

Strauss, Voegelin, and Burke: A Tale of Three Conservatives

Robert P. Kraynak

Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin were scholars in the field of political philosophy, yet they did not have an explicit political teaching. They studied the great political philosophers of the past in order to learn lessons that might become living truths for us today. But Strauss and Voegelin did not write political treatises defending a specific political ideology, such as conservatism or liberalism, or a specific regime, such as ancient Sparta, constitutional monarchy, or liberal democracy. Aside from early writings and occasional statements, their published works do not contain an identifiable political *doctrine*.¹

Nevertheless, their approach to philosophy is essentially “political”—rather than metaphysical, epistemological, or ethical in the narrow sense. And they are widely regarded today as “conservatives,” with students and followers who are prominent conservatives of one kind or another. For example, Voegelin’s legacy is carried on by scholars such as John Hallowell, Ellis Sandoz, and David Walsh who defend the Christian basis of liberal democracy. And Strauss’s legacy is carried on by a variety of followers: by “Jaffaites” defending the

natural rights doctrine of the Declaration of Independence and Abraham Lincoln; by Harvey Mansfield defending the Aristotelian basis of politics; by Allan Bloom in his cultural critique of relativism; by Michael Zuckert with his Lockean view of “natural rights republicanism”; by the “faith-based” Straussians following Fr. Ernest Fortin, not to mention the infamous neoconservatives who have been linked to Strauss.²

These observations raise important questions about Strauss and Voegelin and their influence as scholars: Is there a political teaching that emerges with any kind of clarity from their writings, and what kind of political legacy is fairly traceable to them? In attempting to answer these questions, I will argue that Voegelin and Strauss were devoted primarily to the recovery of philosophy as the open-ended quest for ultimate truth, and that this goal led them to embrace classical or Christian models of wisdom and made them philosophical radicals in the academy. It also led them to become strong critics of modern currents of thought, although they differed somewhat in diagnosing the ills of

Robert P. Kraynak is professor of political science and director of the Center for Freedom and Western Civilization at Colgate University. He is the author of *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* and editor, with Arthur M. Melzer, of *Reason, Faith, and Politics: Essays in Honor of Werner J. Dannhauser*.

modernity. Voegelin saw the false certitude of utopian ideologies or Gnosticism as the main danger and Christianity as part of the solution, leaving a political legacy of scholars who support religiously based, Anglo-American democracy. Strauss saw moral relativism or nihilism as the main problem and natural right as the solution, leaving a legacy of mostly nonreligious natural right thinkers who develop political views from Aristotle, Locke, the American Founders, and Churchill. In contemporary terms, their prudent views on politics fit the label “conservative” and resemble the Anglo-American constitutionalism of Edmund Burke, yet Voegelin and Strauss were reluctant to align themselves with Burkean conservatives and often seem unfairly critical of Burke. These observations point to the difficulty of appropriating Voegelin and Strauss for any political cause, although I will argue that their views may be usefully described as a blend of philosophical radicalism and political conservatism.

*The Permanent Problem of Philosophy
and Politics*

Voegelin and Strauss taught political philosophy, not by writing political treatises, but by presenting a grand interpretation of Western thought through the careful analysis of classic texts. In developing their teachings, they sought to discover the Truth about the permanent problems of man or human nature, which they understood as political problems in the broadest sense. For Strauss, the fundamental issues arose from the relation of law and philosophy, while for Voegelin the abiding issues arose from the relation of political order and the search for cosmic order. Let me elaborate these points in order to show the similarity in overall orientation

of the two thinkers, along with some crucial differences.

The permanent problem of man that emerges from Strauss’s writings is the relation of the Philosopher and the City, as expressed above all in Plato’s dialogues. This relation is seen in the inherent tension that exists between the need of the political community for an authoritative law—ultimately based on divine law—and the erotic need of the philosopher for rational knowledge of the whole. These two needs create an inevitable conflict because the city is “closed” in the sense of demanding belief in a particular religion and form of government as the only true or authoritative law, while the philosopher is “open” in the sense of questioning all received opinions in order to ascend from opinion to knowledge, or from convention to nature. These conflicting needs were the underlying cause of the trial and death of Socrates, which became the paradigm for the precarious relation of philosophy and politics everywhere and led many philosophers to develop an esoteric style of writing to avoid persecution by their political communities.

