotelian approach within American political science has aroused controversy. But of greater interest is the consensus Jaffa has forged since first outlining this interpretation of American politics in *Crisis of the House Divided* (1959). His interpretative American studies, as well as the related analysis of Aristotle and

Aquinas, have been favorably received. Professor Thomas Pangle has praised this earlier work as “books from which we all have learned and which deserve to be passed down, in honor, to posterity.” However, Jaffa’s more recent polemics with other students of Leo Strauss about Strauss’s “legacy” are another story. They have reawakened the animus against Jaffa originating from his support of Senator Goldwater’s presidential candidacy. Since the four central essays of this collection are a continuation of a debate initiated with the publication of Jaffa’s *How to Think about the American Revolution*, and the quotation from Professor Pangle just cited above comes, in fact, from a further criticism of Jaffa, no review of his current work can ignore what he now conceives to be its keystone.

In a well-publicized address honoring the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence, the late Martin Diamond sought to harmonize his earlier interpretation of the Declaration with more contemporary opinion about it. To make his new interpretation more acceptable, Diamond transformed what Abraham Lincoln had said were eternal truths in that document—that all men are created equal, endowed with inalienable rights—into Lincoln’s personal sentiments or preferences. On this new basis, Diamond then embraced a radical separation of the democratic natural right teaching of the Declaration of Independence from the Constitution’s “legalisms” and compromises. The Declaration, Diamond argued, offers “no guidance” to the proper reading of the Constitution. In my opinion, Jaffa is correct, and Diamond’s description of the “no guidance thesis” is more radical than appears warranted by a reading of Locke, certainly more than could be warranted by any reading of Lincoln whatsoever. Jaffa got much the better of this argument until, unaccountably, he insisted upon identifying Diamond’s interpretation of the “no guidance thesis” with that of Willmoore Kendall, John C. Calhoun, and Justice Taney. These gentlemen, too, argued that the Framers never intended democracy on the basis of a statement of universal human nature. Moreover, Jaffa has maintained this apostasy, linking other scholars, notably Walter Berns, to this charge. In what sense can one say that Diamond and Berns are defenders of the peculiar Southern institution?

This is the point of Jaffa’s “Freeport” question. While neither Diamond or Berns would ever defend the “positive good of slavery,” and indeed each may be said to have condemned it outright, Jaffa’s question exposes their inability or unwillingness to justify this condemnation. Are men free and equal, as professed by the Declaration, or, do Diamond and Berns believe only the Framers, and not serious political philosophers, believe it to be the case? Given the opinion of our time, their silence on this question will necessarily be construed as agreement with the view that freedom or slavery is an epiphenomenon of the development of ideas in time, in other words, a form of historicism. This conclusion is more than inferential. If the United States is a modern or Hobbesian regime, as these authors claim, its foundation in modern natural right, is, according to Leo Strauss, epistemologically inadequate, and consequently cannot escape the self-destruction of modern reason. “The contemporary

rejection of (classical) natural right leads to nihilism — nay it is identical with nihilism” (Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 5).

Berns reveals his distance, if not contempt, for classical political philosophy in this invective, quoted by Jaffa: “Strauss did not believe he, or political philosophy could save Western Civilization (or reverse ‘the decline of the West’). It is precisely hopes of this kind that distort the quest for truth. Eternity, not history, is the theme of philosophy, which, Strauss believed, must beware of wishing to be edifying. Jaffa, like Marx, wants to change the world, not to interpret it; he does nothing but edify” (pp. 144, 154). This statement, it seems, can have a theoretical origin only in a skepticism which is incompatible with Aristotle’s criticism of Platonic philosophy for being insufficiently “relevant for political life” (p. 145), or, in historicism, simply. (Jaffa takes the position that Aristotle complements Plato’s thought, by articulating the Platonic principles of natural right relevant to political life.) Almost needless to say, Aristotle experienced at first hand the (potential) skepticism of Plato, while Cicero and St. Thomas Aquinas were similarly cognizant of its existence. In Berns’s defence, one may note that Jaffa makes little effort, particularly in the work at hand, to silence the cavils of the modern skeptics on a theoretical level, as was attempted by each of the aforementioned philosophers.

