

The Straussian Paradigm Turned Upside-Down: A Model For Studying Political Philosophy

J. Mikael Olsson

Abstract

Much of Leo Strauss's scholarship focused on the possibilities of moral knowledge and the quality of rulers, and these interests guide his readings in the history of political philosophy. I suggest that this is a fruitful way of studying political thought. It will, however, be argued that Strauss's belief in objective morality should be discarded. Thus, our judgments on past thinkers may have to be reversed or modified. Strauss's belief that only objective values can lend a firm support to democracy is also discussed and refuted. How this "inverted" Straussianism might be applied is briefly exemplified with the case of Hobbes.

1. Introduction

It is safe to say that Leo Strauss remains a controversial figure. Perhaps it is the case that he is more controversial than ever, due to the fact that connections have been made between him (or rather his disciples) and the neoconservatives that supposedly shaped the agenda of the Bush (Jr.) administration (2001-2009).¹ But that is on a "political" level. It may be more difficult to assess his position on a scholarly level, but my impression is that his stocks, as a political philosopher of sorts, have risen somewhat since, say, the middle of the 1990s.

Those coming to *Natural Right and History* – probably Strauss's most well-known book – for the first time may find it difficult to understand a lot of the text. But if they return to it after additional studies in political theory and philosophy, they may find some fascination with some of the unorthodox analyses of past thinkers, especially if they share with Strauss the almost pathological desire to "drag out the dusty books" (Stauffer 2007, 224). But the more one becomes able to form one's opinions on the fundamental matters of the book, the more annoyed (the reasons for which I will return to shortly) one may become as well, perhaps ending up with something of a

peculiar mix of fascination, inspiration, annoyance, and hostility.

On the one hand, it is easy to appreciate the way Strauss *uses* ancient (and some not so ancient) texts to highlight fundamental questions about politics. He shows us that those texts can be read in other ways than what is common; and he shows us how these new interpretations can be of use to us in our modern predicaments. Furthermore, it is not implausible to claim that Strauss mostly asks the right kinds of questions of the texts: he is interested in the question of *knowledge* about political values and the question about *who should rule*.

But on the other hand, I believe he is giving the wrong answers to those questions. To Strauss, the question about moral knowledge is answered in the cognitivist way: he wants to recover a tradition of “classical natural right” and uphold the idea that there are “absolute” values, the truth of which can be demonstrated by appeals to “reason” and “nature”. This kind of answer to the question of the existence of moral knowledge often has consequences for the question of who should rule; and, indeed, Strauss draws conclusions about the undesirability of a too untempered, anti-elitist, and “nihilistic” democracy.

There is thus nothing fundamentally wrong with Strauss's approach to the study of the history of political philosophy. There is nothing inherently wrong in "using" this history in novel ways as a “therapeutic” to cope with modern problems. And there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the questions in which Strauss is interested. The main problem with Strauss, however, is his meta-ethical views, and they are what shapes the use he makes of this model. He uses it to find heroes that can serve as champions for his “classical natural right”. But what are we to do if we like the general framework (i.e., the use of the history of political philosophy for “therapeutic” reasons, and the question of moral knowledge and political rule), but reject the cognitivist story about meta-ethics? The solution seems to be to, so to speak, turn the model on its head. Perhaps we can engage ourselves in a sort of “inverted” Straussian

enterprise; using a similar approach to the study of the history of political thought, but finding different "heroes" and another "story" of the progression or retrogression of political philosophy?

In the following pages I will develop that idea. First, I will describe what I perceive to be the core of the Straussian (scholarly) enterprise. Then I will discuss in what ways that approach should be modified in order to meet the needs of the non-cognitivist scholar. Lastly, I will outline some concrete ideas concerning the character of such an "inverted" Straussian view of the progression of political philosophy.

2. The Straussian Vocation and Method

One of my commendatory points in regard to Strauss is the interest he takes in the history of political philosophy. There are, however, different opinions about the nature of this interest, because Strauss is (like on some many other occasions) not very clear himself. On the one hand, Strauss's way of approaching old texts has been described as "neutral", or conducted in a spirit unburdened by preconceived ideas or political agendas (Behnegar 1999, 103f; Major 2005, 482f). On the other hand, he is sometimes seen as being engaged in a rather specific project, connected to his views on contemporary politics, and aimed at persuasion rather than "antiquarian" scholarship (Drury 1985, 316; Gunnell 1985; 339).

What seems clear, however, is that he is not studying ideas as a "proper" historian, in the vein of, say, Quentin Skinner — Strauss studies the history of philosophy, but he is not a *historian* of philosophy. And I think it would be misleading to claim that the Straussian enterprise is about "mere" curiosity about the history of ideas and about a "neutral" search for interesting arguments. It seems clear, in reading Strauss, that he has *special* reasons for studying certain thinkers. He does not urge us to "merely" study, for example, classical natural right to be able to enhance our education about ancient times; he wants us to *adopt* classical natural right as a model for politics in our own time.²

John Gunnell has described the “purpose of the [Straussian] enterprise” as being “essentially therapeutic”. In other words, the purpose of studying the history of political philosophy is to facilitate the amelioration of our present situation. This scholarship, thus, has an *instrumental* value; Gunnell calls the enterprise “thoroughly instrumental and practical”, being “intelligible only in view of his strategic reasons for undertaking it”. And Strauss's aim basically seems to be to write a (useful) *story* about the “progressive deterioration” of a particular tradition of political philosophy and the rise of a type of “modernity [...] that has brought the West to a situation of social and intellectual crisis” (Gunnell 1978, 123, 130, 128, 131).

