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Doctoral Dissertations, 2011-2026 Religion

2020

Isaiah Berlin and Leo Strauss: The Jewish Question and the Limits of Politics

May, Daniel David

Princeton, NJ : Princeton University

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ISAIAH BERLIN AND LEO STRAUSS:

THE JEWISH QUESTION AND THE LIMITS OF POLITICS

Daniel May

A DISSERTATION

PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY

OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE
BY THE DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

Advisor: Leora Batnitzky

November 2020

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Abstract

"Isaiah Berlin and Leo Strauss: The Jewish Question and the Limits of Politics" brings two immensely influential 20th-century political thinkers into conversation around their engagement with the question of how Jews might achieve freedom and security in the context of the modern nation-state.

Despite the renown of both figures, no study has brought the two into sustained conversation, and with some reason. Strauss and Berlin drew what are generally considered to be opposing conclusions from the catastrophes of 20th century European politics, the latter famously arguing on behalf of a liberalism that recognized that values were plural and incommensurate, the latter holding that such pluralism descended into relativism. This dissertation, however, argues that both thinkers attempted to rethink 20th-century politics out of their shared conclusion that the Jewish experience represented an indictment on Western thought as a whole. Doing so not only reveals surprising resonance between the two figures, it illuminates the significance of their thought for modern Jewish politics and liberalism at a time when both are considered by many to be in a state of crisis.

The dissertation begins by exploring how Berlin and Strauss answered what they agreed was the fundamental political question of their era: how had Enlightenment liberalism descended into fascism? Both responded by concluding that modern liberalism's unjustified aspirations provoked a nationalist backlash against its most basic assumptions. As a consequence, they attempted to reconstruct modern political thought in ways that emphasized recognition of the inherent and insurmountable dilemma of political life, of which for both the Jewish question was exemplary.

From this beginning, the work explores the approach of both to what they each took as the only viable options for Jewish politics under modern conditions, liberalism and Zionism. It then critiques the constructive politics that each developed out of their reflections on the modern Jewish experience, tracing the disagreement between the two over whether the limits of political life are or ought to be considered tragic and the practical implications of their respective positions. It concludes by interrogating the ways that their influence continues to shape and limit contemporary Jewish political thought.

To Sarah Lillian May, זייל

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Acknowledgements

A dissertation collects far more debts than readers. This one is no exception, and I am overwhelmed by gratitude as I consider all the friends, family, teachers, mentors, colleagues and classmates that helped shape this project and supported me through the writing of it.

The questions that animate this dissertation began in organizing work almost twenty years ago. My mentors through that time -- Ernesto Cortes, Sister Judy Donovan, and Sister Maribeth Larkin – taught me the joys of politics. Marcos Hernandez and Salvador Valdez are my brothers for life, and leaders I will forever follow. The sharpness of Robert Hoo's mind always helps me see the world clearer. Joy Silvern's fire and laughter keeps me tethered to the ground.

It was through hearing them asked by students that I came to learn the central questions of contemporary Jewish politics. It was an honor to work as Director of J Street U alongside so many talented young people, and it's a joy to have so many as members of my current Brooklyn family. Ben Elkind, Jacob Plitman, Simone Zimmerman: you inspire me even more today than when we first met. To my one-time colleagues and forever friends Ira Stup and Sarah Turbow, thanks for never letting me forget the things worth being angry about.

I am blessed with close friends that not only let me prattle on about Isaiah Berlin, Leo Strauss, tragedy, liberalism and Zionism far more than could ever be considered appropriate, but encouraged me to think that the ideas I was wrestling through might be useful and interesting and even maybe important beyond the walls of the academy. Adi Flesher, Joe Schwartz and Isaac Luria lifted me up in the low moments and brought me down to earth at the highs. Max Berger gave me the language to describe to myself what I was doing. Through numerous conversations on the absurdity of our politics and the fragility of our democracy, Andrew Marantz's investment in ideas and their power reminded me why I was doing this at all. Carinne Luck's enthusiasm for this project and eagerness to

talk it through were a constant wind at my back; like most things in my life over the last decade, I cannot imagine how I could have gotten through it without her. In every conversation, Rachel Smith reminded me that thinking is an act, and one better be careful with it; the sharpness of her mind would be a terror without the warm of her friendship. Over dozens of Prospect Park walks and various food adventures, James Reich showed me why this business is worth being in by refusing to accept all the nonsense that comes with it. As he has done in regard to pretty much everything in my life over the past decades, Oded Na'aman helped me think through the hardest parts of this thing. Ben Polk challenged me to be a thinker and person worthy of the great blessing that is our friendship.

Classmates and colleagues have provided an intellectual community for what is so often such solitary labor. The extended REP gang – Toni Alimi, Raissa von Doetinchen de Rande, Davey Henreckson, Judah Isseroff, Candacce Jordan, Gustavo Maya, Mary Nickle, Joseph Naron, Mary Nickle, Yoav Schaefer, Liane Carlson and Yoni Brafman – provided invaluable feedback on various drafts of seminar papers and chapters. In annual gatherings to read one another's work, Martin Kavka, Paul Nahme, Sarah Pessin, Michael Morgan, and Randi Rashkover (among others here mentioned) offered feedback, criticism, support and a collegiality that represented the best of what this vocation can provide. The StoutFest crew of Joshua Dubler, Fannie Bialik, Steven Bush, Alda Balthrop-Lewis and Molly Farneth offer a model for scholarship, teaching, and intellectual friendship that I feel continually inspired to meet. Brian Lee's ceaseless interrogation of his tradition has shaped how I approach my own. Mara Willard has been a thought partner and friend for the last ten years, a source of enthusiasm and commiseration depending on what the moment demands. Shira Billet is an intellectual thought-partner in all matters related to modern Jewish thought and a wellspring of encouragement, solace and support through every stage of this process. Nyle Fort is a force of nature, life, love, outrage, and passion; he makes the struggle a joy.

For financial support and intellectual community in the years I worked on this project, I am grateful to the Association of Jewish Studies, the University Center for Human Values at Princeton, and the Shalom Hartman Institute. Versions of Chapter Three and Four were delivered at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, the Association of Jewish Studies Annual Meeting, the Society of Jewish Ethics Annual Meeting, and at conferences at Princeton and Yale University.

The community of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America – especially Zohar Atkins, Shira Billet, Will Friedman, Sarah Mulhern, Yitz Landes, Sarah Zager, and Rachel Rothstein among others – provided a much-needed intellectual home over the last two years of writing. At a time when I wasn't so sure, Yehuda Kurtzer told me that what I was doing mattered. And I am so thankful to the Institute for connecting me to Elisheva Urbas, a dissertation doula and miracle worker who walked me back from various ledges and then showed me how to chart a path onward and upward.

This dissertation could not have been completed without the support of the administrative team at the Department of Religion at Princeton, who provided invaluable support in matters great and small. I'm grateful to Mary Kay Bodnar, Lorraine Fuhrmann, Kerry Smith and especially the indefatigable Patty Bogdziewicz for all they do for the community of 1879 Hall and the students that rely on them so much.

Among the funny things about a dissertation is that while the audience for the work is so small, it includes folks that – if a student is lucky – are among the people a writer most respects in the world. This can make the exercise rather daunting, but it is maybe the reason to do it. I can think of no better place to have studied than Princeton University and the Religion Department, so full of such brilliant and generous humans. It has been an enormous honor to learn with Eric Gregory, John Gager, Gabriel Citron, Danielle Allen, Imani Perry, and others.

Throughout our conversations, Eddie Glaude has shown me how scholarship and teaching can be a place to hold together the threads of one's political anger and imagination. For his students and many far beyond, he is the model exemplar of the publicly engaged scholar. It has been an immeasurable gift to count Cornel West as my teacher and, as I refer to him, my rabbi. He has taught me so much, but above all that love must be the absolute starting point for any politics, teaching, or writing worth doing. His generosity is boundless, his spirit infectious, and his intellectual energy contagious. An hour with him gives me life for days.

It is only fitting that the initial seeds of this dissertation emerged in conversation with Jeff Stout. I ended up at Princeton because of Jeff, who I met almost two decades ago when I was a young community organizer. I could never have anticipated, in our drives around South East Los Angeles, the significance that he would have on my life. Few teachers are as demanding, fewer still as generous, and nobody has pushed me so hard while encouraging me to believe that I could rise to the challenge he set. He has made me a better writer, thinker, teacher, and person.

It is an enormous honor and incredible fortune to have had Leora Batnitzky as advisor for this project. She not only introduced me to the writing of Leo Strauss but to the world of modern Jewish thought and encouraged me to think that I might have something to contribute to it. She has been a constant source of support, read countless drafts of chapters, challenged my thinking and sharpened my questions on matters great and small, helped me see the difference between the important and the interesting, and had a faith in me and the project without which it would never have been written. While the writing itself was often difficult, talking the ideas through with her was always a joy.

As Cornel West likes to remind me, we are who we are because somebody loved us. My parents, Elaine and Lary May, have taught me the things worth caring about and how to care about them. My brother Michael refuses to let me take myself too seriously and his kids Isaiah and Ezrah ensure that

I don't. In the last year of this writing, my sister Sarah passed away after a long struggle with illness. The force of her spirit drove me forward throughout her days and carries me still. I dedicate this dissertation to her memory.

In the writing of this project, I met my now wife Meechal. No words can express my gratitude for her presence in my life. She makes all the things better, among them this project, which she read repeatedly and with such care. Every day with her is a gift.

Preface

Why Isaiah Berlin and Leo Strauss, and Why Now?

I presented the prospectus for this dissertation one week after the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and I will defend it one week before the presidential election of 2020. Given the last four years, I often felt like the idea for the project began in one world, and I was on the hook to write it in another. Throughout the process, it has been impossible to cease to ask myself – in a habit of mind not always conducive to scholarly labor – why it was that these two dead white men were worth the effort I was dedicating to their work. The politics with which Isaiah Berlin and Leo Strauss have come to be associated sometimes seemed of a distant age, and their disinterest and blindness to the most basic forces of political life – gender, class, and race above all – came to feel less like unfortunate but telling weaknesses and more like limitations with which I had less and less intellectual patience.

I initially conceived of the project in the last year of the Obama presidency, in what now seems like the twilight of American neoliberalism. It was in that political climate that I decided that a powerful undercurrent in American Jewish politics required naming and examination. That view would be given memorable expression by Yair Lapid, then candidate for Prime Minister of Israel. When asked by *The New York Times* for his plan to end the occupation, he answered that it was a "very American question." Americans, he declared, believe "everything can be fixed." But the Holocaust had taught Jews the fallacy of such a view. The catastrophe had shown that "the only test of moral people is in immoral times." For Israelis, Lapid insisted, these tests were a matter of daily

dilemmas – shots fired from within a hospital, rockets launched from a crowded neighborhood. "This tension between morality and survival," he concluded, "is the core of 20th century Judaism."[1]

Lapid's declaration of this dilemma as the "core of 21st century Judaism" is unusual only in its concision. The view that contemporary Jewish life is shaped by a tragic conflict between the requirements of survival and the demands of morality is one with deep and wide resonance in contemporary Jewish life. Its power seemed to me both inadequately recognized and in need of interrogation. Doing so, I felt, was worthy of a dissertation.

There was a second reason I was drawn to thinking about tragedy, beyond the particular power of the position in American Jewish politics. I was shaped as a political person through my five years as an organizer with the Industrial Areas Foundation, the country's oldest community organizing network, founded by Saul Alinksy in the 1940s. Among the lessons I received as an organizer was to never let the perfect be the enemy of the good, to always seek compromise. I learned that political life was defined by unpredictability, unintended consequences, and that only fundamentalists and saints imagined that victories could be won without some losses. I was taught, in other words, to see tragedy as constitutive of politics, and to consider such recognition the difference between political naivety and maturity. As a consequence, in my most honest moments I knew that I was attracted to the same politics that I found troubling in debate over Israel and Palestine. This, it seemed to me, was also worth interrogation.

So I had a topic. I decided to begin with two thinkers that I thought could illuminate the central questions: Isaiah Berlin and Leo Strauss. This proved a fateful decision.

* * *

[1] Bari Weiss, "Can This Man Oust Netanyahu?" *The New York Times*, March 19, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/19/opinion/netanyahu-israel-yair-lapid.html (Accessed October 2020.)

At some point in the process, as I was deep in one of the many tangles of weeds that a dissertation leads one into, I remarked to my teacher Eddie Glaude that I often felt like the political commitments that drove the project seemed farther away the deeper I dove into the work. He encouraged me to put up some photos around my workspace, images that might remind me of the animating questions at the source of the project.

Among the photos I chose was a cluster of tents in the village of Susya, a Palestinian community of several dozen families in the hills surrounding Hebron, a city in the South of the West Bank. I had initially visited the town a decade ago, when my friend Elad Orian brought me there to see the windmill and solar installations that his organization, Comet-ME, had built in the village. While the Jewish settlement just next to Susya was connected to water and electrical lines, the village – like most Palestinian communities in Area C of the West Bank, in which infrastructure is controlled by the Civil Administration of the Israeli military – had access to neither. The electrical systems built by Comet transformed the community; among other consequences, the availability of electric butter churners freed up women in the village from hundreds of hours of strenuous labor.

Over the years since I first visited, the village has become a well-known site of resistance to the occupation, as the community was slated for demolition and the families of Susya organized to remain on their land. In response to the village's submission of a plan for development that would have allowed the families of the community to build without threat of demolition, the Civil Administration rejected the request on the following grounds:

> This plan offers no hope that the population can be advanced beyond the state of poverty and ignorance to which its representatives have condemned it…. the village dwellings are fragmented and scattered, founded upon tribal and clan identities which suffocate the citizen, the individual, and which offer no means for social development or opportunities for making a living, for cultural or educational experience….[while] the urban structure lets people meet one another, multiple opportunities, enriches the horizons of each and everyone in the family or tribe as in the wider society. Thus, in our view, the present plan is but another attempt to prevent this impoverished population from making progress….it also prevents the Palestinian woman from liberating herself from the cycle of poverty and loses

> off opportunities for work and education. Similarly, it keeps the Palestinian child away from the opportunities open to everyone else and condemns him to life in a small, degenerate village.[2]

The paternalism of the language hardly requires commentary. As evidence for those who indict Israel's occupation as a species of settler-colonial politics and ideology, the document is almost too on the nose. It is also a striking example of a tendency in modern political thought that famously troubled Isaiah Berlin, according to which ideas of autonomy can be harnessed as justification for coercion, domination, or tyranny.