Much has been written about Strauss’s view on these matters. Suffice it to say here that Strauss spoke consistently and spiritedly of the crisis of the West. Strauss apparently referred to his experience with Nazism in one, characteristically self-effacing statement: “Other observations and experiences confirmed the suspicion that it would be unwise to say farewell to reason. I began therefore to wonder whether the self-destruction of reason was not the inevitable outcome of modern rationalism as distinguished from pre-modern rationalism, especially Jewish-medieval rationalism and its classical (Aristotelian and Platonic) foundation” (Preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, p. 31).

Jaffa and Strauss may be said to belong to that tradition of classical political philosophy where Wilhelm Hennis recently placed Alexis de Tocqueville. “The *science politique* of Tocqueville still stands in the tradition of political science as a practical-theoretical discipline. As with everyone before him, the knowledge he seeks in this field is sought not for its own sake but for the sake of correct action” (cf. p. 4). However, is there no difference between Jaffa and Strauss on these matters? What accounts for the intensity of the dispute between Berns and Jaffa, professed adherents of Strauss, a dispute which forms the core of this volume?

If it can be said that Berns emasculates Strauss’s political thought by ignoring both the letter and the spirit of Strauss’s turn to premodern rationality, Jaffa presents a politically committed, if not a Strauss “made young and beautiful,” as Plato says he made of Socrates. Where Strauss saw a debate between the ancients and the moderns about the nature of political things, a debate inclining toward the ancients in his view, Jaffa professes to see a refutation of modernity. Where Strauss suggests “we have to raise the question whether what is called the ‘discovery’ of history is not, in fact, an artificial and makeshift solution to a problem that could arise only on the basis of very questionable premises” (*Natural Right and*

History, p. 33), Jaffa says unequivocally, "today, thanks to the work of Leo Strauss, it is relativism taught by positivism and historicism, that must rank among the most thoroughly exploded superstitions of the human mind" (p. 122).

However, in his warning to the reader to observe his partisanship, Jaffa alerts him (as did Nietzsche in a similar situation) to consider his position with the utmost care (p. 143). For this reason, it would be a great mistake to think Jaffa's teaching results merely from a spirit of competition within the "Straussian" school or a simpleminded—or not so simpleminded—defense of American "ideology." It would be a wiser policy to look at Jaffa's thought as a serious attempt to describe what political justice is, from a perspective stimulated by Strauss's thought, and faithful to its spirit.

Although the second volume of Jaffa's long expected Lincoln work (*A New Birth of Freedom*) is still anticipated, Jaffa has nevertheless emerged as the most prolific of Strauss's students. It is perhaps not unreasonable to reflect, at least initially, on Jaffa's contribution to American political thought. To my mind, Jaffa makes a serious claim to have interpreted American politics—drawing upon the deepest sources of liberalism, both ancient and modern—in as intelligent and accurate a manner as has so far been seen. With the greatest clarity and vigor he has yet attained, Jaffa presents in this collection his case that contemporary politics rests on a unique combination of classical and modern political thought present in both the American Founding and the speeches and actions of American statesmen. Because of Jaffa's realism, or anti-ideological Aristotelianism, George Anastaplo is correct in his judgment that: "Mr. Jaffa is, in my opinion, the most instructive political scientist writing in this country today" (p. 48).

—THOMAS S. ENGEMAN

CLASSICAL PERSPECTIVES ON FEMININITY

Arlene W. Saxonhouse: *Women in the History of Political Thought*. (New York: Praeger, 1985. Pp. 210. \$12.95.)

Arlene W. Saxonhouse's *Women in the History of Political Thought* does more than just discover a major place for women in the tradition of political theory, significant as this achievement is. By demonstrating that women play an integral part in that tradition—often setting limits upon the public world and defining its possibilities—Saxonhouse offers new insights into the tradition itself. Political thought of the past did not limit itself to the public realm of power, conflict, and war, as many recent commentators assume. Rather, it explored the relation between this public world and the private world of women and family life, upon which the public world depended and with which it often came into conflict. Such political thought, which views human beings within a network of rela-