This account of the “instrumentalism” of Strauss's scholarship gets ready support from *Natural Right and History*. From the start it is clear that the book is about the *deplorable* decline of classical natural right. Already at page two Strauss writes that “the need for natural right is as evident today as it has been for centuries and even millennia”, because we need “a standard of right and wrong independent of positive right and higher than positive right”. And there are supposedly great stakes involved, because “the rejection of natural right is bound to lead to disastrous consequences” (Strauss 2004, 2). This contention becomes the filter through which Strauss chooses to view the history of philosophy.³

Should one study the thinkers of the past in this manner or not? Some scholars would, no doubt, claim that one should inoculate oneself as much as possible against the risk of falling into the “mythology of doctrines”, as Skinner calls it. He denounces Strauss for being “the chief proponent” of a “demonological (but highly influential) version” of a particular form of that mythology, namely when certain classical theorists are “criticised for falling short of their proper task”. And what the “proper task” is, is determined by some “eternal standard”, in Strauss's case, natural right. Thus, people like Hobbes and Machiavelli can be criticized for not living up to that standard. In other words, the “paradigm [of natural right] determines the direction of the entire historical investigation” (Skinner 2011, 64).

Here, I do not think that one necessarily has to be on Skinner's side, unless, perhaps, one has the ambition of being a good *historian*. But as I mentioned earlier, Strauss should not be regarded as an historian. He regards historical knowledge as potentially important for *political philosophy* (which itself “is not a historical discipline”), but only as “preliminary and auxiliary to” the latter (Strauss 1949, 30).⁴ And if one's ambition is to achieve things in the political realm (albeit in a very indirect way) I cannot see the reason why it should be “forbidden” to impose one's own “paradigm” on a selected body of texts. If one is not interested in persons or historical contexts, but ideas that can be used in the contemporary world, then why not *use* the history of ideas to make (hopefully) interesting points and develop political solutions? The problem, thus, is not really the Straussian paradigm of studying the history of philosophy with a “mission”. I do not think we should immediately denounce those who have such a mission, but we should take care to examine in what the mission consists, and when we make use of the paradigm ourselves, we should first make sure that we really are engaged in the most reasonable mission we can imagine.

But what if we define the core of Straussianism as consisting in the interpretive method of “esoteric” reading, rather than in the “therapeutic” program of reestablishing natural right in the contemporary world? This method basically says that we must read the old philosophers, and especially those that wrote in societies where no one – for political (or religious) reasons – could write clearly about their true opinions, with the assumption that they use certain “tricks” to reveal their (esoteric) doctrines for those who can read between the lines, while the “unwise” readers remain on the surface of the text, imbibing the (self)censored (exoteric) doctrine. This method Strauss sometimes describes as a way of reaching the *true* interpretation of a specific text; a method of “understanding” a writer “as he understood himself”, rather than foolishly attempting to “understand its author better than he understood himself” (Strauss 1949, 41).

It is clear, however, that for Strauss, the method and the political program are very

closely linked. In other words, he (and other “commentators, historians and text-book authors who have adopted the tradition of political philosophy *as a vehicle for their arguments*” [Gunnell 178, 130; emphasis added]) seems to have studied thinkers whose esoteric message might be *of use* (as models of either “good” or “bad” thinking). The instrumentality that Strauss sees in history actually drives him to understand the authors better than they understood themselves. And this is the sort of enterprise that I am partial to, as long as one is clear about in what the political program (that makes the interpretive activity necessary in the first place) consists. A research program that focuses on finding esoteric messages without any interest in the goodness or utility of the message does not appear to be “real”, or full-blown Straussianism – “a student of Strauss is interested in reading esoteric texts written by the truly wise” (Frazer 2006, 38).

Furthermore, Strauss does not seem to have a theory about why his interpretive method is “good science”, or the like; nowhere (according to Gunnell) does “Strauss set forth anything approaching a general theory of textual interpretation or principles of hermeneutical historiography that would give substance to his demand for objectivity”. But, again, this is not to be expected if one keeps in mind that “Strauss's explication of the tradition of political philosophy is not a research conclusion but a dramaturgical account of the corruption of modernity designed to lend authority to his assertions about the crisis of our time” (Gunnell 1978, 131). Or, as a more recent commentator has put it, it is “fitting that the approach to political philosophy taught by Strauss and his disciples be interpreted not as a value-free method but as one fraught with political values”. It is a study of political philosophy that offers “a *selective* reconstruction of classical thinking”, rather than an “objective” one (Gottfried 2012, 62, 136; emphasis added).⁵

3. Natural Right and the Best Regime

Strauss's mission, then, consists in the propagation of natural right through the study of various political philosophers. In the following two sections I will spell out what I

perceive as the core and essence of his view of natural right.