For the student of Jewish history, however, the military's reasoning calls to mind more specific historical precedent – namely, debate over whether and how Jews might be made useful participants in modern society, what was known throughout the 19th century as the "Jewish question." To take one notorious example, in his 1782 Edict of Tolerance, King of Germany Joseph II declared that it was the Empire's goal to "make the Jewish nation useful and serviceable to the State, mainly through better education and enlightenment of its youth as well as by directing them to the sciences." In order to do so, the King allowed Jews access to various trades and professions to which they had been denied entrance – and prohibited the use of Hebrew and Yiddish, abolished rabbinical authority, made Jews liable for military service, and required Jews to adopt German last names.[3]

The ruling reads as shocking, however, not because of any uncomfortable historical resonance but because the regime of the occupied territories is not generally publicly defended on grounds that it civilizes its (Palestinian) inhabitants. Instead, villages like Susya are declared a security threat. While it may be lamentable and unfortunate that its residents live under military rule, goes the argument, such is the sad cost of an intractable conflict. Precedent for this position can also be found in the

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[2] The ruling is cited in David Shulman, *Freedom anzd Despair: Notes from the South Hebron Hills* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018),70.
[3] Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, ed. *The Jew in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 36.

work of Isaiah Berlin. Values like security, morality, liberty, and democracy, Berlin insisted, rest in perpetual tension with one another. Compromise among them is imperative, Berlin argued, and sacrifice sometimes necessary – however regrettable. Berlin's simultaneous worry over the directions that claims to autonomy can travel alongside his insistence on the necessity of tragic sacrifice suggest the complex ways he illuminates the ideology at work in occupation: revealing its domination while simultaneously providing a framework for justification of the very domination diagnosed – even and especially for those who find it so troubling.

This particular combination of positions led me to identify Berlin as a figure who could reveal contradictions at the center of contemporary Jewish politics. Yet the postwar liberalism with which Berlin is often associated can seem, well, rather quaint – not only alongside the neoliberalism of the last several decades but especially amidst the nationalist revival of the last decade. Moreover, Berlin's particular brand of liberalism led him to defend the rights of national belonging and by extension Zionism, a position that has made him particularly influential for Jewish liberals of the last half-century. Given that today both liberalism and Zionism seem to be in obvious crisis, one might assume that however significant that influence may have been, it is on the wane.

Berlin's defense of both Zionism and liberalism, however, were shaped by ambiguities that, in the face of those crises, are more obviously relevant today than the vigorous defense of both that he often offered. Berlin defended individual autonomy as the mark of freedom yet worried over the consequences of a politics that failed to recognize the power of communal life and attachment. He held that national belonging was one of the great needs of human beings but warned against the ways that such belonging could metastasize and destroy the cultures it aspired to protect. In short, he attempted to reconstruct both liberalism and nationalism in light of what he took to be their tendencies towards self-destruction. That effort at reconstruction led him to insist on the compatibility of liberalism and Zionism. It also led to his more famous argument that notions of

freedom that rest on the sources of rule represent a threat to liberty properly understood. Berlin, in short, offered both one of the most influential arguments on behalf of the mutual interdependence of liberalism and Zionism and one of the most famous arguments suggesting their necessary opposition. For this reason alone, I am not sure there is another 20th century political thinker that more fully expresses the dilemmas, tendencies, and contradictions of contemporary Jewish politics than Isaiah Berlin.

While I often wasn't always sure that I was right about Berlin, events of the last few years had a way of reminding me that I wasn't wrong about the contradictions. As if on an schedule, each year brought a new "crisis" in the relationship between American Jews and the Israeli government that." In the summer of 2017, it was the Israeli government's decision pundits and commentators described as "unprecedented to shelve a proposal for an egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall – a decision that led Ike Fisher, longstanding board member of AIPAC, the country's largest pro-Israel lobbying organization, to demand a return of $1 million he had invested in Israeli bonds, and that moved the President of the Jewish Reform Movement, the largest Jewish denomination in the country, to declare the ensuing political fight "a battle for the soul of Israel."[4] The next summer, it was the Knesset's passage of a law declaring Israel the "nation-state of the Jewish people." That decision provoked Ronald Lauder, former President of the World Jewish Congress and the Jewish National Fund to write in *The New York Times* that the government of Israel was attempting to destroy the harmony between "Judaism and Enlightenment" and in so doing "crush the core of

[4] On Ike Fisher's reaction, see Aidan Pink, "Jewish Philanthropist May Suspend Aid to Israel Over Diaspora Controversies," *The Forward*, July 2nd, 2017 (https://forward.com/fast-forward/376125/jewish-philanthropist-may-suspend-aid-to-israel-over-diaspora-controversies/) Accessed October 2020. For Rick Jacob's response, see David M. Halbfinger, "Jews of the Diaspora Bring Their Cause to the Israeli Public," *New York Times*, October 30, 2017. For an example of the general reaction of pundits and commentators, see Steven Bayne, "Israel and American Jewry: Can the Rift be Healed?" *Jerusalem Post,* July 16th, 2017. https://forward.com/fast-forward/376125/jewish-philanthropist-may-suspend-aid-to-israel-over-diaspora-controversies/

contemporary Jewish existence."[5] And in the summer of 2020, the Israeli Prime Minister's proposal to annex parts of the West Bank led writers to predict a "death-blow" to the American - Israeli relationship.[6]

These controversies were produced by the often unnamed but still fundamental tension between the two forms of politics that have come to define contemporary Judaism: liberalism and Zionism. If Berlin helps reveal the ambivalences, ambiguities, and contradictions of a Jewish politics that strives to reconcile the two into a liberal framework, there are few 20th-century Jewish thinkers that more vociferously attack the assumptions behind that liberalism than Leo Strauss. Strauss insisted that liberalism and Zionism had to be recognized as rival responses to the Jewish question, that the various iterations of Judaism inspired by both were antithetical to Judaism as it had historically been understood and practiced, and that any Judaism shaped by either was plagued by fundamental contradiction. For anyone interested in the contours of modern Jewish politics, these claims are likely to prove intriguing, if for no other reason than their extremity. But if I was surprised to find myself writing a dissertation on Isaiah Berlin, I could never have imagined when I began graduate school that I would spend so much time with Leo Strauss. As someone rather deeply involved in a Jewish Left that generally takes acolytes of Strauss as our political enemies, I was not expecting to find myself so compelled by the purported intellectual father of neo-conservativism.

But any student of 20th century Jewish political thought is bound to run into Strauss. Of those writers who have made contributions to both modern Jewish thought and political theory, the only figure of comparable stature is Hannah Arendt (a writer I decided was too close to my heart for purposes of dissertational dissection). Yet even Arendt, for all her controversies, does not have a

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[5] Ronald S. Lauder, "Israel: This is Not Who We Are," *New York Times*, Aug 13, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/13/opinion/israel-ronald-lauder-nation-state-law.html (Accessed October 2020).
[6] For just one indicative example, see Danielle Ziri, "Will Annexation be a Death-Blow for American-Jewish Support for Israel?" *Haaretz,* May 15, 2020. https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-annexation-will-be-a-death-blow-for-american-jewish-support-of-israel-1.8849139 (Accessed October 2020).

legacy as contested as Strauss. As any serious reader of his work quickly discovers, the nature of his contribution is far from clear or self-evident. What is never opaque in Strauss, however, is the force of his criticism, which he levelled with characteristic power in his reading of Isaiah Berlin. In a few short pages, Strauss declared that Berlin was exemplary of a crisis in modern liberalism.

That crisis, to Strauss, was that modern liberalism descended into relativism. This argument is one of Strauss's most famous, and I initially found it tiresome. But as I read Strauss more seriously, I realized his argument regarding relativism was only a first move towards a much more interesting claim – that liberalism leads to nihilism. Nihilism, Strauss held, is a valorization of power for its own sake, independent and apart from anything that power might accomplish or serve. Over the last few years, this argument has only grown in force and power.

Strauss's analysis of liberalism and nihilism is not often read alongside his critique of modern Jewish thought. Throughout my reading however, I began to consider whether the two arguments might be more related to one another than generally recognized. And I wondered whether they might be more closely related to the claim that initially made me to want to read Strauss seriously, his argument that political Zionism necessarily transforms into first cultural Zionism and then religious Zionism, which in turn inevitably devours Zionism itself. I continue to think that this analysis remains among the most prescient criticism of Zionism offered in the annals of 20th-century Jewish thought. As I read Strauss's writing closely, I began to see this seemingly peripheral argument as central to his claims about modernity as a whole. His critique of Zionism, I concluded, emerged out of his own ambivalent commitment to a Zionism that he feared slid into the same nihilism that he made so central to his indictment of liberalism.

As strongly as one might resist Strauss's constructive politics (however those are interpreted) or reject the grand sweep of his claims, anyone awake to the dynamics of our current moment – and especially concerned about the direction of Zionism – cannot fail to feel the force of these

arguments. Perhaps ironically and certainly counterintuitively, that force is all the more resonant for those troubled over the direction of policies and politics with which Strauss is often associated. He may have been wrong that contemporary liberalism and nationalism degenerate into a valorization of power empty of ethical, moral and even political content. He may have been wrong about what to do about it. But our current politics suggest that his indictment is not as easily dismissed as some of us might hope.

As I fell into the world of these writers, my obsession with tragedy remained a compass. But as the political ground underneath my desk shifted throughout the project, I came to find myself as consumed by the questions with which Berlin and Strauss wrestled as I was by their constructive responses. Can liberalism be salvaged from the nationalist revolt it provokes? Can communal belonging be secured without devolving into nativism? Can individual autonomy and freedom be protected without our politics descending into nothing more than a meeting ground for material acquisition? Can we rethink our devotion to technological progress in time to secure a future for humanity on our planet? And of particular relevance for those invested in Jewish politics: can liberalism guarantee Jewish survival and on what terms? And can collective Jewish life be secured in ways that do not demand and require the domination of another people? Berlin and Strauss may not answer these questions satisfactorily, but even and perhaps especially for those who find themselves disagreeing strongly with their conclusions, their writing illuminates the work that awaits – or so is the wager of the pages that follow.

Introduction

"Jewish modernity," the historian Enzo Traverso recently declared, "has reached the end of the road."[1] For the century and a half between the extension of citizenship to Jews in France in 1791 to the massacre of the Holocaust, Jewish thinkers, artists and writers offered what Traverso calls a "counter-tendency" to the dominant forces of Western culture and politics.[2] As a consequence of an emancipation that weakened the hold of Jewish tradition but never allowed full participation into the opportunities of Western education and culture, generations of European Jews were thrown into a liminal space, between a tradition that they could no longer embrace and a broader culture that, in excluding them, they could not fully accept. In Traverso's telling, the creative, intellectual, and political work produced by the writers and artists of this generation forced "to think against – against the state, against accepted ideas, against orthodoxies and domination" – reshaped the culture of the West.[3]

As the center of that West has migrated from Europe to the US, as the Holocaust has come to represent a hell by which Western civil religion measures itself, and as the state of Israel has given to Europe's longest persecuted people the unparalleled powers of atomic weapons, Jews find themselves with a degree of power heretofore unknown in Jewish history. As a consequence, Traverso argues, the "age of critical Judaism" has been replaced by a "Judaism of order."[4] In his view, once finally accepted into the fabric of Western life, Jewish intellectuals ceased to think against the current, but with it.[5] "After having been the main focus of critical thought in the Western

[1] Enzo Traverso, *The End of Jewish Modernity,* trans. David Fernbach (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 3.
[2] Ibid., 4.
[3] Ibid., 17.
[4] Ibid., 128.
[5] Ibid., 17.

world," he declares, "Jews today find themselves, by a kind of paradoxical reversal, at the heart of the mechanisms of domination."[6] Traverso offers two Jewish intellectuals as especially emblematic of the new landscape: Isaiah Berlin and Leo Strauss.[7]

At first glance, the two seem fitting exemplars. Isaiah Berlin is perhaps the philosopher most closely associated with the waning era of the British Empire, Strauss perhaps the thinker most closely associated with the height of the American. Yet the work of the two calls into question Traverso's narrative. Whatever else one wants to say about them, both Berlin and Strauss offered a sustained indictment of the whole of modern Western politics and philosophy. Both drew a direct line between the European Enlightenment and the massacres of Totalitarianism. If Berlin and Strauss sound notes that are today in harmony with the dominant chords of Western politics and power, they could only do so as a consequence of a profound shift in those chords. But are those notes in harmony? And if so, what is the song they sing? If the two are anywhere near as influential as Traverso suggests, the questions have obvious significance for how we might understand the contours of modern Jewish political thought, its relationship to power, and its influence on broader trends in contemporary politics. Determining the answers, however, requires asking the ways in which the two might have been moved by the counter current from which Traverso suggests their work so dramatically departs. And the force that shaped that counter-current was the Jewish question.

* * *

In February of 1962, on what must have been a chilly Midwestern winter night, Leo Strauss gave a lecture at the Hillel House at the University of Chicago, in his thirteenth year as a professor at the school with which his thought would come to be associated. Throughout his two decades at Chicago

[6] Ibid., 3.
[7] Ibid., 48-54.

Strauss would speak at Hillel on a handful of occasions, using the occasions to distill and synthesize ideas and to suggest some of the ramifications for Jewish life of the close textual readings that dominate his published work. But this particular invitation made Strauss uncomfortable. When the rabbi of the Hillel initially asked him to speak on the predetermined title, Strauss was repelled. But despite his initial aversion, he told his audience that he quickly realized he could easily speak to the question posed, "Why we Remain Jews: Can Jewish Faith and History Still Speak to Us?" He was prepared for it by a lifetime of work. "I believe I can say, without any exaggeration," he declared, "that since a very, very early time the main theme of my reflections has been what is called the 'Jewish question.'"[8]

For those familiar with Strauss's work, this self-description might seem a bit surprising. Strauss wrote an enormous amount – full length books on Spinoza in 1930, on Hobbes in 1936, on Machiavelli in 1958, and lengthy essays on, among others, Maimonides, Plato, Aristotle, Farabi, Xenophon, Locke, Lucretius, Theucydides, Judah Halevi, Rossuea, Heidegger, Weber, and many others collected and curated in various works published through several decades.[9] Those many thousands of pages of writing span a great diversity of epochs and periods, but they do revolve around a central theme: the relationship between philosophy and politics. This seems however at best only tangentially related to the matter of how Jews might be granted freedom and equality in the modern era, the matter to which the Jewish question is generally considered to refer.

Twenty years after Strauss's lecture at Hillel in Chicago, upon receipt of the Jerusalem Prize in 1979, Isaiah Berlin would also suggest the centrality of the Jewish question to his own work. "Two thousand years of Jewish history," he declared, "have been nothing but a single longing to belong." All "the criticisms I have made," he continued, "of the doctrines of the French Enlightenment and

[8] Leo Strauss, "Why We Remain Jews?" in JPCM, 312.
[9] For a list of these publications, see the bibliography to this dissertation.

of its lack of sympathy for emotional bonds between members of races and cultures, and its idealistic but hollow doctrinaire internationalism, spring, in my case, from this almost intuitive sense of one's own roots -- Jewish roots, in my case."[10] While put less explicitly in his case than Strauss's, given the degree to which Berlin's work was shaped by his critique of "hollow doctrinaire internationalism" the self-summary offered a description of motivation quite similar in substance.