Using a different kind of terminology, Voegelin describes the permanent problem of man as the relation between two needs—the “truth of the soul” and the “truth of society.”³ Despite the use of more technical terms, Voegelin resembles Strauss in viewing this fundamental relation as a kind of tension in the human quest for order. On the one side, there is the openness of the soul to truth, which Voegelin describes as the encounter of philosophers and other seekers of wisdom with the “divine ground of being.” This experience arises from the “in-between status” of man as a mortal being seeking transcendent order in the cosmos, which is expressed in different “symbols,” including the ideas of philosophers. On the other

side is the need of society for “representations of order,” which in healthy societies takes the form of a civil theology open to transcendence and in unhealthy societies becomes a rigidly closed ideology. In the historical quest for order, the proper balance between “open” and “closed” souls and societies is rarely achieved, especially in the modern world.⁴ As Voegelin says of an earlier period, “the tension between a truth of society and a truth of the soul existed before . . . and the new understanding of transcendence could sharpen the consciousness of the tension but not remove it from the constitution of being.”⁵

In reflecting on these statements, one can see a similarity in Strauss’s and Voegelin’s claims that an inherent tension exists between the needs of philosophers and the needs of societies that cannot be eliminated without distorting one or the other. Hence, they are critical of the modern Enlightenment for attempting to remove the tension, either by making the political community more rational and attuned to theoretical doctrines or by making philosophers more practical and activist in trying to change the world. While agreeing on these major points, the two men disagree on the role of reason and faith in the quest for truth. In a famous exchange of letters, Voegelin describes philosophers and theologians as engaging in the same enterprise, meaning they use reason and revelation as comparable tools in seeking to know and to express the ever-elusive “divine ground of being.” Strauss opposes Voegelin’s tendency to synthesize philosophy and religion, asserting that “philosophy is radically independent of faith”—this is “the root of *our* disagreement.”⁶ For Strauss, reason and revelation are exclusive alternatives that admit of no synthesis that does not subordinate one to the other, requiring an either/or choice—philosophy or religious faith.

Following the logic of their positions, Strauss and Voegelin agree on crucial points in the development of Western thought but diverge on the role of Christianity. For Strauss, Western thought is a philosophical drama in which the classical philosophers and their medieval developers made virtue the standard for politics; this approach provoked the accusation of modern thinkers that the ancients “aimed too high” and that one should lower the goal of politics to the satisfaction of selfish human passions in a regime of freedom and material prosperity. While the modern revolt against any authority above man at first glorified scientific reason in the conquest of nature, it eventually led to the destruction of reason and produced the crisis of moral relativism or nihilism—the denial of any objective standard of right and wrong and the complete forgetting of eternity. Faced with this situation, Strauss sought to recover the classical rationalism of Socrates, which he understood to be a kind of *zetetic* (or searching) skepticism that allowed for rational standards of morality in natural right.

For Voegelin, the development of Western thought is mostly a religious drama (“history is Christ writ large”) in which Christianity changed human consciousness in ways that make it impossible to return to classical philosophy. While Christianity advanced the consciousness of the West by elevating the dignity of all persons, it also created a problem for political authority by dividing the spiritual and temporal into two realms and by radically secularizing or “de-divinizing” the political realm. This division eventually provoked a reaction among medieval thinkers like Joachim of Flora who sought to re-connect the two realms by giving politics an eschatological dimension. Their efforts produced a deformed kind of spiritual knowledge that Voegelin

calls Gnosticism—the attempt to realize heaven on earth through secularized political religions, such as radical Puritanism, progressive liberalism, Comte’s “religion of humanity,” socialism, communism, and fascism. The history of the West is thus a Christianized history of consciousness that leads to misguided efforts to bring about worldly salvation through utopian ideologies, resulting in the totalitarian tyrannies of the modern age. Faced with this situation, Voegelin sought to recover the primary experience of openness to transcendence in the “mystic-philosophers” of earlier ages in the hope of restoring the authentic basis of order.