The first thing to notice is that natural right in Strauss is not really about *specific* principles for political action. In a letter he had stated that he purposely named his book *Natural Right*, rather than *Natural Law*, in order to convey his opinion that “[n]ature does not contain laws of conduct; unless, of course, one believes there exists a divine legislator. The idea of natural right does not involve such assumptions” (Drury 1987, 309).⁶ Strauss perceives natural law as containing such principles as the Second Table of the Decalogue – principles that “specify certain types of actions as forbidden without qualification”. This is, according to Strauss and others, the distinction between the teaching of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, the former espousing a theory that does not involve divine command. And, unlike natural *law*, natural right does not “restrict the 'latitude' of prudent statesmen”. However, Strauss does not – as Drury describes – criticize natural law too harshly, because he seems to believe that the dissemination is salutary among the unwise masses, whereas natural right should be applied by those in power (properly guided by philosophers) (Drury 1987,310, 311).

So the classic natural right teaching is – in Strauss's hands – a theory about the good regime, rather than a theory about specific rules. It is a theory about a rule of the “wise”. The “characteristic answer of the classics, to the question of the best regime,” is that the “best regime is that in which the best men habitually rule, or aristocracy”. And the unhampered rule of the wise is “according to nature”; it would be “against nature” if the wise were to be held accountable to the unwise. But this solution to the question of the best regime is usually “impracticable”, because “[t]he few wise cannot rule the many unwise by force”. Instead, “the unwise multitude must recognize the wise as wise and obey them freely because of their wisdom” (Strauss 2004, 140, 141). There is, thus, a compromise that must be made between the requirement for wisdom and the requirement for consent. The mark of “egalitarian” natural right would be to emphasize consent at the cost of wisdom. Strauss, however, does expressly state that

he is not an adherent of egalitarian natural right.

In practice, then, the best *possible* regime cannot take the form of aristocracy. The best compromise according to the classics (as interpreted by Strauss) is a rule by “gentlemen”. The gentleman “is not identical with the wise man. He is the political reflection, or imitation, of the wise man”, and he will probably “be a man of not too great inherited wealth, chiefly landed, but whose way of life is urban”, in other words, “an urban patrician who derives his income from agriculture”. And, by extension, the best possible regime can, by the classics, be described as “a republic in which the landed gentry, which is at the same time the urban patriciate, well-bred and public spirited, obeying the laws and completing them, ruling and being ruled in turn, predominates and gives society its character.” Or, put succinctly, a “mixed regime” (Strauss 2004, 142).

It is difficult, at least from reading *Natural Right and History*, to ascertain just how much of a good normative model Strauss believes this is. It seems pretty clear that he believed strongly in the legitimacy of “noble lies” in political life (although probably not the kind of shenanigans ascribed to certain “Straussians” in the US Government⁷). He also seems to have endorsed United-States-style democracy (with some qualifications). But these allegiances are perhaps not contradictory. Some people have described (most notably Drury) Strauss as espousing natural right *only* as a noble lie, a sort of “Machiavellianism that is well dressed in classical garb” (Drury 1987, 311). If this view is correct, Strauss seems to be operating on three levels: a “hidden” philosophy for the *really* wise, natural right for the “ordinary” wise, and natural law (often in the form of religious commands) for the common citizen.

However, I do not intend to treat the problem of Strauss's actual doctrine here. But I would like to underscore that I believe the question of the best regime rather than specific principles of policy is the fundamental, and more important, question in political philosophy. In *posing* that question Strauss hits the mark. His *answer* to the

question is, however, more difficult to come to terms with. In order to describe why this is so, I think it is fruitful to *assume* that Strauss really believed in the fundamental goodness of natural right (because if he only used it as a useful fiction he has really disqualified himself as a political *philosopher*, since he does not reveal his “hidden” doctrine; which means that there are no philosophical reasons presented for holding that doctrine, whatever it may be⁸). And if we assume this, I think the reason that he comes up with the wrong answer to the right question is that classical natural right is built on certain opinions about moral knowledge that is fundamentally flawed. That I will discuss in the next section.

4. Natural Right and Moral Knowledge

Without the discussion and polemic about the fact-value distinction, *Natural Right and History* would be a very different book. As we saw in the previous section, Strauss is not very clear about exactly what natural right entails in practical politics; it is more of a principle stating that it is better that the “wise” rule, rather than the “unwise”, or at least that the wise have a substantial influence in the state.

Now one aspect of being wise seems, for Strauss, to know what is *good* by nature, that is what is *absolutely* moral. The wise are, in other words, the ones who have knowledge about the good. However, a fundamental tenet for many social scientists has been that you cannot derive any values from facts. And thus, no morality can be “objective”. This is the position that Strauss takes strides with in *Natural Right and History*. And reading other works also, one can see that this is one of the most important things for him; he seems to perceive *political philosophy* itself as consisting in mainly a quest for knowledge about the good. If, Strauss writes in an essay, “men make it their explicit goal to acquire knowledge of the good life and of the good society, political philosophy emerges. [...] Political philosophy will then be the attempt to replace opinion about the nature of political things by knowledge of the nature of political things”, and it will be “the attempt truly to know [...] the right, or the good, political order” (Strauss 1957, 343-345).

I agree with Strauss that this is a very important question. To the extent that the Straussian mission is dedicated to answer questions about moral ontology and epistemology it must be described as a praiseworthy enterprise, because where one stands on these questions usually has great importance for where one stands on the other big question in Straussian thought, namely about who should rule.