Yet Berlin's self-description is even more surprising than Strauss's. Berlin is most famous for two interrelated arguments. The first is what is generally referred to as "value pluralism:" the claim that the values which we pursue both individually and collectively are plural and incommensurate, and that conflict and tension among them is therefore permanent and inescapable. The second is his famous distinction between negative and positive liberty and his defense of liberalism on the grounds that it protected the former against the latter. Neither of these claims seems straightforwardly related to the general question of the "emotional bonds" between races and cultures nor the more specific issue of whether and how Jews might find a sense of belonging in the modern world.

In this dissertation, I ask how our views of these thinkers might be shaped if we take these self-descriptions seriously. To put the Jewish question at the center of their work, however, is to suggest that both should be considered as participating in a tradition of political thought that took this question as central – that is, a tradition of Jewish political thought. As soon as we do, however, Strauss and Berlin appear as outliers, and not only or even chiefly for the relatively minimal degree to which they addressed questions of Jewish politics directly.

Beginning with Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* in 1783 and culminating with Hermann Cohen's *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, the dominant trend in Jewish thought throughout the long 19th century was to interpret Judaism as representative of the potential and possibilities of

[10] Isaiah Berlin, "Three Strands of My Life," PI, 438-439.

modern Western politics and philosophy.[11] Even the religiously orthodox that most resisted the upheavals in culture and politics that followed emancipation found in modern political structures new tools to advance their religious and political aims.[12] When it came to politics, Jewish socialists, liberals, democrats, and nationalists across their profound disagreements all held that Judaism offered an exceptional manifestation of the political program to which they were aligned.[13] In this, as several scholars have argued, Jewish political thinkers worked to translate the traditional Jewish messianic hope into terms of modern political progress.[14] Throughout these arguments, Jews and Judaism were conceptualized as the tip of the spear of modern philosophy and politics, as the tradition and culture that most fully represented the possibilities of modernity. According to such arguments, the persistent persecution of the Jews only reflected the degree to which the promise of modernity had not yet been fully achieved. It was therefore incumbent on Jews – either by advancing a universal tolerance encouraged by liberalism, leading the struggle for liberation from economic exploitation, or realizing the comity of nations through a humanitarian nationalism – to lead the work of bringing modern politics and thought into accord with its promise.

The World Wars and the Holocaust destroyed these hopes. To a great number of writers, the destruction seemed an indictment of the very idea of progress upon which so much modern political thought rested.[15] Among those who reached such a conclusion were Leo Strauss and Isaiah Berlin.

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[11] This is admittedly a very crude overview. For a concise summary of these trends, see Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), especially Chapters Two, Three, Four and Eight.

[12] I am referring here especially to Samson Rafael Hirsch; see Batnitzky, 40-43.

[13] For a summary of these arguments, see Ezra Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), especially Chapter One.

[14] For examples of interpretation of modern Jewish politics as embracing the form of a "secular messianism," see the introduction to Arthur Hertzberg, ed. *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993); Rory Schacter, "Hermann Cohen's Secular Messianism and Liberal Cosmopolitanism," *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, August 24, 2008. https://jcpa.org/article/hermann-cohens-secular-messianism-and-liberal-cosmopolitanism/ (accessed September 2020).

[15] Again, this is of course an extremely broad and general summary, but the degree to which postwar thought was shaped by a general anti-utopianism and indictment of notions of inevitable progress is well known. For early but still valuable works tracing the origins of such positions, see Judith Shklar, *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* (Princeton:

Whereas the trajectory of modern Jewish thought as a whole worked to accommodate Jews and Judaism into the fabric of Western political life, both Berlin and Strauss saw the ultimate failure of that accommodation as reflective and representative of insurmountable dilemmas that political life could never resolve. To both, rather than the eventual resolution of the Jewish question representing the potential promise of modern politics, the persistence of the problem and its ultimately catastrophic consequence represented the limits of that politics. In this dissertation I argue that this position motivated their respective political projects, and that once recognized as central to their thought that work and its implications – for how we understand the influence of these two enormously significant political thinkers, how we appraise their normative claims, and whether and in what way they offer positions and perspectives that help make sense of contemporary politics and Jewish politics especially – appear in new light.

Several immediate questions follow from this claim. The first relates to interpretative debates over both thinkers. Strauss and Berlin are generally read as offering diametrically opposed political philosophies; I argue that once situated within a debate over how to respond to the Jewish question, surprising resonance in their respective political projects emerges. But for those familiar with their work, this seems unlikely – one provided among the most influential accounts of liberalism offered I the 20th century, the other one of the most famous indictments of that liberalism. So how and in what way does considering their work as revolving around the Jewish question alter how we see their dispute and its legacy? The second relates to what was, for both, the most significant movement of modern Jewish politics, Zionism. Here again, their work is generally summarized in ways that would suggest opposition. Berlin argued that Zionism definitively resolved the Jewish question; Strauss insisted that it did not and could not. In what ways, then, did their disagreement over this matter

Princeton University Press, 1957) and George Kateb, *Utopia and its Enemies* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).

shape their respective views on liberalism and their more fundamental political theory? Third and lastly, if indeed they both saw the Jewish question as a paradigmatic reflection of insurmountable dilemma, what are the practical consequences of a politics so construed – for political life in general and Jewish politics especially? If the most essential dilemmas of political life are not ones that can be resolved, then what can politics accomplish? And if the Jewish question is exemplary of insoluble political dilemma, then what does a Jewish politics look like that insists that such a question cannot be resolved?

These three questions frame the three parts of this dissertation. But posing them in the way I have done assumes a more general claim that needs to be made explicit and defended: that Berlin and Strauss can productively and appropriately be considered thinkers for whom the Jewish question was central. In so doing, I do not mean to make an argument of traditional intellectual history and suggest that the Jewish question is the definitive problem that shaped their respective political projects. And to be sure, considering their work through the lens I offer brings certain issues to the foreground while relegating other matters crucial to both the background (for example, I only briefly discuss Berlin's relationship to Russian thought, and I only gesture at the significance of Heidegger for Strauss). Nonetheless, defending even the more modest claim requires more than simply referring to moments when they each declared their Jewish identity or Judaism relevant to their work. Nor can one simply point to the texts to which they made reference– while Strauss wrote a great deal on Jewish texts, Berlin did not at all. So what do I mean by "the Jewish question?" And why might it at least be plausible to consider the question central to both Strauss and Berlin?

In the remainder of this introduction, I answer these questions. First, I offer a bit of biographical detail on both figures. Next, I contextualize each within the politics of the Cold War and suggest that as much as both were obviously participants in debates distinctive to that political conflict, their work was motivated less by the conflict with communism than it was by the victory of

fascism – a victory that was, for obvious reasons, inextricable from the Jewish question. I then turn to an analysis of the Jewish question and an overview of what became the dominant Jewish approaches to that question in the postwar period: liberalism and Zionism. I suggest that the tension between these two responses provides the engine around which the political thought of both Berlin and Strauss revolves. Finally, I give a brief summary of the scholarship and the disciplinary interventions this dissertation offers. I conclude by presenting the plan of the project.

Jewish Lives in Exile

In a public interview late in life, Strauss asked whether "it is proper for people to talk about themselves in public?" The question was rhetorical, and his answer succinct. "The general answer is: no."[16] Berlin had no such misgivings.[17] While Strauss only very rarely spoke about his personal background, Berlin sat for many hours of interviews with students and admirers recounting tales of his family and life. Any attempt to summarize their biographies is therefore necessarily slanted by the wealth of personal material on the one and the relative paucity on the other. But the broad strokes are more than sufficient to demonstrate a rather obvious point. Like nearly all European Jews of their generation, both Isaiah Berlin and Leo Strauss were thrown across the continent and world as a consequence of their Judaism. This obvious and, in the context of their generation, wholly unremarkable fact was definitive in shaping the questions with which they would wrestle throughout their scholarly lives.

Isaiah Berlin was born to Mendel and Mussa Marie in June of 1909 in Riga, then the capital of Livonia, a province of the Russian Empire. But next to the great majority of Russian Jews, the

[16] "A Giving of Accounts: Jacob Klein and Leo Strauss," in JPCM, 459.
[17] This is most evident from the hundreds of hours of interviews for which Berlin sat, spanning over a decade, for the biography written by his one-time student, Michael Ignatieff. For a description of those meetings, see Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London: Vintage, 2000), 6.

Berlins lived a rarefied life. Just a hundred miles to the East and South of Riga, the Jews of the Pale of Settlement were forbidden from owning farmland, attending non-Jewish schools, changing their names, and pursuing various occupations. But Riga's Jews were free from most of the restrictions of life in the Pale and young Isaiah's family especially so. Unlike the great majority of their Jewish neighbors, the Berlins were able to travel freely throughout the Empire on account of Mendel's appointment as a "Merchant of the First Guild," a status that granted him honorary citizenship and exemption from the various laws to which Jews of the Russian empire were generally subject.[18] Mendel acquired membership in the guild when he and his father were adopted by his biological great-uncle. That uncle, the Isaiah Berlin after whom the younger was named, had built the Berlin timber company into a major exporter – by the 1890's the company owned over 75,000 acres of forests – and he mentored Mendel in the family trade. When the elder Isaiah died in 1908, he left Mendel the business. When the young Isaiah was born a year later, it was into one of the wealthiest Jewish families of Riga.

While Mendel's grandfather was a pious rabbi and Mendel grew up speaking Yiddish, in Berlin's family the primary language was Russian. Berlin would later say that his own education in European philosophy required no great break from his parent's world, but several details suggest that the family straddled the two worlds of Russian Jewry more than the young Berlin may have recognized.[19] In his later years Mendel would scrawl a short memoir (never published) in which he recounted his yearly trips to Lubavitch, a tiny village in the Pale to receive the rabbi's blessing. That rabbi was both the leader of Lubavitcher Chassidism, and a family relative – Mendel's adoptive grandmother was a Schneerson, a direct descendent of Rabbi Schneur Zlaman Schneerson, the founder of Lubavitcher

[18] These biographical facts from Berlin's early life are from Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life,* Chapter 2.
[19] Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 15-19.

Chasidism.[20]

Whatever particular relationship Berlin's father might have had to his own Jewish upbringing, by the time Berlin was a teenager, the fact of the family's Jewishness would drive them across the continent. In 1914, when Berlin was only five years old, the Austrian Archduke was assassinated, launching the First World War. Most of Russia's Jews were German speaking, and many Russians accused Jews of giving aid to the enemy – including the High Command of the Army, who ordered all Jews deported behind military lines (Riga's Jews managed to bribe their governor to avoid the edict). When a fire wiped out much of Mendel's timber stock, he confronted the German owner of the yard for lighting it intentionally in an act of anti-Jewish sabotage. In retaliation, the German owner accused Mendel of arson and reported him to the police. With the German army only 25 miles from the city, Mendel decided to move his family from Riga, first to Andreapol and then to Petrograd, where they arrived in 1916.[21]

Petrograd, however, quickly provided its own upheaval. Initially, Mendel managed to navigate the unfolding revolution while maintaining his business, but as violence continued and rations began, Mendel began to consider whether his business had a future on such shifting sands. In 1919 the family decided to leave, first returning to Riga in 1920 before securing visas to emigrate to England in 1921. Berlin would spend the rest of his life in England and come to be as closely associated with the British Academy as any scholar of his generation. But he would often recall two particular moments from his youth that reveal to the degree to which, throughout his life, he considered himself an immigrant and outsider.

The first was from the days of the February revolution of 1917, when then eight-year-old Isaiah

[20] This story from Mendel's memoir is recounted by Ignatieff in *Isaiah Berlin*, 14-15. These yearly trips challenge Berlin's later summary of his father's approach to his own Jewishness. "If assimilation had been possible," he told Ignatieff, "he would have been happy to assimilate. Ignatieff, 30.
[21] These details are provided in Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, Chapter 3.

went for a walk in Petrograd with his governess after the day's marches and rallies had settled. Suddenly the roadway filled with a small group of men carrying a terrified policeman in their arms. The police were one of the last of the Empire's officials to remain loyal to the Czarist regime, and Berlin remembered his face contorted in fear.[22] The second occurred during the family's train ride back to Riga from Petrograd in 1920. In their train car two other passengers mocked and ridiculed the Berlins for their obvious Jewishness, assuming that the family could not understand their Latvian. But Berlin's mother interrupted the insults. At the next station, she was taken by police for questioning – the Latvians had accused her of being a communist spy. As Berlin would later recall, the incident taught him that "we were Jews…we were not Russians. We were not Letts. We were something else."[23]

There are risks to reading too much into such anecdotes, but the two events offer an apt pair of memories from which to trace preoccupations that would shape much of Berlin's eventual work. In the image of the young boy watching in confused horror as a Russian policeman is carried off in terror, it isn't hard to see the adolescent who would become famous as an anti-Communist skeptic of all revolutionary politics. And in his own words, the lesson he took from the encounter on the train was clear and plain: "We had to have a home. There was no point living in a perpetual *qui vive*. Above all there was no denying it, concealing it. To do so was undignified and unsuccessful."[24] As Berlin would suggest in the much later lecture already cited, this conclusion would prove definitive for both his Jewish politics and his thought as a whole.

Upon arrival in London, the Berlins left spontaneous violence behind, and Berlin's biography over the two next decades is one of uninterrupted academic ascent. Though he began school with only a few words of English he quickly became a stellar student and was admitted to Oxford in

[22] Ignatieff, 23-24.
[23] Ignatieff, 30.
[24] Ignatieff, 30.

1928. In 1933, he became a fellow at All Souls and their first Jewish member. Throughout the thirties he worked alongside some of the great figures of mid-century British analytic philosophy, among them A.J. Ayer and J. L. Austin.[25] In 1938 he became a lecturer at New College.

When Britain entered the war against Germany, like many of his colleagues Berlin volunteered for service. He spent most of the war years in the United States, working first for the Ministry of Information and then for the Foreign Office out of the British Embassy in Washington DC. Initially assigned to report on attitudes towards the war in American media, he became immersed in the diplomatic circles of Washington. He also became deeply involved in Zionist politics and developed a relationship with the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann. Given his position, Weizmann saw Berlin as a potential ally for pressuring Churchill and the British foreign service to lift restrictions on immigration to Palestine and support the formation of a Jewish state.[26]

In his official position, Berlin's own commitments were ostensibly secondary. But in the summer of 1943, the tension between the multiple allegiances he would later describe as braided strands – to Britain, to Judaism, and to his Russian upbringing – tightened. As Zionist advocacy for a Jewish State began to worry Arab allies, the British foreign ministry and US State Department developed plans for a joint statement condemning Zionist agitation and insisting that any deliberation on the future of the region be postponed until after the war. Berlin learned of the planned statement and decided he would do his best to stop it. He leaked news of the plan to the publisher of a Zionist newspaper, and the American Zionist organizations leapt into action as Berlin had predicted they would. As a result of the ensuing pressure, the joint statement was scrapped. Berlin only admitted his role in the affair at the end of his life, but it stands as a striking moment of

[25] For a thorough discussion of Berlin's early formation in these circles, see Joshua Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Chapter One.
[26] Ignatieff, Chapters 8 and 9.

personal allegiance.[27]

After the war, Berlin returned to London. In later years, he would say that it was on a flight back to Europe that he decided he could no longer work in the field of philosophy, and decided instead to dedicate himself to the history of ideas.[28] Over the coming decades he would become one of the most widely known public intellectuals of the 20th century. He was appointed to the Order of the British Empire at 37, knighted at 48, a founder of a new college at Oxford at 57, granted the Order of Merit, Britain's highest award for intellectual achievement, at 62, and made president of the British Academy at 65. And yet, late in his life he told an interviewer that despite all his success, he never felt at home in England. "There isn't a Jew in the world known to me who somewhere inside him does not have a tiny drop of uneasiness vis-a-vis them, the majority among whom they live," he said. "They may be very friendly, they may be entirely happy, but one has to behave particularly well, because if they don't behave well they won't like us." Berlin was pressed on the point – wasn't he himself at ease, given his ascension to the heights of British political and social and academic society? "Nevertheless," he insisted. "I'm not an Englishman. And if I behave badly…"[29] A year after that conversation in 1998, he died.