As one can see, Strauss and Voegelin disagreed about the harmony of philosophy and religion, but they shared views on crucial issues—the permanent problem of man, the crisis of the Western tradition, the false philosophies of modernity, and the need to recover ancient wisdom. They also shared the experience of exile from Nazi tyranny and the sense of being outside the mainstream of academic political science, providing a bond of cordial friendship and professional collaboration. Did this mean they agreed on the political implications of their views of Western thought or on the principles of practical politics?

*Sober Politics: Anglo-American
Constitutionalism*

The answer, I believe, is yes: Strauss and Voegelin embraced a very sober version of Anglo-American constitutionalism as the only prudent alternative to the dangers of modern totalitarianism and nihilism. Yet one might be surprised to learn how little is said on this topic in their voluminous published writings and how reluctant they were to embrace the label “conservative”

or to align themselves with the great spokesman for Anglo-American constitutionalism, Edmund Burke. Perhaps we can understand why by looking at their influential works, Voegelin’s *New Science of Politics* and Strauss’s *Natural Right and History*.

Both books were written in the early 1950s and were mainly intended to give sweeping interpretations of Western political philosophy that explained the spiritual or philosophic causes of the crisis of modernity and what can be done about it. Along the way, they make references to the ideological conflicts of World War II and the Cold War and offer some clues about their concrete political views.

In *The New Science of Politics*, Voegelin scatters political comments throughout the book but saves his discussion of political alternatives to Gnostic ideologies for the last three pages. There he asserts that the political forces most capable of resisting the Gnostic deformations are found in England and America, arising from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the American Revolution of 1776. Those revolutions provided a sound basis for politics because they took place in a period when “the forces of tradition” were still alive in England and America, unlike in France and Germany, where the forces of modern revolution (laicism in France, economic materialism and racist biology in Germany) produced “modernity without restraint.”

The traditional forces were good, however, not simply because they were Anglo-American but because they accorded with “the truth of the soul”—meaning they exhibited the “virtues of *sophia* and *prudentia*” that were derived from the classical and Christian traditions and applied by aristocratic statesmen.⁷ The English and Americans were therefore capable of producing constitutions

that were undistorted by utopian ideologies and sentimental assumptions about human nature.

Voegelin is hopeful that the Anglo-American constitutional democracies will maintain their dominant power in the world (although in earlier passages he castigates them for leaving Eastern Europe to the Soviets at the end of World War II, based on “dream-world” assumptions of perpetual peace, just as he castigates Weimar Germany for not using force to suppress the Gnostic ideologies of communism and fascism).⁸ In Voegelin’s words: “The American and English democracies represent the oldest, most firmly consolidated stratum of civilization, while the German area represents its most progressively modern. In this situation, there is a glimmer of hope, for the American and English democracies which most solidly in their institutions represent the truth of the soul are, at the same time, existentially the strongest powers. But it will require all our efforts to kindle this glimmer into a flame by repressing Gnostic corruption and restoring the forces of civilization.”⁹ These comments give us a clear sense of Voegelin’s hard-headed political realism in defense of the Anglo-American constitutional democracies.

In these contexts, it is surprising that Voegelin never mentions the political thinkers who might have influenced him or offered similar assessments. His blunt comments on “real-politique,” for example, remind one of the Christian realism of thinkers like Reinhold Niebuhr. But Voegelin never mentions Reinhold, even in contexts where he praises Reinhold’s brother, H. Richard Niebuhr, and expresses sympathy for Reinhold’s brand of Augustinian realism.¹⁰

Most surprising of all is Voegelin’s omission of any reference to Edmund Burke,

since Voegelin’s whole critique of modern utopianism and praise of Anglo-American constitutionalism is a page right out of Burke. One could argue, in fact, that Voegelin’s “new science of politics” is really not so new, insofar as his critique of Gnostic ideologies is nearly identical to Burke’s critique of “abstract theory” for causing the French Revolution; and Voegelin’s appeal to “tradition” (specifically English tradition) not only sounds like Burke’s “prescription” but also shares Burke’s trust in “experiential” wisdom as a reflection of providential order.