The problem, however, is that Strauss's metaethical views appear to be untenable. Neither does he present any real arguments for them, nor does he engage with the critical metaethical literature that existed when he was writing (e.g. Hägerström, Ayer, Stevenson, Hare, Nowell-Smith). And authors who otherwise write appreciatively about Strauss do not really try to defend his cognitivist stance (although they do not seem to reject it either), so we cannot get any guidance from them as to how Strauss would have argued against modern noncognitivists. Many Straussian commentators do, on the other hand, discuss Strauss's view about the *consequences* of a disbelief in objective values. Strauss may be right or wrong about them, but if he wants to escape the accusation of being mainly a noble-lie-theorist (erecting “objective” values as a noble lie because of the dire consequences of not doing that) it would be interesting to know if he has an answer to the underlying metaethical question. (And it would only be fair to ask this of Strauss, since seems to have posed similar questions with respect to Heidegger.⁹)

What Strauss does is basically attacking a certain way of doing social science – his main target is Max Weber – which does not really settle the question of moral knowledge. Strauss's contention is – contra Weber – that “[i]t is impossible to study social phenomena, *i.e.*, all important social phenomena, without making value judgments”. The fact that scientists are interested in science seems itself to betray some implicit statements of value: “Social science cannot pronounce on the question of whether social science itself is good. It is then compelled to teach that society can with equal right and with equal reason favor social science as well as suppress it as disturbing, subversive, corrosive, nihilistic. But strangely enough we find social

scientists very anxious to 'sell' social science, *i.e.*, to prove that social science is necessary" (Strauss 1957, 349, 348).

This sort of argument about implied values necessary for the activity of social science takes up a large part of *Natural Right and History*. The annoying thing, however, is that it entirely misses the crucial point about moral knowledge. What Strauss is proving (whether he succeeds or not) is that social scientists who cling to the fact-value distinction actually make some sorts of judgments of value. But this does not answer the question about the *nature* of these values. The reason that Strauss wants us to study classical natural right is that we should obtain *knowledge* of it. The question whether there can be (objective) knowledge or not about what is good is a question that is wholly distinct from the question whether it is possible to abstain from making value judgments in reflecting about politics. It is the latter question that Strauss is answering, while the first question is the one he should be answering. Strauss writes that "Weber [...] never proved that the unassisted human mind is incapable of arriving at objective norms or that the conflict between different this-worldly ethical doctrines is insoluble by human reason" (Strauss 2004, 70). But Strauss does certainly not prove the opposite. Indeed, he doesn't even seem to try. I am, of course, not the first one to notice this. Let me quote a lengthy passage from one (conservative) commentator who sums it up neatly:

One expects at the end of *Natural Right and History* to be shown the proper (re)grounding of natural right in our time; one expects the reigning relativism and nihilism to be overcome in dialogue with the great thinkers that Strauss has so admirably explicated. Nothing of the kind, however, occurs. Strauss might have demonstrated to us how philosophy grounds natural right. He might have turned toward Jerusalem and shown us how faith or theology articulate the true basis of moral and political life. He might even have tried to ground natural right in the scientific study of human nature, as some of his extended followers [...] have done. Since he speaks so much about the soul, he might have tried to defend the reality of the soul as distinct from the body. But Strauss does none of this. He has laid out the modern crisis so boldly and analyzed its main forms so thoroughly and he has taught us how to read the classical texts to grasp the problem of natural right. Yet, when the issues are joined so forcefully, he fails to give an answer

(Sherlock 2006, 211).

In other words, he never answers the vital question of just how values can be something other than subjective attitudes. Of course, he could have delved into the metaethical literature and found different sorts of support for “objective” values. The problem is that I don't think that would have helped him. It may be the case that his account in *Natural Right and History* was intended to be “negative and preparatory”, that his “intention is to induce us to reflect on the opinions we take for granted, to open us to the possibility that there is a true 'philosophic ethics or natural right'” (Lenzner & Kristol 2003, 22f). But, in the end, the solution to the Straussian problem of moral knowledge must, I think, be searched out from the opposite angle. And if we read political philosophy as that kind of “inverted” Straussian enterprise – with the presumption that there are no “facts” to discover about what is good – I think there are many interesting and inspiring things to find, as well as a different answer to the question of who should rule. And, what is more important, the *noncognitivist* approach does not have to lead to a dangerous indifference to certain democratic institutions. Interpreted as a “noble-lie-theorist” this seems to be Strauss's main preoccupation – the fear that “[o]nce we realize that the principles of our actions have no other support than our blind choice, we really do not believe in them any more” (Strauss 2004, 6); that we will lose our capacity to defend, for instance “Western Civilization”. This is, of course, a different argument to the one about the existence of objective values. It is an argument that in order to successfully defend our political system in a hostile world we (or rather the “wise”) should, so to speak, stamp our values with the word “objective”, even though that word does not make any sense metaethically. The contention is that noncognitivism necessarily leads to the most lax kind of relativism (in the sense of acceptance of all kinds of values). There is, however, no logical (and, I believe, rarely any psychological) connection between noncognitivism and relativism. And that noncognitivism (combined with a few minimal, and reasonable, norms) can constitute a forceful defense for democracy I will briefly try to demonstrate in the next section.