Leo Strauss was born ten years before Berlin, on the cusp of the 20th century in September 1899 in the small town of Kirchain just outside of Marburg, Germany. From his early life we know just the basics. Strauss's father Hugo was a merchant who, like Berlin's father, was raised in the family

[27] See Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 117-118. Seyla Benhabib finds in this decision definitive evidence of Berlin's ultimate commitments: "when the chips were down and the time came to act on behalf of one set of values rather than other, Berlin did not hesitate the choose: his loyalty to Israel and to the Jewish people, although he was not a religious Jew, trumped his loyalty to the British Crown." Seyla Benhabib, *Exile, Statelessness, and Migration: Playing Chess with History From Hannah Arendt to Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 177.
[28] For a concise description of this moment of vocational conversion, see the introduction to Cherniss and Smith's introduction in Ed. Joshua L. Cherniss and Steven B. Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 19.
[29] Marilyn Berger, "Isaiah Berlin, Philosopher and Pluralist, is dead at 88," *New York Times*, Nov 7, 1997.

business (although it was a much, much smaller business). In contrast to the self-description Berlin offered of his own education, Strauss would recall that his youthful interest in Plato, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche marked a movement "rather far away from [his] Jewish home." As an adolescent, Strauss attended a prestigious gymnasium in Marburg, from which he was graduated in 1917, around the same time he was "converted to Zionism – to simple, straightforward political Zionism."[30] After graduating from high school he was recruited for service in the war then unfolding, and served as an interpreter in Belgium – an experience to which he never referred in his published writings or lectures.

After his year of military service, Strauss enrolled at the University of Marburg to study philosophy in a department still dominated by the great neo-Kantian and Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen, who died just before Strauss's arrival. Strauss studied under Cohen's student, Ernst Cassirer, and wrote a dissertation on F.H. Jacobi, a figure whom Strauss rarely discussed in his later work but whose attack on the enlightenment's rejection of revealed religion was one to which he was clearly indebted. In 1922 Strauss acquired a post-doctoral fellowship to study with phenomenologist Edmund Husserl in Freiburg, where Strauss first encountered Martin Heidegger. After first seeing Heidegger lecture, Strauss told Franz Rosenzweig of the astonishing experience. Strauss was at the time immersed in the writings of Weber, but he told Rosenzweig that next to Heidegger, Weber now appeared "as an orphan child."[31] Heidegger's embrace of the Nazi party represented to Strauss—and to many others of his contemporaries—a profound indictment of the philosophy that had so impressed him. Throughout Strauss's life Heidegger would remain the figure who represented the pinnacle of modern philosophy, both its power and its failure.[32]

[30] "A Giving of Accounts," JPCM, 458.
[31] Ibid., 461.
[32] For two perspectives on this relationship, see Lawrence Vogel, "Overcoming Heidegger's Nihilism: Leo Strauss Versus Hans Jonas" and Catherine Zuckert, "Leo Strauss; Jewish, Yes, But Heideggerian?" both in Samuel. Fleischacker,

While in Marburg Strauss began publishing his first articles, all of which appeared in Zionist publications. One of those, a lengthy challenge to Hermann Cohen's criticism of Spinoza, caught the eye of Julius Guttman, then head of the Academy for the Science of Judaism in Berlin.[33] Guttman appointed Strauss as a research assistant, and Strauss was charged with editing an edition of the works of Moses Mendelssohn. It was during this time that Strauss began work on his first book, "Spinoza's Critique of Religion," eventually published in 1930.

Strauss managed to leave Berlin just before the Nazis came to power, when in 1932 he received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to develop his research on Hobbes in Paris (in part due, ironically, to a letter of recommendation from Carl Schmitt).[34] From Paris, Strauss traveled to England, where from 1935 to 1937 he continued his work on Hobbes while a researcher at Sidney Sussex College at Cambridge University. Unable either to secure permanent employment in England or to return to Germany, Strauss accepted a position as a lecturer at Columbia University in 1937. Shortly after he arrived in New York, the Jews of Kirchain were deported. Strauss's father died in the weeks before the deportation; his stepmother was killed in the camps.

A year after arriving in New York, Strauss accepted a position at the New School for Social Research. A decade later, in 1949, he joined the faculty at the school with which his thought has come to be most closely associated, the University of Chicago. In his first few years in Chicago, Strauss published the two books that would cement his reputation, the 1952 *Persecution and the Art of Writing* and the 1953 *Natural Right and History*. He would go on to teach at Chicago for nearly twenty years, retiring in 1967. After a short stint as a visitor at Claremont College in California in 1968, he became a distinguished scholar-in-residence at St. John's in Annapolis Maryland, where he died in

Heidegger's Jewish Followers: Essays on Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Hans Jonas, and Emmanuel Levinas (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 2008).

[33] For this history, see among others Eugene Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile* (Brandeis University Press, 2006), Chapter Two.

[34] Ibid.

1973.

While Strauss revealed far less of his autobiography in public conversation, he did on one occasion share one particularly searing story from his youth. At the age of five or six, he recalled, a group of refugees fleeing the pogroms in Russia passed through his family's house. While at the time his family lived peaceably with their non-Jewish neighbors in Kirchain, Strauss described the moment as "unforgettable." Despite the calm of the community, he "sensed for a moment that it could happen here." While it would be years before the rise of the Nazi party would make life in Germany impossible for Strauss, he recalled that the childhood experience "went to my bones."[35]

As is clear from these short autobiographical sketches, Isaiah Berlin and Leo Strauss came from very different worlds and traveled quite different careers. One was the son of a wealthy businessman raised in a mostly secular environment that came of age and rose to rapid academic success in an England that welcomed him as a favored son. The other grew up in much more modest means and far more religious observance, was unable to return to his home country as a refugee, and struggled to achieve any kind of professional security until his late 40s. While Berlin spoke with a distinctive lilt throughout his life, the traces of his original tongue are obscure in his famously rapid speaking voice. Strauss, already a grown man by the time of his arrival in the United States, spoke a high-pitched English deeply accented by his German upbringing.[36]

Then there is the matter of their intellectual formation. Berlin was a student of British empiricism shaped by debates in analytic philosophy. Strauss studied with Cassirer and Rosenzweig and would later recall that while in his twenties, he "agreed with everything he read of Nietzsche."[37]

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[35] "Why we Remain Jews," JPCM, 313.
[36] Audio recordings of both are available online. Audio of a number of Strauss's courses have been made available by the Leo Strauss center at the University of Chicago, at https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/audio-transcripts/courses-audio-transcripts/'; Audio of Berlin's lectures can be found at the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library, http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/information/recordings.html. (Both accessed September 2020).
[37] "Correspondence of Karl Löwith and Leo Strauss," George Elliot Tucker, trans. *Independent Journal of Philosophy/Unabhängige Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 5/6 (1998), 183.

And while both were raised to some extent with a Jewish education (however partial in Berlin's case), only Strauss would seriously devote himself to Jewish texts and Jewish theology.

Yet two points of striking overlap are apparent even in these brief biographies. The first is the centrality of Zionist politics to their political commitments. All of Strauss's early publications are devoted to Zionist politics. While Berlin published his lengthiest reflections on Zionism only in 1951, his experience as a young diplomat who found himself at the center of the Zionist politics of the war years was among the definitive political experiences of his life. Second, while both Berlin and Strauss were trained as philosophers, each came to find that philosophy as a discipline was ill equipped to address the political crisis through which they lived. To both, it was obvious that the catastrophes of the 20th century represented an indictment of Western political thought as a whole. But what was the relationship between thought and that horror? This was not a question that political philosophy on its own could answer. It required interrogating the history of modern political philosophy. And as Berlin and Strauss did so, like many of their generation they concluded that the link between modern political thought and the rise of totalitarianism was a radically overinflated sense of what it was that political life might be expected to accomplish. In this, they shared a perspective that was definitive for what many have come to describe as Cold War liberalism.

Strauss and Berlin between Cold War Liberalism and Postwar Liberalism

"Liberalism" is a notoriously diffuse term, and without qualification it's hard to know what it indicates at all. In her recent work charting the history of the idea, Helen Rosenblatt argues that for most of its modern history liberalism referred to a disposition, "liberality," which was understood primarily in opposition to slavishness and selfishness.[38] Liberality, Rosenblatt argues, was a moralistic

[38] Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

creed, indicating a spirit of generosity and toleration. It was only in the 20th century, she suggests, that liberalism came to be focused on rights. Among those Rosenblatt cites as most responsible for this shift was Isaiah Berlin.[39]

It is not surprising that Rosenblatt would cast Berlin in a starring role in her story. Largely as a result of his 1959 lecture and subsequent essay "Two Concepts of Liberty," Berlin's thought has come to stand as a paradigmatic articulation of 20th-century liberalism. At the center of that lecture is Berlin's now famous separation of liberty into two forms: negative and positive, the former delineating freedom from interference, the latter describing the freedom to be ruled by a particular power or to become a particular kind of person. By defending negative freedom as the "truer" form of freedom, Berlin drew a sharp line between the right to choose and the substance of whatever is chosen.

This emphasis on rights above the particulars of a good pursued or a duty fulfilled has become so closely associated with contemporary liberal thought that it's difficult to avoid the slide between Berlin's argument and "liberalism" as such.[40] But as several scholars have noted, Berlin participated in a broad refashioning of liberal thought after World War II. As Joshua Cherniss explains, the "*locus classicus*" of Cold War liberalism was Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s 1949 *The Vital Center*.[41] In that work, Schlesinger articulated the basic parameters of the position: commitments to constitutional democracy and civil liberties, to ameliorating injustice through gradual reform, and a self-conception as moderate, avoiding complacency on one side and aggression on the other.[42] None of these on

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[39] Ibid., 272.

[40] The other most significant and widely cited 20th century liberal, John Rawls, has been of course enormously influential in shaping this understanding of liberalism as well. Among many who have challenged such views, David Cieply criticizes this emphasis on neutrality and argues it is a distinct product of the Cold War liberalism that, in his view, Berlin was definitive in shaping. See David Cieply, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[41] Joshua Cherniss, "Isaiah Berlin and Reinhold Niebuhr: Cold War Liberalism as an Intellectual Ethos," in *Isaiah Berlin's Cold War Liberalism*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Gateway East, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 15. See Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949).

[42] Ibid., 16.

their own however capture what is particularly distinctive about Cold War liberalism as against its prior iterations. That difference is above all a consequence of Schlesinger's fourth feature: a rejection of utopian aspiration.[43]

Within the United States, the representative of Cold War liberalism who most exhibited this last feature was Reinhold Niebhuhr, whom Schlesinger acknowledged throughout the *Vital Center* as a definitive influence.[44] Niebuhr's "Christian realism" was indebted especially to his reading of Augustine, who Niebuhr argued offered a sober political vision that was in urgent need of recovery. Writing in 1953, Niebuhr explained that Augustine "takes account of the power and persistence of egotism, both individual and collective, and seeks to establish the most tolerable form of peace and justice under conditions set by human sin."[45] That "most tolerable form" was still bound to be shot through with a selfishness and pride that defined a human condition shaped by sin. Moreover, evil had to be recognized as ever-present, and it could only be defeated with force – however regrettable. There were bound to be "situations in which a choice must be made between equally valid loyalties [when] one value must be sacrificed to another," and in such cases "rational solutions of such tragic dilemma" was by definition impossible.[46] This was a liberalism chastened by both the horrors of the 20th century and those horrors that were necessary to meet them.

Berlin wrote to a friend that Niebuhr's "doctrine of the incurable fallibility of men and women" was one with which he "felt in profound sympathy – as against those who believe in Utopias and final solutions which too often lead to disaster and the shedding of blood."[47] This sympathy led

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[43] The anti-utopianism of much postwar political thought is well known; two of its most thorough explorations remain among the earliest: For a more recent reflection on postwar anti-utopianism, see Barry Gewen, *The Inevitability of Tragedy: Henry Kissinger and His World* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2020), especially Chapter Three, "Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt."

[44] Cherniss notes the following citations to Niebuhr in *The Vital Center* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949): 45, 147, 166, 170.

[45] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Augustine's Christian Realism," in Niebuhr, Robert McAfee Brown, ed. *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 131.

[46] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 157.

[47] Berlin, undated letter, Berlin Papers Box 228/250, cited in Cherniss, "Isaiah Berlin and Reinhold Niebuhr," 17.

Berlin to what some have described as his tragic liberalism: a liberalism that recognizes that tragic dilemma are inescapable and permanent in political life, and is justified as the form of politics that recognizes this fact.[48]

In the internal conflicts among Cold War liberals, many considered this tragic view altogether too weak an intellectual armor for the battle against communism. James Burnham (once one of Trotsky's disciples, later a contributor to *The National Review*) argued that the liberalism offered by Niebuhr and Berlin was "demoralized in advance."[49] This didn't seem to be much of a fighting faith. Among the first to level a version of this charge at Isaiah Berlin was Leo Strauss. To Strauss, Berlin was a quintessential representative of the philosophical incoherence that beset modern liberalism.[50] While Berlin argued that pluralism was the antidote to a politics that drifted towards totalitarianism, Strauss saw pluralism as reflective of the weakness of a liberalism that could not even affirm its own commitments.

Given this critque, one might readily conclude that Strauss and Berlin stand in plain opposition. Yet as Steven Smith has suggested, Strauss was much closer to Berlin than these summaries would indicate.[51] Strauss is most famous not for his criticism of value pluralism but for a seemingly distant claim that the great political philosophers throughout history wrote in a style in which they intentionally obscured their actual positions. This claim is often taken as solely hermeneutic, but to Strauss the style of the great political philosophers is indicative of a more fundamental and primary position: that philosophy is by definition subversive, a threat not only to the politically powerful but to political stability itself. Premodern philosophers understood this fact and wrote their works in order that they might not undermine the basic moral and political commitments upon which social

[48] Both Cherniss and Steven B. Smith use this term. See Cherniss, "Isaiah Berlin and Reinhold Niebuhr," 13.
[49] James Burnham, *Suicide of the West: An Essay on the Meaning and Destiny of* Liberalism (New York: John Day, 1964), 297-98. Quoted in Cherniss, "Isaiah Berlin and Rienhold Niebuhr," 23.
[50] Strauss, "Relativism."
[51] Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 15.

life rested. Modern thinkers had forgotten this wisdom, because they assumed a perfect alignment between the truths that philosophy could discover and those that political life ought to implement. This view shares a surprising affinity with Berlin's position. Both diagnosed the problem of modern politics and in particular the catastrophe of totalitarianism as the result of the same fundamental error: the idea that reason can discover definitive and applicable answers to fundamental political dilemmas. It was this inflated faith in the power of reason that, both concluded, led to the massacres that had upended their world and their lives.