It is puzzling to realize that Voegelin omits references to political thinkers like Niebuhr and Burke. The reason, one may conjecture, is that Voegelin grounds his sober, conservative, Anglo-American constitutionalism on a philosophical teaching about human nature and the need for transcendent order, whereas Burke tends to avoid theoretical speculation in practical politics (although not entirely, as we shall see).¹¹ Another reason may be the strong aversion felt by Voegelin, expressed repeatedly in his *Autobiographical Reflections*, to a party or sectarian label that might resemble a dogmatic “ism” or ideological tendency, despite the obvious affinity of Voegelin for Christian realism and conservative Anglo-American constitutionalism.¹²

The case of Strauss is also puzzling, since his political views are less explicit in his published works than Voegelin’s, yet he too strongly supports Anglo-American constitutionalism while openly criticizing Edmund Burke. Strauss says almost nothing in *Natural Right and History* about his preferred alternatives to the modern philosophers who caused the demise of natural right and the rise of historicism or relativism in the nineteenth century. The two “villains” of the book are Rousseau and Burke: Rousseau for denying human

nature, and Burke for beginning the historical school of thinking.

After criticizing them in the last two chapters, Strauss leaves the reader hanging in suspense, without even the cursory nod to Anglo-American constitutionalism provided by Voegelin. The reader is left to infer that Strauss is calling for a revival of natural right as the antidote to historicism and positivism. But which kind of natural right—classical natural right, Christian natural law, or modern natural rights? One is reminded, of course, of Strauss's words on the first page of the book, praising the Declaration of Independence for its natural rights doctrine and the confidence that it gave Americans to become the most powerful nation in the world (a line that seems to be the textual basis for some neoconservatives to appropriate Strauss for their universalist crusade for democracy, as well as for certain Straussians to embrace the universal cause of modern natural rights found in the Declaration and Lincoln).

As if Strauss felt the need to clarify his own position to readers, he added a new preface to *Natural Right and History* twenty years later (the seventh edition of 1971), in which he says: "Nothing has shaken my inclination to prefer 'natural right,' especially in its classic form, to the reigning relativism" and that appealing to "higher law . . . understood as 'our' tradition as distinguished from 'nature,' is historicist in character, if not in intention."¹³

Strauss's message seems clear: he supports a return to the classical natural right of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, rather than the Christian natural law of Aquinas or the modern natural rights of Hobbes, Locke, and Jefferson; and he thinks that Burkean traditionalism is a form of historicism rather than of natural right and it should be rejected for contributing to moral relativism. Except for these pointers,

Strauss leaves readers to determine on their own how classical natural right might be prudently applied to the modern world.

In reflecting on these books, one could easily infer that both Voegelin and Strauss are unfair to Burke. Voegelin slights him by omission in the *New Science of Politics* and even more so in his powerful historical work, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, which is obviously Burkean in theme and outlook but never mentions Burke. Nor are there references in Voegelin's *Autobiographical Reflections*, which is otherwise so generous in its tributes to scholars who influenced him, especially on the topic of Gnosticism (although he says "the application of the category of Gnosticism to modern ideologies" was his own contribution).¹⁴

Strauss also could have presented Burke differently in order to make him less of a villain in the demise of natural right, since Strauss acknowledges that the case is not clear-cut: he cites Burke's numerous references to natural right (he even says Burke "does not tire of speaking of natural right [as] anterior to the British constitution"), but Strauss interprets the references as mostly rhetorical or as overshadowed by Burke's appeals to prescription.¹⁵

Strauss also praises Burke for his wise political judgments in rejecting modern ideologies and embracing sound classical prudence, but he then undercuts the praise by accusing Burke of fatalism and of an unwillingness to fight for lost causes (a charge that seems quite unfair in light of Burke's die-hard opposition to the French Revolution and his tenacious but ultimately losing battle of fourteen years to impeach Warren Hastings).¹⁶

The implication is that Strauss could have given a more balanced or positive presentation of Burke by arguing that Burke combined appeals to "prescription"

with appeals to natural law and providential order—something that Peter Stanlis corrects by documentation in *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* and that Harvey Mansfield corrects in his introduction to Burke's *Letters* by reminding readers: "For Burke . . . prescription is a 'great fundamental part of natural law.'"¹⁷ One may infer, then, that Strauss presents Burke in a more negative light than is necessary.

This judgment is supported by an earlier lecture by Strauss called "German Nihilism," delivered in 1941 but only recently published and analyzed by Catherine Zuckert in order to clarify his affiliation with "right wing" politics.¹⁸ Strauss's thesis is that the rise of Nazism in Germany was caused not only by militarism but also by the German culture of the 1920s spawned by Nietzsche, which was infected with "nihilism"—which Strauss defines, at first, as the will to destroy modern civilization because of its degraded view of material contentment but then defines more broadly as "the rejection of the principles of civilization as such."