5. Noncognitivism and the Defense of Democracy

When the noncognitivist ask the question whether value statements can be true or false, she gives the answer in the negative. Hägerström – one of the earliest systematic defenders of the doctrine – put it like this: “Since science only describes what is true, while it is meaningless to regard a conception about what should be as true, no science can make it its task to show how we should act” (Hägerström 1987, 48). In other words, what we *should* do is not a question of the right kind of *knowledge*. And insofar as we claim that some value-statement is true or false, it is probably the case that we are not actually making a value-statement at all, but reporting some fact. When we say that it is wrong to steal, we might, for instance, mean that most (or all) people think that stealing is wrong, or (more extravagantly) that some deity believes it is wrong to steal; these statements would, however, not be value-statements, but reports of facts, hence keeping the fact-value distinction intact. And if we were to make explicit the assumptions that were probably implicit before, namely that “good actions are those that are approved by most (or all) people”, or “good actions are those are approved by the deity”, we are no longer talking about facts, but about values (or rather a combination facts and values). But whenever we move from facts to values we simultaneously lose the ability to claim that our statements are true or false (or, in case of combined statements, that the value-part is true or false).

Now, noncognitivism is usually developed in conjunction with a particular type of analysis. It is entirely possible to state that values cannot be true or false and make a halt; but usually philosophers have been interested in finding out what *meaning* value-statements have if they are not statements of fact. This is, indeed, the main preoccupation of such philosophers as A. J. Ayer and C. L. Stevenson. Stevenson describes the meaning of values in terms of imperatives (“‘This is good’ means *I approve of this; do so as well*” [Stevenson 1944, 22]), and imperatives cannot be regarded as true (even though one can give different sorts of hypothetical reasons for obeying them). In other words, values express people's *attitudes* (and the wish to

change those of other people), and not their *beliefs* (about facts). A more recent example of this kind of analysis is Alan Gibbard's "Norm-expressivism", which states "that moral judgments express an agent's acceptance of rules" (Miller 2003, 95). I do not think, however, that the reasoning I will sketch out below does require any definite answers to those kinds of questions; like J. L. Mackie, we may say that "[t]he denial that there are objective values does not commit one to any particular view about what moral statements mean" (Mackie 1990, 18).¹⁰ All we need is the non-cognitivist foundation, namely the claim that value-statements cannot be true or false.

This is, of course, the opposite of what Strauss claims (or *appears* to claim, since he is not really making an effort to defend his position). As described above, he thinks that political philosophy should be about the quest for *knowledge* of what is good and bad. If we are noncognitivists we cannot, however, accept this position. Now, according to Strauss the rejection of "objective" values has political consequences, as noted in the previous section; in order to defend certain "Western" values we need to believe that they are "true" (whatever that means). The question, though, is whether, for instance, the value of democracy cannot be rigorously defended even if one does not believe in any "absolute" or "objective" morality (or "natural right"). While Strauss does not seem to believe that noncognitivism gives one enough moral conviction, or the like, to defend democracy against its antagonists, I think that the noncognitivist has compelling (albeit not logically "binding") reasons for supporting democracy, and that cognitivists usually have less compelling reasons. And I think it can be intuitively comprehended that a belief in "objective" values may not without difficulty lead to "aristocratic", "elitist", or even "fanatic" political solutions. After all, why should I let the majority decide what is a "good" law, when they have no grasp of what is "really" good? *Mutatis mutandis*, the noncognitivist may easily argue that if there is no law that is good "objectively", why should the fact that I (or my own little group) am attracted to certain morality be a good reason to make a law out of it in the face of opposition from a majority?

One might retort that there is no logical contradiction in being a noncognitivist and believing that it is allowed to force through laws simply because some specified person approves of it. This may be granted, but it can easily be disregarded if we require an *ethical* argument not to contain any specific named persons (a caveat to which I think most people would be willing to subscribe). An argument that, for instance, says that the fact that I, John Doe, approve of law X (or action Y) is a good enough reason to make it real, would not be accepted as an ethical argument (although engaging with “ethical” arguments is, of course, not necessary if one is content with living in a *bellum omnium contra omnes*). Barring this solution to normative dilemmas, the noncognitivist seems to have, so to speak, few places to hide. The solution for political philosophy seems to be to rely on majoritarian democratic decisions, since all we really *know* about the different propositions is how many are supporting them. We do not *know* which proposition *is* the best one (as long as normative aspects are decisive), so that cannot guide us. We may know which proposition we ourselves support, but since we do not believe that the mere fact that our little group supports a certain proposition is a *better* reason for making it a law than the fact that some other group supports an opposing proposition, we cannot as convinced noncognitivists insist that our minority position should win the day. If we do not believe that some normative position is objectively better than its negation (and if we believe that ethics derived from facts about the attitudes of specific persons are quite flimsy) it seems that opposing positions must cancel each other out, until a remainder is left that decides the course of action.

Thus, a noncognitivist has good reasons to adhere to a doctrine of the rule of the many rather than to the doctrine of the rule of the “best”. Besides, I think it can be intuitively grasped that adherence to “objective” values (which, we should remember, is not really a sensible position, but rather a sort of metatethical “fiction”) may easily lead to all sorts of fanaticism.¹¹ It is not hard to imagine a dictator who believes he can legitimately rule supreme because he is morally *right*, but it is (at least to my

mind) harder to imagine a dictator who does not believe in the “objective” goodness of his own actions and who does not believe that the fact that he (as a specific person) has certain political attitudes “overrides” the attitudes of others. Of course, one could claim that there may be dictators who agree to the first part (noncognitivism), but not the second (the minimal condition of “anonymity” of ethics). I can only reply that that kind of dictator is not really interesting to political philosophy, because that would simply take us back to a sort of state of nature, where weapons, rather than words, must be the tool of the oppressed – in short, a situation where neither the words of Strauss, nor any noncognitivist philosopher, would be of much importance.¹²

6. Consequences for Scholarship and Interpretation

As I have pointed out, my purpose has not been to criticize the Straussian stance that the study of the history of political philosophy should be conducted in light of contemporary problems and in light of an overarching belief in certain values. But the results of such studies will differ if one is not convinced that the guiding light of the activity should be a “recollection” of “classical natural right”. The results will differ if we set the task of “recollecting” such things as moral skepticism and majoritarian democracy. If the Straussian paradigm has certain heroes and villains, this “inverted” Straussianism will have other heroes and villains. In what follows I will consider Strauss's treatment of Hobbes, and see how it may differ if one approaches Hobbes from my proposed angle.