In response, both insisted that the great error of modern political thought was the view that all important political dilemmas could be resolved. In this, as already noted, they shared a general disposition and perspective with many Cold War thinkers. But among the first things that strikes anyone who turns to their writing with an eye to the Cold War context is that neither wrote much challenging communism directly.[52] Strauss hardly ever mentioned communism at all and while Berlin certainly saw communism as the most explicit and obvious example of the politics against which he warned (and wrote his first book on Marx), he spent a great deal more intellectual energy waging a battle against what he called a "liberalism founded on rationalist metaphysics" than he did against socialist thinkers.[53] The absence reflects the problem of considering the two as Cold War thinkers instead of writers for whom the question of the Cold War was thoroughly colored and shaped by the fact of the World Wars that just preceded it. The central preoccupation of their work was not demonstrating why liberalism was superior to communism but asking why and how liberalism

[52] The most obvious exception to this is Isaiah Berlin's 1939 book on Karl Marx. But in some respects, given that it was Berlin's first book it is all the more striking that references to Marx are so infrequent in Berlin's postwar work. The exception to that general tendency is Berlin's essay on Marx and Disraeli, which as we'll see in Chapter Three is much more invested in matters of Jewish identity than communism as such. See ""Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx and the Search for Identity" in AC.
[53] PSM, 220.

collapsed in the face of totalitarianism. And for both Berlin and Strauss, this question was inextricable from the most fundamental matters of modern Jewish politics.

The Jewish Question and the Jewish Answer(s)

In the two years after the French Revolution, the question of whether Jews ought to be made citizens of the new republic dominated the debates of the nascent French Assembly. Given the economic requirements for citizenship and the Jewish population of France, no more than a few hundred Jews would have received the rights of citizenship. Yet during those two years, the assembly took up the question of whether Jews could be citizens 32 times.[54] As David Nirenberg has argued, this intensity of focus followed from the radicality of the revolution's aims, which entailed nothing less than the creation of a new kind of person, a modern citizen. If the signal characteristic of this new person was that the citizen as opposed to the subject created the law, then the Jews – that people who had since the Gospels represented for Christian Europe subservience to the law – were the limit case of the revolution's power. Could even the Jews be transformed from subject to citizen? Could even they be "converted"?[55]

The debate in the assembly fell along the question of whether this conversion was possible. The most famous entry in this argument was offered by Count Stanislas of Clermont-Tonnnerre, who in December of 1789 made the case for Jewish emancipation in terms that would succinctly describe the exchange demanded by what would become known as emancipation:

> As a nation the Jews must be denied everything, as individuals they must be granted everything; their judges can no longer be recognized; their recourse must be to our own exclusively; legal protection for the doubtful laws by which Jewish corporate existence is maintained must end; they cannot be allowed to create a political body or a separate order within the state; it is necessary that they be citizens individually.[56]

[54] David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2014), 365.
[55] Ibid., 367.
[56] Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, ed. *The Jew in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 115.

As Wendy Brown has noted, here is as concise an articulation of modern subjectivity as one might find, an "entwining of Hobbes and Foucault in a single sentence."[57] According to this formula, the new citizen-subject declares their allegiance to the state as an individual and in turn the state recognizes their rights as such. But as Brown notes, the individual so described must be carved out of the corporeal body. That corporeal body therefore necessarily remains, giving shape and definition to the individual. As Amar Mufti has described this twofold act, emancipation is from its first moment "caught in a contradiction it cannot overcome."[58] In insisting that corporeal identity be denied, emancipation makes that denial the condition for citizenship. But in so doing, emancipation only reinforces the power of the corporate identity it seeks to deny. As Mufti helpfully summarizes the paradox, "in the same instance" that the state attempts to call forth the individual Jew out of the Jewish nation in order to assimilate it into the French one, "it fixes their collective identity as a sovereign group outside the life of the state."[59] The Jew can only be emancipated as a Jew, and therefore their status as a problem for the modern state is inscribed in the moment that their freedom by that state is granted.

The paradox is produced by a tension given memorable expression by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. There, Arendt argued that modern politics was defined by the relationship between the two sources of authority that were assumed by the French revolutionaries as mutually interdependent but in fact rested in profound tension. One was the "inalienable rights" of all human beings as human beings, the sovereignty of the individual according to which all government determined its authority. The second was the right of national self-determination, the sovereignty of

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[57] Wendy Brown, "Tolerance and/or Equality: The 'Jewish Question' and 'the Woman Question'," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2004), 4. See also Wendy Brown, "Rights and Identity in Late Modernity: Revisiting the 'Jewish Question'," in *Identities, Politics, and Rights*, ed. Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Keams (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

[58] Aamir R. Mufti, Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 60.

[59] Ibid., 68.

the nation. The tension between these two sources of authority shaped what Hannah Arendt called "the tragedy of the nation-state": as soon as the individual was emancipated, it was swallowed by the nation.[60] Each source of sovereignty, Arendt suggested, produced its own set of "Jewish questions."

According to the logic of national sovereignty, the issue was whether Judaism prevented Jews from acquiring a national identity based on the new nation state. Could they be as German, as Italian, as British, and as American as their non-Jewish fellow countryman? Would they be loyal to these nations or to their own people scattered across the globe? Could they give up their business practices which (so went the argument) contributed only to themselves, and contribute to the national wealth? According to the logic of individual sovereignty, the question was whether, given their submission to Jewish law, Jews could be made to recognize the universal demands of reason. Could they abandon their exclusive commitments, and embrace a reason which knew no difference between Jew and Gentile? By the logic of national sovereignty, the problem was that Jews were too universalist, too cosmopolitan. By the logic of individual sovereignty, they were too particularistic, too enclosed in their own ways and communities. But what seem contradictory charges, Arendt suggests, were produced by the same cause. The questions meet at the site where the modern-nation state's conflicting sovereigns collide.[61]

While neither Berlin nor Strauss made the point as explicitly as Arendt, I will suggest throughout this dissertation that they agreed with the Arendt both on the centrality of this tension and that the Jewish question was the site in which it was most acutely revealed. They were, admittedly, not explicit on this point. Instead, they approached the issue by interrogating what each considered the two most significant and relevant Jewish responses to the Jewish question, each of which took one

[60] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism: New Edition with Added Prefaces* (New York: Harcourt, 1976), 230-231.
[61] See Mufti, Chapter One.

of the two sources of sovereignty as its own and defined both Judaism and Jewish politics according to its logic.

As Strauss would remind his audiences, it was Baruch Spinoza who first presented to Jews the options that would become dominant for Jewish life under conditions of the modern state. Spinoza had insisted that Jewish law be recognized as a political law, and therefore binding only in the political regime in which that law initially developed, the Hebrew Republic. Any contemporary allegiance to those laws was therefore only a matter of prejudice and superstition. This did not mean that Spinoza found no truth in Judaism, Strauss would note, but that whatever truth happened to be in it was not distinctive to it. Any "true" Jewish lessons and teachings are by definition universal lessons and teachings. For these reasons, Strauss summarized, Spinoza is appropriately considered a founder of modern liberalism. But, Strauss noted, he in fact offered two paths such a modernized Judaism might take.[62]

The first was a Judaism of universal ethics, unbounded to archaic law. Under such a framework, Judaism could persist as a matter of individual preference or conscience under governments that respected such rights. Spinoza, however, suggested another avenue in lines that Strauss would frequently quote from memory: "If the foundations of their religion did not effeminate their minds, I would absolutely believe that they might again restore their state, under auspicious circumstances, considering the fact that human things are mutable."[63] These lines would come to prove influential among Zionists who read in them the first call to return Jews to political sovereignty.[64] In capturing their force, Strauss noted that "this is the earliest suggestion of a purely political solution to the

[62] "Progress or Return," in JPCM, 90-93
[63] JPCM, 90. For Strauss's other references to the same text, see for example "Why we Remain Jews," JPCM, 319.
[64] For a history of this reception, see Daniel B. Schwartz, *The First Modern Jew: Spinoza and the History of an Image.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

Jewish problem — the substitution of a purely political solution for the miracle of redemption toward which men can contribute, if at all, only by a life of piety. It is the first inkling of unqualifiedly political Zionism.[65] Spinoza, Strauss concluded, therefore laid the foundations for both political Zionism and liberalism.[66] These two options were, Strauss held, "the two classical alternatives which followed from the radical break with Judaism."[67] Each followed upon rival answers to the question of what Judaism might mean in the modern era, and proceeded along one of the sources of sovereignty described by Arendt. In the first, Judaism is a matter of individual commitment, and private belief. In the second, it is the name for a tradition that held together a Jewish nation.

While Spinoza offered both options, Strauss continually underscored the depth of the rivalry between the two. It was, he insisted, crucial not to forget the "truth proclaimed by Zionism regarding the limitations of liberalism."[68] Given much Zionist thought, however, this is an initially puzzling statement. Herzl and other founding figures of Zionist thought described themselves and are generally considered to have been proud liberals. Strauss, however, explained that criticism as follows: "Liberalism stands and falls by the distinction between state and society or by the recognition of the private sphere," he wrote, "protected by the law but impervious to the law." [69] Above all, according to liberalism "religion as particular religion belongs to the private sphere." The crucial point was that liberalism rests on the notion that the law will protect individual beliefs, of which religion is considered paradigmatic. But for this reason, "to recognize a private sphere in the sense indicated means to permit private 'discrimination,' to protect it, and thus in fact to foster it."[70]

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[65] "Progress or Return," JPCM, 90.
[66] Ibid., 91
[67] Ibid., 91
[68] "Preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion," JPCM, 143.
[69] Ibid., 144.
[70] Ibid., 144.

The liberal state protects both a Jewish right to Judaism, and the right to discriminate against that Judaism.

This concise criticism of liberalism may not often be associated with Zionism, but it runs very close to one of the more famous (and infamous) indictments of liberal thought ever penned. As a young man of 26, Karl Marx argued in his 1843 essay "On the Jewish Question" that the legal framework that provided equality before the law only reinforced the power of social forces that act "after their own fashion." While "political emancipation" offered political equality to citizens, Marx held that in so doing it only emancipated the state from any responsibility for the exploitation those same individuals suffered in a civil society.[71] To Marx, the liberal state offered an abstract political "citizen" that was declared free and equal to all others, while in the concrete that same individual – as a worker, wife, or Jew – only suffered all manner of social inequality and division. The persistence of the Jewish question was to Marx only a reflection of the contradiction at the heart of a liberalism that both promised legal equality and ensured exploitation.

The parallel between this argument and much of classical Zionism is not often appreciated.[72] Nonetheless, a great deal of classical Zionist argument follows in form Marx's famous critique. In his opening address at the First Zionist Congress in 1897, for example, Max Nordau declared that while "the law magnanimously lays down the theory of equal rights," "government and society practice equality in a manner which makes it…a mockery."[73] The great hope that the Jews had placed in emancipation, he argued, was rooted in a logical mistake – imagining that social equality followed from legal equality, that the former could produce the latter.[74] In a memorable metaphor,

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[71] "Political emancipation was," he wrote, "at the same time an emancipation of civil society *from* politics." Robert C. Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader: Second Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1978), 45.
[72] The best analysis of this aspect of Herzl's thought remains "Politics in a New Key: An Austrian Trio" in Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1980).
[73] Arthur Hertzberg, ed. *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993), 235.
[74] Here is how Nordau put it: "The emancipation of the Jews was not the result of the a conviction that grave injury had been done a people, that it had been shockingly treated, and that it was time to atone for the injustice of a thousand

Nordau declared that equal rights were like a piano that everyone had to have in their living room, but no one could play.[75] Legal equality only existed in a realm of pure abstraction, and was independent of and powerless over forces of social discrimination.

This indictment runs through nearly all the seminal texts of classical Zionism. Several years before Nordau's speech, Leon Pinsker argued in what is considered the first polemic of political Zionism that legal law was necessarily made by those in power to craft it; given that the Jews only received the law, whatever equality they acquired by it could only affirm their degraded and inferior position. For this reason, emancipation was "a rich gift, splendid alms, willingly or unwillingly flung to the poor, humble beggars whom no one, however, cares to shelter, because a homeless, wandering beggar wins confidence or sympathy from none."[76] To Pinsker, in accepting such equality enthusiastically, the Jews only confirmed their pathetic status. They were a people without a home, a nation that could not even recognize itself as such, a "ghost people," a "living corpse" haunting the lands of Europe. According to Pinsker and Nordau (and other classical Zionists), legal equality only protected and encouraged the discrimination it in theory promised to overcome. In attempting to prove themselves worthy of the freedom liberal equality promised, Jews only deformed themselves.

Given this argument, it was unsurprising that those who did see in legal equality a promise of eventual Jewish freedom were so adamantly opposed to the Zionists. As fierce as the inter-denominational fights were within German Jewry in the mid 1890s, the Reform and Orthodox communities of Munich still managed to unite against the Zionists. As they declared in a joint statement opposing the first Zionist congress, the Zionists were not only wrong but dangerous.

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years; it was solely the result of the geometrical mode of thought of French rationalism of the eighteenth century. Without reference to sentiment and emotion, this rationalism, operating with logic alone, laid down principles as axiomatic as those of mathematics; it insisted upon trying to introduce these creations of pure intellect into a world of reality." *The Zionist Idea*, 238.

[75] Ibid., 239.

[76] Ibid., 187.

How could one protest against the requirement of baptism for civil service (of which the German Jewish community was united in opposition) while insisting that the Jews were a member of a nation other than the German one? Anyone who supported the Zionists, they wrote, "should not complain that they are treated by the government like foreigners and are barred from public office." Across their great divisions, the Munich Jewish community could "say to our fellow countrymen with complete conviction that we comprise a separate community solely with respect to *religion*."[77] Zionists saw such views as the pathetic ponderings of a community unable to recognize the fact of their own national difference.

In insisting that Jews were a distinct nationality, however, the early Zionists were not just insisting on the limitations of liberalism. They were also accepting the rationality of antisemitism, a theory of immutable and eternal Jewish national essence, and a fundamental opposition between the requirements of national life and the constraints of legal equality. It is not surprising then that, as we'll see, Isaiah Berlin and Leo Strauss concluded that Europe's descent into barbaric violence represented a simultaneous affirmation and indictment of both liberalism and nationalism. But as such, that descent also called into question the responses to the Jewish question that dominated modern Jewish thought. In light of the catastrophe, it seemed to both Berlin and Strauss that more important than the rivalry was the premise that both liberalism and Zionism shared – the view that the Jewish question could be definitively resolved. Both Strauss and Berlin concluded that in this, modern Jewish politics mirrored the great failure of modern politics as a whole. It was not resolution of the Jewish question that would, at long last, prove the liberatory promise of modern politics. It was instead the necessary insolubility of that question, at least on the terms in which it had been conceived, that demonstrated the limits modern politics had so catastrophically sought to overcome.