Strauss opposes German nihilism by defending civilization, understood as "the conscious culture of reason" (through philosophy or science) and morals or "the rules of decent and noble conduct." He ends by saying that "the present Anglo-German war is then of symbolic significance. In defending modern civilization against German nihilism, the English are defending the eternal principles of civilization . . . it is the English, and not the Germans who deserve to be and to remain an imperial nation."¹⁹

In explaining his high praise of English civilization and leadership, Strauss goes beyond the obvious need to justify Allied victory in the war. He offers an explanation that is Burkean: "The English almost always had the very un-German prudence

and moderation not to throw out the baby with the bath, that is, the prudence to conceive of the modern ideals as a reasonable adaptation of the old and eternal ideal of decency, of rule of law, and of that liberty which is not license to changed circumstances . . . *the English never indulged in those radical breaks with traditions which played such a role on the continent.* Whatever may be wrong with the modern ideal, the very Englishmen who originated it were at the same time versed in the classical tradition, and the English always kept in store a substantial amount of the necessary counter-poison. While the English originated the modern ideal, the pre-modern ideal, the classical ideal of humanity, was nowhere better preserved than in Oxford and Cambridge."²⁰

Of course, Strauss indicates why the conservative appeal to tradition is not enough: "We seek what is good, and not what we have inherited, to quote Aristotle. In other words, I believe it is dangerous, if the opponents of National Socialism withdraw to a mere conservatism which defines its ultimate goal by a specific tradition."²¹ And this would be a sufficient argument to reject Burke's conservatism, if Burke himself relied solely on tradition to defend the politics of prudence and moderation found in English constitutionalism and ordered liberty.

One can argue, however, that Burke relies on more than tradition or prescription, especially when arguing against unjust laws or irrational traditions, as in Ireland and India, because even a conservative reformer must appeal to higher law—to "superior law," natural law, right reason, virtue, and providential order. Although some scholars may go too far in painting Burke as a "Whig Thomist" (as Francis Canavan does), Strauss overstates the case for Burke as a historicist, even

though later currents of historical thought, like Hegelianism, might claim his parentage. The puzzle is that Strauss knows this, since he mentions Burke's debts to classical natural law philosophers such as Cicero, Aristotle, and Suárez.

As Steven Lenzner argues, one can only conclude that Strauss deliberately chose to downplay Burke's appeals to natural right or natural law in order to portray Burke as a thinker who prepares the way for relativism and nihilism.²² This interpretation leaves Strauss in the position of endorsing Anglo-American conservatism while depriving Burke of credit for being an able defender of the English constitutional tradition by prudently combining appeals to prescription and natural law while holding natural law "in reserve," as it were, for cases of reform in accordance with providential order.

If these assessments are correct, then Voegelin and Strauss were more Burkean than they wanted to admit. In Voegelin's case, the "virtual silence" is apparently due to a concern for being too closely identified with conservative parties and a judgment that conservatism is not sufficiently grounded in the transcendent order.²³ In Strauss's case, the critical stance is apparently due to a judgment that conservatism is hopelessly weak if it relies mostly on tradition (with occasional appeals to natural law). Hence, Strauss deliberately exaggerates Burke's historicism in order to steer conservatives away from Burke and toward a recovery of natural right that would be powerful enough to counter the dangerous tendency of nihilism to promote strong-willed fascism or weak-willed appeasement.

By adopting this strategy, however, Strauss may have produced something he never intended, namely, a pretext for American neoconservatives to use him as an authority for promoting universal natural rights and for a Jaffaite school of Straussians to focus

on the Declaration and Lincoln, rather than to develop a robust classical conservatism embodied in English and American constitutional traditions of ordered liberty. If this interpretation is correct, it makes one wonder what kind of political legacy Strauss and Voegelin intended, and what kind of legacy actually emerged.