We might start with Hobbes's notion of “natural law” and how it differs from the classical conception. According to Strauss, Hobbes divorces “the idea of natural law [...] from the idea of man's perfection”. In Hobbes's hands natural law becomes something less normative; he attempts to deduce a “scientific” view of man as a “passionate”, rather than a “reasonable”, animal. In other words, “the most powerful of all passions will be a natural fact, and we are not to assume that there is a natural support for justice or for what is human in man”. The great crime Strauss seems to find in Hobbes is that he transforms justice into something that “no longer consists in

complying with standards that are independent of human will” (Strauss 2004, 180, 187).

Now, as most students of political philosophy know, Hobbes thinks that the desire for self-preservation and fear of violent death is the supreme “passion” in man. Although we may not agree that this passion is so important that it should be the virtual bedrock of a political philosophy, I think we may agree with Hobbes that it is fruitful to begin with a conception of what a human being *is*, rather than what he “by nature” *should strive to be*, which is Strauss's view. As Strauss sees it, Hobbes takes away the possibility of finding someone that can call (objective) judgment on man's actions; whereas the “classics” thought that there is a “natural judge” (i.e. the wisest person) in these matters, and that the “best regime is the rule of gentlemen”, Hobbes places us in a world where there is no one who is a better judge than anybody else about what is good or “natural”. And in this world “laws are laws by virtue, not of truth or reasonableness, but of authority alone” (Strauss 2004, 185f).

What we see, then, is that Strauss reads (and judges) Hobbes in light of his own preference for “classical” natural right, rather than its “modern” version. What happens if we read Hobbes in light of our noncognitivist and majoritarian preferences? We might just find that rather than being one of the foremost destroyers of the possibility a good society for man, Hobbes can be viewed as a great ally of it, provided that we read him not in the “esoteric” way that Strauss reads him, but how a firm *non*-believer in “classical natural right” would read him.

What is clear, is that Hobbes made some valuable points about the “emotive” meaning of ethical terms, and about the (im)possibility of objective values. He is, indeed, making the kinds of claims about the nature of morality for which Strauss is criticizing him. In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes writes that “whatsoever is the object of any man's Appetite or Desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth *Good*: And the object of his Hate, and Aversion, *Evill* [...]. For these words of Good, Evill, and

Contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: There being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common Rule of Good and Evill, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves”. And with regard to the state of nature, he notes: “To this warre of every man against every man, this also is consequent: that nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place [...]. It is consequent also to the same condition, that there be no Propriety, no Dominion, no *Mine* and *Thine* distinct” (Hobbes 1985, 120, 188). Hobbes, in other words, rejects the idea that we can find any “objective” standard of reason or morality. “Unlike his classical predecessors, Hobbes explicitly denies that there is any natural standard of reasons [...]. In the state of nature, Hobbes tells us, there is no agreement as to the definition of words or of any other standard of measurement – from pints and quarts to good and evil” (Okin 1982, 56f). It is to escape this “intellectual anarchy” that a sovereign is needed, someone who can *stipulate* “good” laws in the absence of the “objective” good.

But if we approve of this nihilistic account of morality, should we also approve of Hobbes's solution when it comes to the type of sovereign power we should install? As is well known, Hobbes is usually regarded as a defender of absolute monarchy, a totalitarian of sorts (e.g., Passmore 1941,43). It is not hard, however, to realize that a “Hobbesian” can also be a convinced democrat. As I perceive it, the main error in Hobbes is his insistence on fear of violence being the only motive of action that carries any real force when it comes to directing the purposes of government. If we could conclude without hesitation that this fear overshadows all other motives, *perhaps* we could agree with him that an absolute “dictatorship” is not *unthinkable* as a solution to the problem of the war of all against all. But since we can hardly concede to this theory of human motivation, we need a sort of government that is sensitive to people's *actual* goals and ambitions. We cannot expect that a non-removable sovereign will accurately *represent* the people on whose behest government has been established. Indeed, Hobbes seems to have realized something of this in his post-*Leviathan* writings. As Okin observes, Hobbes's treatment of the significance of

Parliament gets more positive in the *Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England*, which he wrote towards the end of his life. In his earlier writings, Hobbes had basically assumed an identity of interests between the (absolute) sovereign and the citizens. In the *Dialogue*, however, he turns to Parliament, “as an institution representative of the people in a way that he had expressly denied in his earlier works, as a means of ensuring that the furtherance of the public interest remains the only aim of government” (Okin 1982, 51).