[77] Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, ed. *The Jew in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 538.

By considering their writing in light of the Jewish question, I not only argue that their work revolves around the same problematic. I suggest that they approached that problematic through reflection on a single theme – whether a political world that renders the Jewish question insoluble ought to be considered tragic. For Berlin, the persistence of the Jewish question reflected the incommensurability and inherent tension between values that were incorrectly imagined to be in harmony – above all, the values of individual autonomy and national belonging. Once political life could be seen as inherently beset by tragic losses, then the Jewish condition could be recognized as no longer tragic, at least in any distinctive sense. If the fundamental questions of political life were insoluble, the Jewish question could be solved. Strauss rejected both the view that the Jewish question could be solved and the notion that political life was necessarily tragic. To him, such positions erased, in his mind, the distinctive and crucial power of Judaism. But that crucial power had to be maintained, for Strauss, in part because Judaism offered one of the only means by which the tragedy could be avoided, and the limitations of political life constrained and accepted. How Berlin and Strauss came to these positions, its implications for their work's reception, and its relevance for contemporary debate, is the topic of this dissertation.

Situating the Project in the Field(s)

This project contributes to several bodies of literature. Most obvious is the way in which the readings of both Berlin and Strauss that I offer depart from many interpretations of both figures. Isaiah Berlin is perhaps the most widely cited political theorist of the 20th century. As of this writing, the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library lists almost sixty full-length books on his life and thought, many hundreds of articles (between roughly ten and twenty published in major journals every year since

1980), and several dozen dissertations.[78] Then there is the enormous literature dedicated to questions he is considered to have been central in posing: on the relationship between liberalism and pluralism, between nationalism and individual rights, and the implications and coherence of value pluralism.[79] While not nearly as controversial as Strauss, Berlin has also generated his share of criticism by those who find his liberalism predicated on a European chauvinism and see in it the precursor of neoliberal argument that has led to widespread evisceration of investment in the public good.[80]

It is reasonable to ask, given all this, if there is anything left to say about the man. Yet despite the voluminous literature, very little scholarship has situated Berlin within discussion and debate over Judaism and Jewish politics. To be sure, a number of writers have addressed Berlin's Zionism and the question of how and whether it fits within his broader political thought.[81] Yet the vast majority of that literature is either apologetic or dismissive, taking Berlin's Zionism as either in obvious harmony with his broader thought or as straightforwardly opposed to it.[82] Taking Berlin's engagement with Jewish politics as a primary source for his mature thought and situating that engagement within a broader tradition of Jewish political argument disrupts familiar interpretations of both Berlin's liberalism, his pluralism, and his Zionism.

Of those readers who have most explored Berlin's relationship to specifically Jewish concerns, no scholar has done more than Arie Dubnov. In a series of articles and in a full-length biography, Dubnov argues that Berlin's mature thought can only be adequately understood as following upon

[78] For a list of books, see: http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/onib/books.html; for a list of journal articles, magazine essays, and chapters in edited books, see: http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/onib/other.html; for dissertations: http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/onib/theses.html

[79] I discuss much of this literature in Chapter Two.

[80] For critiques of Berlin along these lines, see James Tully, ""Two Concepts of Liberty in Context"," in *Isaiah Berlin and the Politics of Freedom: "Two Concepts of Liberty" 50 Years Later*, ed. Bruce Baum and David Nichols (London: Routledge, 2012) and Barnor Hesse, "Escaping Liberty: Western Hegemony, Black Fugitivity," *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (2014).

[81] I discuss this literature at length in Chapter Three.

[82] Again, I discuss this literature at greater length in Chapter Three.

the ambivalence at the center of his Zionism.[83] Most ambitiously, Dubnov suggests that it was out of his reflections on Zionism that Berlin developed his account of negative liberty, finding in the concept a theory of freedom that allowed him to hold together both his support of Zionism and his criticism of it.[84] In short, Dubnov suggests, it was Berlin's engagement with Zionism that produced the political thought for which he is famous.[85]

Dubnov's careful analysis and archival work is invaluable for those interested in the centrality of Berlin's Jewish concerns to this work as a whole. And in my own work I build upon his reading of the ambivalence at the center of Berlin's Zionism. Yet in his general interpretation of Berlin's thought, Dubnov sides with the great bulk of the scholarship in affirming ultimate coherence within Berlin's Jewish politics and between that politics and his thought as a whole. This interpretation, I argue, obscures what is most interesting and to my mind relevant about Berlin's engagement with Jewish politics, which is that contradictions so explicit in his engagement with Zionism remain unresolved in his more famous political thought. Those contradictions, however, are only brought into focus once Berlin's Zionist writings are contextualized within a larger tradition of Zionist criticism of liberalism. Dubnov, for all the care of his scholarship, doesn't pursue that context and

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[83] Arie Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Arie Dubnov, "Between Liberalism and Jewish Nationalism: Young Isaiah Berlin on the Road Towards Diaspora Nationalism," *Modern Intellectual History* 4, no. 02 (2007); Arie M. Dubnov, "What is Jewish (if Anything) About Isaiah Berlin's Philosophy," *Religions; Basel* 3, no. 2 (2012).

[84] Dubnov makes this argument most concisely in "Between Liberalism and Jewish Nationalism: Young Isaiah Berlin on the Road Towards Diaspora Nationalism."

[85] Dubnov, however, rejects the notion that this fact implies that Berlin ought to be considered a "Jewish thinker." Borrowing Michael Walzer's definition, Dubnov notes that the Jewish political tradition is bound by an intertextual conversation in which Jewish texts are considered the authoritative works with which to wrestle through the problems of Jewish politics. Given the near complete absence of such references from Berlin's writing, Dubnov argues that the notion that Berlin is in some sense a "Jewish thinker" requires reducing Berlin's thought to the fact of his ethnicity – a reductionism that is not only problematic on its face but particularly so in regards to Berlin and his emphasis on choice as reflective of freedom. Instead, Dubnov argues, Berlin's work was motivated by Jewish questions even as he came up with answers that were not in any decisive or distinctive respect particularly "Jewish" at all. As Dubnov puts it, Berlin's "Jewishness [was a] generator of questions and problems, not of answers and solutions." See "What is Jewish (if Anything) About Isaiah Berlin's Philosophy."

therefore follows upon the apologetic tendency that colors so much of Berlin's writing on Zionism far more than he departs from it.

If Berlin is one of the more beloved political philosophers of the 20th century, Leo Strauss is one of the most controversial. Those controversies began in the years after his death, as various schools of his students argued over his legacy.[86] It expanded to the academy at large in the furor produced by the 1987 publication of *The Closing of the American Mind*, in which Strauss's student Alan Bloom indicted the whole of American Higher Education for abandoning the Western tradition in the name of diversity and pluralism.[87] It then leapt the walls of the ivory tower in the months and years after the attacks of September 11th, as Strauss was held by many in the popular press to have inspired not only American neoconservative thought but the war on terror and the invasion of Iraq.[88]

Many astute readers of Strauss have responded to these various charges, and it is not my intent in this dissertation to wade too deeply into the debate.[89] Suffice it to say that as many have noted it is

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[86] For an overview of these debates, see Part II, "The Straussians," in Emily and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*.

[87] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012) For a concise attack on Strauss as affirming the elitism of Bloom's work, see Brent Staples, "Undemocratic Vistas: The Sinister Vogue of Leo Strauss." *New York Times*, November 28, 1994. https://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/28/opinion/editorial-notebook-undemocratic-vistas.html (accessed September 2020)

[88] The most extensive scholarly work along these lines is that of Shadia Drury. See Shadia B. Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: Macmillan, 1988) and Shadia B. Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997). For one of many post September 11th articles in the press describing Strauss as the intellectual influence on the neoconservatives who, in part, led the Bush administration's response to the September 11th see James Atlas, "Leo-Cons; a Classicist's Legacy: New Empire Builders." *New York Times*, May 4, 2003. For a more even-handed appraisal of Strauss's influence at the time, see Mark Lilla's pair of essays in *The New York Review of Books*. Mark Lilla, "The European." *The New York Review of Books*, October 21, 2004; Lilla, Mark, "The Closing of the Straussian Mind." *The New York Review of Books*, November 4, 2004. The matter of Strauss's influence on the American Right has generated a great deal of scholarship. For two works that make the case for the significance of that relationship, see Shadia B. Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) and Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2004). For a thorough and rebuttal to these accusations, see Catherine H. Zuckert and Michael P. Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[89] Again, the most thorough of these rebuttals is that of Emily and Michael Zuckert. For another response, see Peter Minowitz, *Straussophobia: Defending Leo Strauss and Straussians Against Shadia Drury and Other Accusers* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2009).

more than a bit ironic that a scholar who attempted to recover a philosophy he held was rigorously undogmatic has come to be associated with such rigorous dogma. But Strauss's relationship to the American right is not, to my mind, coincidental. While he mostly refrained from offering public positions in his own life, the two times he did – in a letter to National Review defending Israel as a "conservative" project and in publicly supporting along with other conservative academics Nixon's candidacy in 1972 – indicate where we might situate him on the American political spectrum.[90] And as I'll argue at some length towards the end of this dissertation, at the center of Strauss's political project was a concern for the authority of law and an insistence that such an authority ultimately rested on religious commitment. It isn't hard to see why such a claim has been influential among conservative intellectuals.

But as any perusal of Strauss's work immediately makes clear, his relentless assault on the culture of modernity makes him a very uneasy fit within the framework of American political thought, conservative or otherwise. And in many ways his critique of liberalism, as we've already seen in its formal parallel to Marx, is much closer to radical thinkers generally associated with the Left than anything familiar to the American Right. An attention to Strauss's Jewish thought further underscores the degree to which his work is so thoroughly alien to the basic frameworks of American politics. As several scholars have noted, Strauss's turn to Jewish and Islamic medieval texts suggest a not altogether subtle indictment of Christianity. Given the centrality of those readings to Strauss's work, it takes a certain flagrancy of misreading (or non-reading) to harness Strauss in support of a "war of civilizations" between Christendom and Islam.[91]

[90] For an analysis of Strauss's very few forays into political life, see Nathan Tarcov, "Leo Strauss and American Conservative Thought and Politics," *Nomos* 56 (2016).
[91] See especially Leora Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 210-212.

That misreading was to some degree enabled by the work of Strauss's students which took his many writings on Jewish texts and themes as secondary, peripheral, or irrelevant to his more central recovery of the classical tradition. Over the last two decades, however, a number of scholars have worked to place Strauss's reflections on Jewish themes at the center of his work. In so doing they have shown both why any discussion of Strauss's mature politics cannot be satisfactory without an attention to his writing on Jewish sources and why, as a consequence of his writing on Judaism, Strauss must be considered one of the great Jewish thinkers of the 20th century. Of particular relevance for this study are the five full length books on Strauss's Jewish thought, those by Kenneth Hart Green, Leora Batnitzky, Eugene Sheppard, Steven B. Smith, and Jeffrey A. Bernstein.[92] As will become clear throughout the dissertation, I lean upon each considerably as I build upon their work.

In my own reading, however, I break from these previous interpretations in two important respects. First, I argue that in its very beginnings Strauss's engagement with Zionism was far more critical then generally appreciated and that criticism far more significant for his mature thought than heretofore recognized. Second, where the general tendency in the literature on Strauss's Jewish writings is to see strong resonance between his approach to the classics and his reading of Jewish sources, I emphasize the differences and suggest that those differences are crucial not only for how we might appraise Strauss's political thought as a whole but most especially how we might understand his account of Judaism. That account, I suggest, points to a Judaism that reflects the dilemma of modern political life in its most acute and exceptional fashion.

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[92] Kenneth Hart Green, *Jew and Philosopher: The Return to Maimonides in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas*; Eugene Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile* (Brandeis University Press, 2006); Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Jeffrey Alan Bernstein, *Leo Strauss on the Borders of Judaism, Philosophy, and History* (Albany: State University of New York, 2015).

Aside from these particulars of interpretation, the most obvious intervention of this project in the literature on both figures stems from placing the two in sustained conversation. Doing so leads to a number of counterintuitive conclusions: Berlin turns out much more wedded to truths that adhere in "nature" than does Strauss; Strauss appears much more a pluralist than is generally assumed; Berlin is revealed as a much less coherent liberal than Strauss; and Strauss turns out to have been far more critical of Zionism than was Berlin. But more than these surprising differences, what comes to the surface in the encounter is the fundamental resonance mentioned throughout this introduction. If, as I argue, at the center of the work of both is an insistence on the permanence of political dilemma and an attention to the Jewish question as the paradigmatic representative of that dilemma, then the work of the two is far closer to one another than generally assumed. This claim not only calls into question standard receptions of each, but how we understand the politics with which both have come to be associated. Setting aside whether that influence is based on sound interpretation, Traverso is not alone in appealing to the two figures as representative of perhaps the two dominant streams of 21st-century American Jewish politics, center-Left liberalism and neoconservatism.

This point suggests the relevance of this project for the still young field of Jewish political thought. As Julie Cooper has recently argued in her thorough and elucidating overview of the field, Jewish political thought as a still relatively new discipline is shaped by a defining insecurity.[93] Given that modern Jewish thought traces its philosophical origin to Spinoza and the horizon that he charted, the options that have become dominant for modern Jewish politics – liberalism and Zionism – must be considered as rebellions against Jewish tradition.[94] But if this is the case, then

[93] Julie E. Cooper, "The Turn to Tradition in the Study of Jewish Politics," *The Annual Review of Political Science* 19 (2016).
[94] Cooper summarizes this challenge by citing Gershon Weiler' *Jewish Theocracy*. There Weiler described the "so-called political tradition of Judaism." Given that Judaism as a rabbinic tradition developed outside the framework of sovereignty, "no such tradition exists." Cooper, "The Turn to Tradition," 72. See Gershon Weiler, *Jewish Theocracy* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved), 1976. For the degree to which this view is indebted to Spinoza, see Julie E. Cooper,

what is the relevance and authority of the Jewish tradition for a modern politics that has rebelled against it?