The Political Legacies of Strauss and Voegelin

Both scholars have produced influential legacies in the academy and beyond that are associated with different brands of conservatism. Among followers of Voegelin, several distinguished scholars stand out: John Hallowell, author of *The Moral Foundation of Democracy* (1954); Ellis Sandoz, author of *Republicanism, Religion, and the Soul of America* (2006) and *The Roots of Liberty: Magna Carta, Ancient Constitution, and the Anglo-American Tradition of Rule of Law* (1993); and David Walsh, author of *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom* (1990) and *The Growth of the Liberal Soul* (1997).

These authors are "Voegelinians" in the sense of drawing inspiration from Voegelin's teaching that a healthy political order needs to avoid the misguided utopianism of Gnostic ideologies while grounding legitimate authority in a transcendent, spiritual order that recognizes the true sources of freedom and human dignity in the in-between status of man as mortal creature drawn to the divine. More specifically, they seek to recover political order in Christianity, natural law, and English common law; and they forthrightly defend the dignity of the human person in a free and morally regulated regime of constitutional democracy. Taken together, they offer us a Christianized

vision of modern politics and a spiritual renewal of the Anglo-American constitutional tradition.

John Hallowell does so by showing that the moral foundation of democracy must be based on the Christian idea of man as a creature made in the image of God; this proposition is the ultimate basis of human dignity that the authors of the American Declaration of Independence perceived but did not explicitly articulate. It now needs to be publicly stated that “the rights of man derive not from the empirically observable nature of man but from the fact that man is a spiritual being created in the image and likeness of God,” meaning “democracy rests upon faith in man as a rational, moral, and spiritual creature.”²⁴

Ellis Sandoz offers a variation on the theme of “recovery” while also correcting some of Voegelin’s omissions. Sandoz gives credit to Burke and to Tocqueville for seeing the necessary connection between ordered liberty and the traditions of Whig politics, Protestant Christianity, the mixed regime, and English common law that have shaped the “soul” of American politics.

In another creative development of Voegelinian themes, David Walsh seeks to recover the spiritual foundations of freedom by trying to tap the latent or hidden spiritual resources of liberalism—resources that Walsh thinks Voegelin underestimated (for example, in Voegelin’s contemptuous dismissal of Lockean liberalism.)²⁵ Walsh’s principal claim is that there is more to liberalism than meets the eye: the “growth of the liberal soul” is bound up with Christian notions of human dignity which liberalism preserves in latent forms and needs to rediscover. For, “just as Christianity is in some fundamental sense the truth of the liberal conception, so the liberal order can be considered the political truth of Christianity.”²⁶

This interpretation expands Voegelin’s history of consciousness by claiming that Christian faith and liberal democracy are spiritual allies—the sacred and secular sides of man’s transcendent dignity. Overall, one could argue that these scholars are faithful to Voegelin’s political commitment to Anglo-American constitutionalism, while correcting his “virtual silence” about Burke and spelling out more explicitly the spiritual basis of freedom.

Strauss’s political legacy is more disputed than Voegelin’s because, paradoxically, it is easier to see his philosophical intention but more difficult to see how it should be applied today. Strauss’s intention is to recover classical philosophy in its Socratic form, with the lofty aim of seeking the disinterested contemplation of truth above the battleground of politics; Strauss also intends to defend natural right against nihilism and the perverse influence of nihilism on modern politics. But Strauss’s arguments for recovering natural right are extremely difficult to judge definitively, since they are shrouded in esotericism and in ambiguities about the viability of classical natural right. Strauss was also reluctant to say precisely what prudence dictates in applying classical natural right to the particular circumstances of today.

In his published writings, Strauss offers only broad statements as guidelines, such as, “liberal or constitutional democracy comes closer to what the classics demanded than any alternative that is viable in our age.”²⁷ In his unpublished lectures, as noted above, Strauss is willing to be more concrete and to endorse British imperial rule, the English constitutional tradition, and Anglo-American democracy as the “decent and noble” alternatives to utopian fantasies and nihilistic destructiveness—an endorsement of Burkean politics on

Aristotelian foundations that led Strauss and many of his followers to admire Winston Churchill and the Churchillian politics of anti-appeasement, honorable ambition, and magnanimous empire.