What we get from *this* reading of Hobbes is, then, not a theory of absolute monarchy, but rather of absolute democracy, perhaps even “an excellent defense of absolute democracy on modern principles”. In other words, the *essence* of Hobbes's theory might very well be equated with his *absolutism* rather than his theory of absolute *monarchy*. Indeed, this sort of “absolute” majoritarian democracy was what I discussed in the previous section, and can also be said to follow from Hobbes's premisses. The Hobbesian type of democracy must be one in which “the majority casts individual votes sufficient to offset those of each member of the minority, and still has votes remaining uncontradicted to the will of the assembly” (Devine 1975, 739, 740f).

The main point that remains to be shown is that a Hobbesian democrat does not need to adhere to Hobbes's insistence that the sovereign (whether it be a democratic assembly or an absolute monarch) can legitimately stifle the free expression of opinions. But if we assume that his reasoning is based on the idea that the sovereign is “the judge of what opinion and doctrines are compatible with peace” (Devine 1975, 748), we can just restate the view that maintenance of peace cannot *a priori* be assumed to be the aim that all citizens regard as paramount. If we keep the Hobbesian idea that the sovereign should act in accordance with the interests of the citizens, but reject the (less essential) *assumption* that they desire peace and security *above everything else*, then we must reasonably concede that a large measure of free discussion is necessary to establish what the citizens' actually desire from their

government. In other words, the Hobbesian sort of “absolute” democracy does not preclude freedom of expression.

What we can get from an “esoteric” reading of Hobbes is, thus, a model of *democracy*. In the vein of Leo Strauss we can extract this model by being attentive to what *seem* to be inconsistencies, omissions, choice of emphasis, etc. Why, for instance, is the discussion (and dismissal) of a democratic sovereign so brief in *Leviathan*? Perhaps he had already realized that his critique of a sovereign assembly rather than a monarch rested on shaky grounds. The above analysis seems to be a fruitful way of reading Hobbes, and, as we have seen, we can gain a more positive view of him if our esoteric reading is guided by a set of ideals other than the ones that guide Strauss.

7. Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to retain some valuable ideas from the Straussian approach to political philosophy. Strauss's preference for classical natural right has, however, been replaced by a non-cognitivist metaethical view. I have assumed that the style of esoteric reading that Straussians are engaged in is a sort of “therapeutic” (and perhaps even “postmodern”) activity, which is very much colored by the ideals one seeks to “confirm” or “refute”. I have not criticized the way Straussians are “using” the history of philosophy for their own therapeutic purposes, but I have tried to show how one can get a very different view of the “heroes” and “villains” of this history if one, so to speak, turns the metaethical ideal of “objectivity” on its head.

These conclusions may be quite uninteresting for those whose main concern lies in the “proper” history of ideas, rather than political philosophy as a fount for political prescriptions. I am aware that the Straussian approach is anathema to strict adherents of, for instance, the “Cambridge school” of the history of ideas. However, I find both approaches to be valuable, although distinct, activities. If we want to know what Hobbes's writing meant to *his* contemporaries we should not take the Straussian route,

but if we want to find out what Hobbes's writings could mean to *us*, then perhaps we should. And in the latter case I have tried to provide an “inverted” Straussianism that may serve those who do not share some of Strauss's specific ideals.

REFERENCES

Behnegar, Nasser (1999) "The Intellectual Legacy of Leo Strauss (1899-1973)", *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 2.

Devine, Francis Edward (1975) "Absolute Democracy or Indefeasible Right: Hobbes versus Locke", *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 37.

Drury, S. B. (1985) "The Esoteric Philosophy of Leo Strauss", *Political Theory*, vol. 13, no. 3.

Drury, S. B. (1987) "Leo Strauss's Natural Right Teaching", *Political Theory*, vol. 15, no. 3.

Frazer, Michael L. (2006) "Esotericism Ancient and Modern: Strauss Contra Straussianism on the Art of Political-Philosophical Writing", *Political Theory*, vol. 34, no. 1.

Gottfried, Paul Edward (2012) *Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America*, Cambridge University Press.

Gunnell, John G. (1978) "The Myth of the Tradition", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 72, no. 1.

Gunnell, John G. (1985) "Political Theory and Politics: The Case of Leo Strauss", *Political Theory*, vol. 13, no. 3.

Hägerström, Axel (1987) *Moralfilosofins grundläggning*, Acta Societatis Literarum Humaniorum Regiae Upsaliensis.

Hobbes, Thomas (1985) *Leviathan*, London: Penguin Books.

Lenzner, Steven & Kristol, William (2003) "What was Leo Strauss up to?", *The Public Interest*, fall issue.

Mackie, J. L. (1990) *Ethics. Inventing Right and Wrong*, London: Penguin Books.

Major, Rafael (2004) "The Cambridge School and Leo Strauss: Texts and Context of American Political Science", *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 3.

Miller, Alexander (2003) *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Norton, Anne (2004) *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Okin, Susan Moller (1982) "The Sovereign and His Counsellours': Hobbes's Reevaluation of Parliament", *Political Theory*, vol. 10, no. 1.

Pangle, Thomas L. (2006) *Leo Strauss. An Introduction to his Thought and Intellectual Legacy*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Passmore, J. A. (1941) "The Moral Philosophy of Hobbes", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 19, no. 1.

Ryn, Claes G. (2005) "Leo Strauss and History: The Philosopher as Conspirator", *Humanitas*, vol. 18, no. 1 & 2.

Sherlock, Richard (2006) "The Secret of Straussianism", *Modern Age*, summer issue.