In light of this question, the discipline of Jewish political thought has to a great extent been shaped by an attempt to de-emphasize the break represented by emancipation and especially by Zionism by emphasizing the continuities between Jewish political thought in its various forms and modern politics, both liberal and Zionist.[95] As Cooper points out, these arguments illuminate the degree to which Jewish political thought as a field is beholden to a Zionist apologetics that seeks to soften any tension between the two while validating the Jewish state as an authentically "Jewish" political project.[96] Alongside and in challenge to this movement, a number of neo-diasporists – Judith Butler, and Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin most influentially – have argued on behalf of a Jewish identity that is not predicated on the rigid parameters of any nationalism.[97] Instead, they call upon Jewish exilic history as resource for a notion of Judaism that "contests sovereign notions of the subject and ontological claims of self-identity."[98] As Cooper suggests, even as none of the neo-diasporists would call themselves liberals and even as they indict the liberal tradition, their focus on

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"Reevaluating Spinoza's Legacy for Jewish Political Thought," *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 2 (2017). For another thorough discussion of the dilemma this point presents for modern Jewish political thought, see Leora Batnitzky, "Political Theory: Beyond Sovereignty?," in *The Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy: The Modern Era*, ed. Zachary Braiterman Martin Kavka, David Novak (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[95] In an essay considered by many to have inaugurated the field, Daniel Elazar argued that Jewish politics constitutes a tradition in that, in all its permutations, shares patterns of what he calls covenantal practice Daniel J. Elazar, "Some Preliminary Observations on the Jewish Political Tradition," *Tradition* 18 (1980). For a more extended argument on this point, see Daniel J. Elazar, ed. *Kinship and Consent: The Jewish Poltiical Tradition and Its Contemporary Uses* (New Brunskwick, NJ: Transaction, 1997).

[96] Cooper, "The Turn to Tradition," 73. Cooper argues, to my mind correctly, that even as the work deepens the notion of Jewish politics, this basic orientation guides the approach of the most significant undertaking in the field, the multi-volume *The Jewish Political Tradition*. Michael Walzer has been explicit on this point, arguing that a more robust recovery of a Jewish political tradition is essential for Zionism's health and long-term sustainability. See Menachem Loberbaum, Michael Walzer, Noam J. Zohar, ed. *The Jewish Political Tradition, Volume 1: Authority* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); as well as *Volume 2: Membership* (2006) *and Volume 3: Community* (2018). For Walzer on the need for a more explicitly Zionist engagement with the tradition, see Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015). For another and more obvious example of the claim on behalf of continuity see Alan Mittleman, "The Politics of Torah," (Albany: Statue University of New York Press, 1996) and Batnitzky's discussion of Mittleman in "Political Theory: Beyond Sovereignty?," 598-600.

[97] Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* (1993).

[98] Butler, *Parting Ways*, 9.

the individual (however ontologically disrupted) as the location for Jewish political expression remains as indebted to the horizon set by Spinoza as do those Zionist apologetics that appeal to a transhistorical Jewish nation.[99]

Cooper argues that the dominance of the horizon set by Spinoza has left Jewish political thought ill equipped to speak to the most obviously pressing challenges facing Jewish political life.[100] She and others have worked to revive alternative traditions of Jewish politics that challenge the Spinoza's horizon, from notions of autonomy that challenge dominant ideas of sovereignty to revivals of Jewish socialism and anarchism.[101] This project shares the aims and motives of much of that work but takes a different approach to the challenge by exploring and examining the ways that the horizon is conceptualized in ways that make it so impervious to criticism. My reading of Berlin and Strauss and their influence suggests that the power of the horizon is not simply a consequence of an apologetic argument on behalf of the amenability of Judaism to both Zionism and liberalism or the combination of the two. Instead, the two figures and their enormous influence suggest that running just under the apologetic currents that shape so much contemporary Jewish political argument is an ambivalence and skepticism towards the horizon as a whole. One of the reasons the unease goes unnoticed is that it is not exclusive to Jewish politics but is woven into more general ways of thinking about political life – as again, Strauss and Berlin's influence help illuminate.

But if indeed Strauss and Berlin are exemplary of modern Jewish politics in the way Traverso argues, and if they are as ambivalent towards Jewish life under conditions of both liberalism and

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[99] On this point, See Batnitzky, "Political Theory: Beyond Sovereignty?"

[100] In her own work, Cooper has sought recover resources from within the tradition that can expand and disrupt that horizon – most especially the long tradition of conceptualizing and practicing collective politics in ways that disrupt notions of either state or individual sovereignty. See especially, Julie E. Cooper, "Reevaluating Spinoza's Legacy for Jewish Political Thought."

[101] For two examples of such recent work, see See Julie E. Cooper, "A Diasporic Critique of Diasporism: The Question of Jewish Political Agency," *Political Theory* 43, no. 1 (2015) and Benjamin Balthaser, "When Anti-Zionism Was Jewish: Jewish Radical Subjectivity From the Anti-Imperialist Literary Left From the Great Depression to the Cold War," *American Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2020).

Zionism as I suggest (a case of course to be made through this dissertation), then this would indicate a much darker counter-current running just below a Jewish politics that on the surface celebrates Jewish life in America and Jewish life in Israel as miraculous achievements of both modern Judaism and modern politics. It is this counter-current that, counterintuitively, helps illuminate the strength and power of both Zionism and liberalism in Jewish thought even as each are taken by many to be in crisis. For if those crises are instead simply reflections of dilemma permanent to political life as such and especially so of modern Jewish life, then there is no choice but to accept and even embrace them.

In taking the Jewish question as the central problem to which modern Jewish political thought revolves, my aim is to draw attention to this ambivalence and its implications. But in so doing, I also want to insist that a primary issue with which any contemporary Jewish political thought must grapple is how and why dynamics so familiar to the modern Jewish experience are so constantly and relentlessly replicated, even as the Jewish question is taken by many to have been solved. One of the most obvious iterations of this phenomenon is the political reaction to Muslim immigration in both Europe and the United States. But for Jews, the fact that Jewish national self-determination has in practice relied on the expulsion, dispossession, disenfranchisement and ongoing occupation of the Palestinian people must be a matter of particularly powerful intellectual and political concern. Like too many Jewish thinkers of their generation, Berlin and Strauss did not address this fact. Their silence on the matter is, however, inseparable from what makes them such important interlocutors for understanding why and how so many today accept that Jewish freedom simply requires the domination of another people – and what it might take, both politically and intellectually, to challenge the power of that position.

The Plan of the Project

The dissertation is divided into three parts of two chapters each: Part One, "The Temptations of Tyranny;" Part Two, "Normalization and its Discontents" and Part Three, "Tragedy and Exception." The first part brings the thought of the two figures into conversation, Part Two then turns to their engagement with Zionism, and Part Three explores their constructive projects.

In Chapter One, "The Revolt Against Reason: The Jewish Question and the Dialectic of Modernity" I argue that Strauss and Berlin offered narratives of modern political thought that travel along surprisingly similar trajectories. Both held that modernity was defined by a radical inflation of reason, and with it a new vision for politics that imagined that fundamental and inescapable conflict might be finally and fully overcome. Both agreed that this new politics and this new philosophy provoked a revolt that eventually descended into a celebration of the will as a rejection of reason so understood. The primary reason for the parallel narratives, I argue, is that both were strongly attracted to the revolt and for the same reason. Each rejected liberalism's response to the Jewish question, and associated the Zionism to which they were sympathetic with the revolt against that liberalism. Yet each also recognized the revolt as having paved the way towards fascism. The narrative of dialectic they offered, I argue, therefore reflects both the centrality of the Jewish question to their mature thought and the depth of ambivalence that each shared towards the two dominant responses to that question.

In Chapter Two, "The Inevitability of Tragedy? The Isaiah-Berlin Leo Strauss Debate," I explore the argument that shaped their intellectual encounter, over whether or not the pluralism that Berlin advanced descended into relativism as Strauss charged that it did. In tracing the contours of their argument, I suggest that the dispute reveals surprising similarities in their respective analysis of the modern crisis and their responses to it. Both of those responses, I argue, were shaped by the worries generated by the narratives described in Chapter One. In light of those worries, Berlin attempted to reconstruct liberalism, while Strauss attacked that reconstruction as failing to recognize

the extent of liberalism's failure. Yet despite the force of this disagreement, their arguments share some striking similarities, revealed by the figure upon whom they both leaned most in making their respective claims, Max Weber. Both, I argue, agreed with Weber that the problem with modern political thought was its avoidance of fundamental dilemma permanent to political life, and both insisted along with Weber that such conflicts had to be accepted as inherent and inevitable. Where they disagreed was over the nature of those permanent dilemmas, and therefore the means by which they might be accepted and managed.

The chapters in Part One provokes two sets of questions, each of which motivates, respectively, Parts Two and Three of the dissertation. Chapter One raises the question of why, if both viewed Zionism as a species of that same nationalism that devolved into fascism, did they remain as committed to Zionism as they did? That question motivates Part Two. Chapter Two raises the question of what might be the normative implications of a politics that insists on insoluble dilemma, which motivates Part Three of the Dissertation.

While many writers argue that Isaiah Berlin's Zionism and his liberalism are mutually re-enforcing, in Chapter Three, "The Magic Lamp: Isaiah Berlin Between Liberalism and Zionism" I argue that the depth of the tension between the two positions is much more severe than generally recognized. I suggest that once Berlin is placed within a tradition of Zionist thought, the extent to which his own Zionism is indebted to the dynamics of 19th-century political theory against which he warned is brought into sharp focus. Once that tension is clarified, I argue that Berlin's attempt to resolve it appears in new light. While Berlin insisted that Zionism "normalized" the Jewish people, he did so by reconfiguring the meaning of "normalcy" by insisting on the permanence of political dilemma to all political life. In short, I argue that Berlin solved the Jewish question by universalizing what he took was the unsolvable dilemma at its center.

In Chapter Four, "The Empty Shell: Leo Strauss and the Paradox of Zionism," I argue that beginning in his early student years, Strauss identified a dilemma at the center of the Zionism which he passionately defended. Zionism, he insisted, must be recognized as a rejection of Jewish tradition. But once so recognized it was clear that the content – cultural, spiritual, and moral – of Zionism could not be described as Jewish. But what then was that content? I argue that his reflections on this question led him to distance himself from Zionism, but that he found in the inability of Zionism to provide any moral or ethical content a failure indicative of modern political life as a whole. That failure, I suggest, would provoke the reflections on the history of political thought for which he is widely known. It also shaped his mature analysis of the contradictions inherent in Zionism, which I suggest are surprisingly relevant in making sense of contemporary challenges.

In Part Three of the Dissertation, "Tragedy and Exception" I turn to the constructive political projects of both thinkers. In Chapter Five, "The Tragedy of the Tragic: Isaiah Berlin and a Liberalism of Loss" I turn to the practical consequences of Berlin's claim that political life is beset by tragic losses. I do so by returning to the relationship between Berlin's conception of political ethics and Max Weber's. I argue that despite Berlin's emphasis on compromise among plural values, his pluralism has a difficult time escaping from problems evident in Weber's political ethics: an emphasis on the decisions of leaders apart from any structures of accountability, an account of values that abstracts from social conditions, and a valorization of tragedy that takes an acceptance of tragic loss as the most manifest expression of political morality. In retaining these features of Weber's pluralism, I argue, Berlin's liberalism paradoxically renders exception to liberal norms as the expression of commitment to liberalism.

In the final chapter, "The Jewish Problem as the Human Problem: The Chosen People and the State of Exception," I argue that Strauss's political thought revolves around the question of exception to which Berlin's liberalism points. I suggest that Strauss's famous distinction between

Athens and Jerusalem is one that ultimately rests on this issue, and that the difference between the two traditions in his view ultimately rests on how each responds to the challenge of emergency and exception. According to Strauss, only Biblical revelation can offer to worldly politics a universal morality that might authorize a law considered superior to the demands of national survival and security – but that the classical tradition teaches the profoundly limited force of that revelation. What emerges, I suggest, is finally a Jewish politics that takes Judaism as exceptional in that Judaism declares a universal morality that the Jewish condition reveals cannot ever be fully fulfilled. With this claim, I argue that Strauss radically departs from dominant trends of modern Jewish thought even as he remains beholden to them.

In the conclusion, "The Tragedy of Jewish Politics," I turn to several contributions to modern Jewish political argument that reveal the relevance of both Berlin and Strauss in contemporary Jewish political debate. I argue that a great deal of that debate is shaped by a tragic conception of Jewish political life that takes insoluble dilemma and most especially a tragic conflict between morality and political survival as constitutive of contemporary Jewish political life. The dominance of this position helps explain, in part, why the practices and strategies of contemporary Jewish politics are so ill equipped to address the crises of that politics. I conclude by suggesting that while Berlin and Strauss may not offer much resource for charting our way out of contemporary challenges, they help illuminate the nature of the crisis and what it will take to address it.

Part One: The Temptations of Tyranny

Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?

- Nietzsche[1]

[1] Fredrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1968), 7.

Chapter One

The Revolt Against Reason: The Jewish Question and the Dialectic of Modernity

"Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters," wrote Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the opening lines of their 1944 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. "Yet the wholly enlightened earth," they declared, "is radiant with triumphant calamity."[1] To Horkheimer and Adorno, the world wars, the rise of fascism, and new technologies of mass slaughter were not only matters of political catastrophe, but philosophical crisis. As Mark Lilla has put it, to Adorno and Horkheimer and a great many other writers of their generation, it was clear that "modern humanism had brought about the dehumanization of man."[2]

The question for these theorists was, then, how had modern thought led to such catastrophe? How had the Enlightenment's aspiration to guarantee peace through tolerance culminated in such horror? Why did modernity's ostensible victory of reason over superstition lead to such irrational violence? Horkheimer and Adorno answered that the Enlightenment was defined by a distinctive notion of reason that promised emancipation and delivered enslavement. Modern reason, they argued, was distinctive in understanding reason as a tool by which to manipulate nature. While such a view suggested that human beings were distinct and separate from the nature which was to be dominated, it turned out that human beings were not so easily removed from nature – and once recognized as part of it, humanity itself was easily considered simply one more material to be

[1] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments,* trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.
[2] Mark Lilla, "What is Counter-Enlightenment," in *Isaiah Berlin's Counter-Enlightenment*, ed. Joseph Mali and Robert Wolker (Phildalelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 2003), 2.

manipulated. Modern reason aspired to free human beings from the domination of nature but instead dramatically expanded the power by which human beings could dominate one another and provided the rationale by which to do so. This reversal shaped what they called the "Dialectic of Enlightenment." Despite the great gulf between their thought and that of the Frankfurt school Horkheimer and Adorno helped to found, both Berlin and Strauss agreed with that on fundamental question provoked by the era's catastrophes: how had reason descended into barbarism? And despite the differences in response that each developed, their narratives of modern thought follow trajectories surprisingly similar to that presented by Horkheimer and Adorno.

As those respective histories are generally summarized, however, they are not only taken as quite distant from that presented by the founders of critical theory but also as opposed to one another. Isaiah Berlin is most generally considered to have presented a story by which the "monism" that he argued was definitive of Western political thought metastasized into totalitarianism. As Berlin defined the term, "monists" held that the conflicts and dilemmas of human life are amenable to ultimate and final resolution according to a single scale or unified aim which all people, if they were appropriately enlightened, would rationally recognize and accept. While theologians and philosophers disagreed on what that resolution entailed, all those who subscribed to the "monist thesis" agreed on three points: that all questions had answers, that the answers could be known, and that when those answers were known they would fit together harmoniously. To Berlin, the problem with monism was plain. As he put it in a lecture late in life, "if one really believes that such a solution is possible then surely no cost would be too high to obtain it: to make mankind just and happy and creative and harmonious for ever – what could be too high a price to pay for that?"[3] With this basic logic, Berlin drew a line from Plato, to Augustine, to the enlightenment of Spinoza and Kant, into the 19th century thought of Hegel and Marx, and straight to totalitarianism.