The difficulty for Straussians lies in adapting the classical natural right of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to the American setting and, thus, in reconciling ancient and modern political philosophy. Strauss clearly stated his preference for ancient or classical natural right, which entails a preference for Aristotelian notions of virtue and mixed regimes over the principles of democracy and natural rights. Prudent adaptations are therefore necessary and have been offered by interpreters of Strauss. One can find very plausible adaptations of the classical ideals to modern politics in Harvey Mansfield's essay "Liberal Democracy as a Mixed Regime," and in Nasser Behnegar's judicious presentation of "The Liberal Politics of Leo Strauss." Behnegar's argument is that Strauss understood the prudential teaching of classical natural right to be a combination of two principles—wisdom and consent—and this combination is best realized in the modern world in constitutional republics like America. These are reasonable interpretations of Strauss's intention because they offer reconciliations of ancient and modern ideas through a prudential mixture rather than a philosophical synthesis of classical and modern approaches to politics.²⁸

For other Straussians, the prudent adaptation of classical principles to American politics is not strong enough to face the threats coming from relativism and radical ideologies. They demand greater certitude for justice and moral order than prudential judgments can provide and are therefore drawn to the "self-evident truths" of modern natural rights proclaimed in

the Declaration of Independence. In a complex effort to synthesize ancients and moderns, Harry V. Jaffa claims to find common elements of moral order in Aristotle, Aquinas, and the American natural rights doctrines of Jefferson and Lincoln. This effort at synthesis, however, is not plausible philosophically, nor is it faithful to Strauss's articulated views on the inherent tensions and incompatibilities between ancients and moderns or between reason and revelation.

A more extreme version of the tendency to find ideological certitude in Strauss's political teachings can be found in the neo-conservative movement. In a bold book, *Neoconservatism: Why We Need It*, Douglas Murray argues that neoconservatives are "revolutionary conservatives" who have found in Strauss's attack on nihilism and his affirmation of a universal doctrine of natural right the intellectual authority for their "repudiation of moral relativism" in the culture wars and in their battles abroad for democracy against the "evil empire" of state-sponsored terrorism.²⁹

While this misinterprets Strauss's praise of the Declaration's universal principles of natural rights, it is not entirely accidental that neoconservatism could emerge from Straussian sources. Although the attempt to connect the two is tenuous, it points to a key difference between Voegelinians, for whom misguided moral certitude is the main problem of politics, and Straussians, for whom misguided moral relativism is the central feature of the crisis of modernity. The neoconservative "legacy" can also be seen as an unintended consequence of Strauss's repudiation of Burke, insofar as it denigrates the idea that natural law is best applied through the inherited wisdom of historical prescription rather through the conscious will of statesmen.

Conclusions

Strauss and Voegelin were philosophical radicals in seeking to recover ancient wisdom in the modern age; but they were political conservatives because they thought that the inherent tension between philosophy and political society could never be overcome and that this predicament imposed permanent limits on politics. Their conservative political views were a secondary but logical inference from their recovery of true philosophy against the false ideologies of modernity, and they inspired many of their followers to oppose the totalitarian and nihilistic distortions of politics in the modern world and to support the decent but sober politics of constitutional democracy.

Yet important differences separated the two thinkers, along with some ironies and surprises in their legacies. Voegelin was more concerned about the dangers of false certitude or false absolutism than

Strauss and more open to Christianity and historical tradition, making Voegelin an unacknowledged Burkean and giving his followers a keener appreciation of Anglo-American constitutionalism than Straussian defenders of natural right based on Aristotle and Locke. But precisely because Strauss was less historicist than Voegelin, he had a much deeper appreciation of the problem of ultimate Truth, including the conflicts between faith and philosophy, and a much more varied and disputed political legacy. These differences and complexities are important, but they should not diminish our admiration for Voegelin and Strauss as great men and great scholars who have enriched and elevated our thinking in many ways. And they should remind us that we have done only partial justice in describing their thought and legacies as a special blend of philosophical radicalism and political conservatism.