Skinner, Quentin (2011) *Visions of Politics*, vol. I, Cambridge University Press.

Stauffer, Devin (2007) "Reopening the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns: Leo Strauss's Critique of Hobbes's 'New Political Science'", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 101, no. 2.

Stevenson, Charles L. (1944) *Ethics and Language*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Strauss, Leo (1949) "Political Philosophy and History", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 10, no. 1.

Strauss, Leo (1957) "What is Political Philosophy?", *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 19, no. 3.

Strauss, Leo (2004) *Natural Right and History*, The University of Chicago Press.

Zuckert, Catherine & Zuckert, Michael (2006) *The Truth about Leo Strauss. Political Philosophy and American Democracy*, University of Chicago Press.

NOTES

- ¹ See Gottfried 2012, 122-130; Ryn 2005, 33-35, 41, 55-58; Norton 2004.
- ² Cf. Zuckert & Zuckert 2006, 31: "In the Straussian frame, the difference between the ancients and the moderns became decisive; Strauss sided with the ancients and traced the ills of modern philosophy and many of the ills of modern politics to that break with ancient philosophy and the consequences of that break".
- ³ Cf. Pangle 2006, 83: "Those of civic ambition who are influenced by Strauss's reflections will presumably not await passively" the "great threats to our liberal democracy." They will try to raise awareness "of the need for thoughtful action not only to defend modern liberalism but to shore it up – in part by supplementing it with ancient liberalism, in part by learning from ancient liberalism to elucidate moral potentials still present in contemporary liberalism that are in danger of extinction, through being forgotten or scorned."
- ⁴ Specifically, history is useful because "all political action is concerned with, and therefore presupposes appropriate knowledge of, individual situations, individual commonwealths, individual institutions, and so on"; but the question whether, and to what degree, a certain regime is practicable at a certain time is wholly distinct from the question of what the (naturally) best regime is (Strauss 1949, 35). To believe that history itself can furnish us with normative ideals (or that certain ideals can only be "true" in certain phases of history) would be to succumb to *historicism* (although some claim that Strauss's conception of historicism is too crude and straw-man-like).
- ⁵ It also interesting to note that Straussianism sometimes has been referred to as a sort of postmodernism. To quote P. E. Gottfried: "Strauss and his disciples often practice postmodernist free association in how they attach meanings to the objects of their analysis [...]. The high degree of subjectivity and the application of the notion of secret writing allow Strauss and his followers to take certain liberties with texts in a manner that one usually identifies with postmodernist readings" [Gottfried 2012, 154]. It would be interesting to know what Strauss himself would have said in response to such an "accusation", but I think that there is some aptness in the connection.
- ⁶ Cf. Zuckert & Zuckert 2006, 183f.
- ⁷ Even some of Strauss's academic defenders do, however, concede that Strauss endorsed some sort of "mild" concept of noble lies. See Zuckert & Zuckert 2006, 126f: "James Madison spoke of the need to clothe law with the authority and veneration that age and habituation provide. He therefore rejected Thomas Jefferson's proposal that constitutional questions be reopened among the people periodically, even though he knew that not everything about this or any constitution was as good as it could imaginably be. The harm of disrupting habitual attachment to the legal order outweighed [...] the potential gain from the public reconsideration of the constitution. Madison's point is very close to Strauss's and Plato's [...]. Strauss willingly accepts the label 'noble lie' for this philosophic reticence".
- ⁸ See further Frazer 2006, 52-54, who discusses the possibility that Strauss's real motivation is mainly to foster a "philosophical way of life", and for this purpose esoteric reading is a good pedagogical device.

- ⁹ Zuckert & Zuckert 2006, 94: “Although he often emphasized the connection between Heidegger’s philosophy and his politics, Strauss insisted that *the* question, the only question, was whether what Heidegger claimed was true. The merits of the thought of an intellectual giant like Heidegger could not be determined merely by our gut reactions to his abhorrent politics. It was necessary, but not adequate, to point out the problematic political and moral effects of his thought. To respond to Heidegger adequately, one had to show where and how his analysis of human existence and *Dasein* was mistaken.”
- ¹⁰ Mackie’s “error theory” does itself represent another interesting suggestion of what value statements mean (namely, that they are mistaken assertions about objective qualities that do not exist). The theory is usually not regarded as a noncognitivist theory (although it is, like noncognitivism, anti-realist), but for practical purposes it is almost indistinguishable from the most common forms of noncognitivism.
- ¹¹ Cf. Mackie 1990, 97: “It is all too easy to believe that the objective validity of one’s own ideals provides an overwhelmingly strong reason for taking no account at all of ideals that conflict with them, or of interests associated with the holding of such rival ideals”. See also Hägerström 1987, 47f.
- ¹² Besides, one could, perhaps, claim that the law-of-the-jungle type of dictator is not really a convinced noncognitivist after all, since the bare fact that he is acting in a dictatorial way might suggest that he believes that *his* reasons for acting the way he does are better than the reasons of those who are oppressed by him; because, why would he act that way if he did not believe his reasons were the *better* ones? This, of course, suggests that actions reveal beliefs about good reasons, but I cannot pursue that general problem here.

Copyright © 2013 Minerva

All rights are reserved, but fair and good faith use with full attribution may be made of this work for educational or scholarly purposes.

J. Mikael Olsson is a PhD candidate at the department of political science, Stockholm university, Sweden.

Email: mikael.olsson@statsvet.su.se