- 1 Exceptions are Strauss's early Zionist writings, published in *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings, 1921–1932*, trans. Michael Zank (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), and Strauss's lengthy introduction to *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 1–12. Also, Voegelin's early writings on Nazism in *The Authoritarian State: An Essay on the Problem of the Austrian State* (1936), *Race and State* (1933), and *The Political Religions* (1938).
- 2 For the best recent surveys of Strauss, see Thomas L. Pangle, *Leo Strauss: An Introduction to His Thought and Intellectual Legacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), and Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
- 3 Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952; new edition 1987) 156–57. Hereafter NSP.
- 4 Voegelin adopts the language of “open” and “closed” from Henri Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, but he strongly criticizes Popper's misappropriation of the terms to equate “open” with positive science and “closed” with Plato and Hegel. See *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934–1964*, ed. and trans. Barry Cooper and Peter Emberley (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1993, 2004), 67–68, 196. Hereafter FPP.
- 5 NSP, 157.
- 6 FPP, 72, Strauss's emphasis.
- 7 NSP, 178–88.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 172, 144.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 189.
- 10 *Ibid.*, see 78, note 5 for the reference to H. Richard Niebuhr's conception of revelation and history in *The Meaning of Revelation* (1946) but no references to Reinhold's conception of history and Christian realism.
- 11 Federici notes, “Although Voegelin had little to say about Burke, his political writings in particular contain elements of Burkean conservatism.” Voegelin's “virtual silence on Burke,” he speculates, is due to the fact that Voegelin “discounts the possibility of conservatism that is [not] sufficiently grounded in transcendent reality.” See Michael P. Federici, *Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), 153.

- 12 In Voegelin's words: "Nobody who is an ideologist can be a competent social scientist. . . . Because of this attitude, I have been called every conceivable name by partisans of this or that ideology . . . a Communist, a Fascist, a National Socialist, an old Liberal, a new Liberal, a Jew, a Catholic, a Protestant, a Platonist, a neo-Augustinian, a Thomist, and of course a Hegelian." Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 46. Hereafter *AR*.
- 13 Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 7th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), vii. Hereafter *NRH*.
- 14 *AR*, 66.
- 15 *NRH*, 319.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 188, 318.
- 17 *Selected Letters of Edmund Burke*, ed. Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). But even Mansfield understates Burke's natural law side. Mansfield says that Burke "does not require that human law be seen as an application of natural law" (Introduction, 21). But this is a misunderstanding, because Burke recognizes the need to appeal to natural law in cases of reforming unjust laws. For example, Burke says in the "Tract on the Popery Laws": the people "have no right to make a law prejudicial to the whole community . . . because it would be made against the principle of a superior law, which is not in the power of any community, or of the whole race of man, to alter—I mean the will of Him who gave us our nature, and in giving, impressed an invariable law upon it." See *The Portable Edmund Burke*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin, 1999), 297.
- 18 Catherine Zuckert, "Leo Strauss: Fascist, Authoritarian, Imperialist?" in *Krakowskie Studia Miedzynarodowe, In Honor of Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.* 6, no. 2 (Krakow, 2009): 277–92.
- 19 Leo Strauss, "German Nihilism," *Interpretation* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 353–78. Quotations from 364, 373.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 372. Emphasis added.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 367.
- 22 See Steven J. Lenzner's excellent article "Strauss's Three Burkes: The Problem of Edmund Burke in *Natural Right and History*," in *Political Theory* 19, no. 3 (August 1991): 364–90. Lenzner's thesis is that "Strauss was intentionally being less than fair to Burke" by downplaying his appeals to natural right; in speculating about why, Lenzner suggests that Strauss was trying to steer political conservatives like Russell Kirk away from Burke as an insufficient resource for staving off the crisis of the West (377).
- 23 See Federici, *Eric Voegelin*, 148–66.
- 24 John Hallowell, *The Moral Foundation of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 81–81, 128.
- 25 Speaking of Locke, Voegelin uses shockingly harsh words: "When it comes to Locke, my heart runs over. He is for me one of the most repugnant, dirty, morally corrupt appearances in the history of humanity." *FPF*, 96.
- 26 David Walsh, *The Growth of the Liberal Soul* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 201.
- 27 Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, eds. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (New York: Free Press, 1991), 194.
- 28 See Nasser Behnegar, "The Liberal Politics of Leo Strauss," in *Political Philosophy and the Human Soul: Essays in Memory of Allan Bloom*, eds. Michael Palmer and Thomas L. Pangle (Lanham, MD: Rowman, 1995), 251–67. And Harvey C. Mansfield Jr., *The Spirit of Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), ch. 1, "Liberal Democracy as a Mixed Regime."
- 29 Douglas Murray, *Neoconservatism: Why We Need It* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006), 15–19, 95.