[3] "The Pursuit of the Ideal," PSM, 12-13.

Leo Strauss, on the other hand, is famous for his lament of the loss of classical philosophy's pursuit of natural truths considered authoritative universally and eternally. As he is most often read, Strauss held that modern thought had abandoned the notion that such truth was available. As a consequence, modern liberals had proven unable to muster the commitments necessary to respond to the totalitarian threat. While to Berlin the catastrophes of world war and genocide indicted a tradition of Western thought that appealed to a unified truth which human beings might know, Strauss argued that they represented a condemnation of the distinctly modern notion that such truths could never be known. Or so standard summaries of their respective projects go.

The immediate contrast in content between these narratives masks the form that they share. Both Berlin and Strauss were haunted by the thought that the Enlightenment and the liberal politics it inaugurated inspired a violent rebellion against its own basic principles, a rebellion that culminated in totalitarianism. But what about Enlightenment political thought could provoke such violent reaction? Both Berlin and Strauss came to a very similar answer. Each viewed the defining characteristic of Enlightenment thought as a radical inflation of what reason could be expected to accomplish, and with it a concomitant and novel political aspiration: that the heretofore perpetual conflicts and dilemmas of political life could be resolved through technical and rational administration. Both argued that this ambition provoked a furious reaction against the homogenizing and stultifying consequence of a philosophy and a politics so understood.

The reason that the arcs are so similar is that both were shaped by an initially disconcerting fact: both Berlin and Strauss were powerfully attracted to the counterrevolution, the rebellion *against* reason.[4] And both were drawn to that counterrevolution for the same reason. To both, the

[4] This point has been much more thoroughly explored in the literature on Strauss than it has on Berlin. Many readers have gone so far as to find in Strauss's attraction to the counter-revolution evidence of a supposed support for fascism. For such readings, see William H. F. Altman, "Leo Strauss on "German Nihilism:" Learning the Art of Writing," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68, no. 4 (2007); Robert C. Miner, "Nietzsche, Schmitt, and Heidegger in the Anti-Liberalism of Leo Strauss," *Telos* 160 (2012); and Shadia B. Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*. Given Isaiah Berlin's reputation as one of

counterrevolutionaries revealed the inability of Enlightenment philosophers and the liberalism they defended to recognize the force, power, and persistence of the Jewish question. Even as the counterrevolutionaries were often far more explicit in their antisemitism than the Enlightenment thinkers they attacked, both Berlin and Strauss agreed that it was the rebels against Enlightenment rationalism who had the far more compelling answer to the Jewish question than did their liberal antagonists.

Yet Berlin and Strauss agreed that these counterrevolutionaries offered a philosophical foundation for a politics that would eventually flourish into fascism. Both therefore found themselves in the peculiar and discomfiting position of attraction to a tradition of thought that simultaneously revealed the deficiency of Enlightenment liberalism and laid the intellectual groundwork for the destruction of the European community and the mass murder Europe's Jews. The mature political thought of both was shaped by this simultaneous attraction and horror, and both would eventually attempt to chart a path beyond the dialectic they diagnosed. Those paths would wind in very different directions, but they began at the same source.

Isaiah Berlin's Enlightenment

In Isaiah Berlin's telling, "Enlightenment" involved two basic ideas, one that was not at all novel and one that was. The less than novel claim of Enlightenment thinkers was their embrace of the monist thesis. What was new, as he put it in 1965, was "the particular twist" which the Enlightenment gave to that thesis. The Enlightenment thinkers insisted that "the answers were not to be obtained in many of the hitherto traditional ways," through revelation or tradition. Instead,

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the most famous liberals of the 20th century, his sympathy with the rebellion against liberalism has been less widely acknowledged, although a number of scholars have noted that it is this sympathy that accounts for the distinctiveness of Berlin's liberalism. See for example Steven B. Smith, "Isaiah Berlin's Tragic Liberalism," in *Modernity and its Discontents: Making and Unmaking the Bourgeois from Machiavelli to Bellow* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), especially 268.

they held that "there is only one way of discovering these answers, and that is by the correct use of reason, deductively, as in the mathematical sciences, inductively as in the sciences of nature."[5]

Three years later, Berlin expanded upon this point. In an entry for the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, he held that Enlightenment thinkers agreed on the following:

> That human nature was fundamentally the same in all times and places; that local and historical variations were unimportant compared with the constant central core in terms of which human begins could be defined as a species, like animals or plants or minerals; that there were universal human goals; that a logically connected structure of laws and generalizations susceptible of demonstration and verification could be constructed and replace the chaotic amalgam of ignorance, mental laziness, guesswork, superstition, prejudice, dogma, fantasy, and above all, 'interested error' maintained by the rulers of mankind and largely responsible for the blunders, vices and misfortunes of humanity.[6]

Berlin often referred to the thinkers that in his view advanced these doctrines -- Condorcet, Rosseau, Descartes and Voltaire – as the "French rationalists." According to these theorists, he wrote, "one set of universal and unalterable principles governed the world." While they perhaps differed "about what these laws were, or how to discover them, or who qualified to expound them; that these laws were real, and could be known, whether with certainty, or only probability, remained the central dogma of the entire Enlightenment."[7]

By the time he wrote those words, Berlin had been reflecting on this point for over a decade. It was central to the argument of his most famous essay, "Two Concepts of Liberty," but already two years before that lecture in the introduction to his 1956 "The Age of Enlightenment," Berlin described what united these thinkers. As he summarized it there, Enlightenment philosophy was defined by its conviction that the faculties of the mind could be examined and explained in the same way and fashion as Newtonian physics explained the workings of the physical universe. The implication of this view was not only epistemological and moral but political. The central conviction

[5] "The First Attack on Enlightenment," RR, 22.
[6] "The Counter-Enlightenment," ATC, 1-2.
[7] "The Counter-Enlightenment," ATC, 4.

was that "what science had achieved in the sphere of the material world" could be replicated "in the realm of social and political relations." The all-important consequence was that "the ideal of creating a wholly just, wholly virtuous, wholly satisfied society was therefore no longer utopian."[8] Across its great diversity, Enlightenment thought was united by this "common ground."[9]

A number of scholars have disputed this picture of Enlightenment consensus.[10] But my interest here is not the accuracy of the description but the narrative Berlin wove from it. And to Berlin, the rebellion against the Enlightenment's revolution was only comprehensible once that counter-revolution was understood as an attack on the idea that a perfectly rational and therefore universally binding politics was both achievable and desirable. It was this aspiration against which the movement Berlin termed the "Counter-Enlightenment" rebelled.

The precise cast of this rebellion would rotate in Berlin's many iterations of the story. In the 1968 essay, "The Counter-Enlightenment," it was Giambassati Vico who founded the revolt. There, Berlin wrote that it was Vico's "revolutionary move" to deny "the doctrine of a timeless natural law the truths of which could have been known in principle to any man, at any time, anywhere." To Vico, argued Berlin, all science could provide was abstract categorization for our experience of the world. In so doing, the scientific method destroyed the capacity for individual experience. The only facts about the world that could be termed true were those that were shared.[11] Against this universalism, Vico insisted on the "uniqueness of cultures" and argued that the answers that people

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[8] Isaiah Berlin, *The Age of Enlightenment*, 17.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Robert Wolker, for example, described "Berlin's invention of a monolithic Enlightenment" as "embarrassing." He goes on to note, as just one example, that while "Montesquieu was perhaps the most tenacious supporter of the proposition that the laws of nature and the operations of the human mind must be understood in the same way," he was nonetheless "especially sensitive to the local variety, specificity and uniqueness of social institutions, customs and mores." See Robert Wokler, "Isaiah Berlin's Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment," in *Isaiah Berlin's Counter-Enlightenment*, ed. Joseph Mali and Robert Wolker (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 2003), 18-19. In the same volume, Mark Lilla agrees that far from asserting that "a narrow rule of reason applied to all human experience," "the mainstream of European Enlightenment and its greatest thinkers remained utterly untouched by this so-called rationalism." See Mark Lilla, "What is Counter-Enlightenment?" in *Isaiah Berlin's Counter-Enlightenment*, ed. Joseph Mali and Robert Wolker (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 2003), 5.
[11] ATC, 6.

developed depended on the questions posed, questions that vary based on the particularities of time and place. This view, wrote Berlin, "struck a powerful blow at the notion of timeless truths and steady progress."[12] Three years later, Berlin cast the German philosopher and theologian J.G. Hamann as the inaugural figure. Like Vico, Hamann held that the only things worth knowing were those that were particular and specific, that defied any universal or general rule.[13]

At the center of Hamann's assault on Enlightenment, Berlin emphasized, was an attack on the Enlightenment's response to the Jewish question. It was Hamann's "great polemic against Mendelssohn," Berlin declared, which revealed his position "more vividly than even his most obviously theological writings."[14] In his 1783 *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn had argued on behalf of a strict delineation between the state's power to regulate action through coercion and religion's commitment to faith as freely chosen. Here is how Berlin summarized Mendelssohn's central argument:

> Mendelssohn expounded the orthodox liberal doctrine of natural law, according to which the State was founded upon reciprocal promises or compacts between the ruler and the ruled, each to fulfil his proper, stipulated functions, and rested on the sanctity of promises, as ordained by natural law, recognized by all rational men – the law claiming universal obedience. He drew from this the normal liberal consequence, drawn by Spinoza before him, that since the promise was valid only if freely given, it entailed freedom of thought and expression, the absence of coercion towards men's beliefs…for unless men were free to arrive at whatever conclusions were indicated by the operation of natural reason, the very notions of natural law and the obligations that sprang from it, and of a rational basis for government, could not be realized. While a government might have the right and duty to restrain or coerce action, it could not, without destroying the foundations of its own rights, dictate belief or persecute non-conformity which did not take violent forms or seek to disturb public order.[15]

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[12] ATC, 7.
[13] Here is Berlin's description of Hamann's importance in the 1965 lectures: "There is one man who, in my view, struck the most violent blow against the Enlightenment and began the whole romantic process, the whole process of revolt against the outlook which I have tried to describe." RR, 40.
[14] "The Magus of the North," TCE, Kindle Edition, Location 6855
[15] "The Magus of the North," TCE, Kindle Edition, Location 6855

This was, Berlin explained, the framework as developed by "Spinoza, Locke and all the fathers of the liberal Enlightenment."[16] According to its logic, government could not demand allegiance to any belief without undermining its own claims to authority. Insofar as political authority defended itself according to reason, a state that demanded allegiance to a particular set of beliefs necessarily abdicated its own legitimacy. With this claim, or so went Mendelssohn's argument, any rationally legitimate government had to offer the Jewish faith the same protection from coercion as any other set of personal convictions.

"Hamann," wrote Berlin, "would have none of this."[17] What Hamann found most offensive in Mendelssohn's argument was the notion that human being might be partitioned into various selves, each with commitments that could be held firmly in check depending on the arena in which they considered themselves to be involved. "These divisions – what a man owes God and what he owes Caesar, the 'public' and the 'private'," wrote Berlin, "seemed to Hamann a fatal method of cutting human beings to pieces, like so much inanimate flesh." According to Hamann, "the notion of confining [God] to his sphere, of creating frontiers against his worship, is a blasphemy and self-deception." This erasure of the divide between public and private, between state and church, would undoubtedly lead to some measure of intolerance. But to Hamann, so much the better. "Toleration of differences," Berlin writes of Hamann, "is a denial of their importance."[18]

Berlin, needless to say, did not affirm this indictment of the division between private and public so central to modern liberalism. But Berlin agreed with to Hamann's criticism of the Enlightenment response to the Jewish question as articulated by Mendelssohn. That sympathy is most evident in Berlin's reading of the figure he described as Hamann's most "natural enemy," Helvétius. To Berlin,

[16] "The Magus of the North," TCE, Kindle Edition, Location 6855
[17] Ibid., 6883.
[18] Ibid., 6855.

there was perhaps no thinker more indicative of "Enlightenment."[19] In a series of 1952 radio addresses, Berlin would describe Helvétius as someone who "thought himself, in short, the Newton of politics." Just as Newton had proven the universal laws by which the physical universe was structured, Helvétius held that he had uncovered the universal law by which society should be organized. That universal law was the simple fact that human beings pursue pleasure and avoid pain. While Bentham was considered to have been the champion of this theory, to Berlin it was Helvétius before him who first developed modern utilitarianism. To Helvétius, the discovery of this principle led to the obvious conclusion that those who recognized it's truth – namely, philosophers and those rulers who listened to their instruction – could implement a system "of sticks and carrots for the human donkey."[20] Through "scientific observation" the "few, necessary rules about the right government of mankind" can be ascertained, and through "the application of reason to nature" they can be implemented.[21]

What is new about this view, according to Berlin, was not its insistence on interest over morality nor the claim that the purpose of government is to make men happy, nor even the basic tenet that human beings as such pursue pleasure and avoid pain. Instead, it was the "alliance" of this position with "rationalism, materialism," and "belief in science."[22] It was this belief that marked modern utilitarianism as modern, for "the one principle which Helvétius clings [to] tenaciously is that education and laws can do anything." Once human rationality is recognized as all-powerful, then "man is infinitely malleable, infinitely flexible. He is a piece of clay in the hands of the potter to mold as he pleases."[23] As clay, humans ought to be molded by those who understand their true

[19] Berlin doesn't ever give Helvétius this honor, so far as I know. But of those figures that he described as indicative of "French Rationalism," Helvétius is the only one to whom Berlin devoted a whole essay or lecture. And in that lecture, Helvétius is portrayed as a paradigmatic representative of positions that Berlin would regularly describe as characteristic of "Enlightenment."
[20] "Helvétius," FB, 17.
[21] Ibid.
[22] "Helvétius," FB, 18.
[23] "Helvétius," FB, 22.

interests, who recognize that those interests are only legitimate when they reflect and align with the truth of the universal laws that govern all beings.

To Berlin, this view – that reason could transform human beings, and through rational government make humans happy – was "one of the central doctrines of the *philosophes*," those who were exemplary of Enlightenment thought to Berlin.[24] As he summarized it, the main "presupposition" of this system was that "all ultimate ends are compatible with each other." This view, he argued, "rests on a false analogy from logic and geometry."[25] Just as there can be no true mathematical proposition that contradicts another true mathematical proposition, no proposition in the moral universe can contradict another. This position inevitably "lead[s] directly to what is ultimately a kind of technocratic tyranny," a tyranny that destroys individual choice and freedom as successfully or even more successfully than pre-modern tyranny, even if and precisely because it is a "tyranny of reason."[26]

Mendelssohn was not, however, Helvétius. Mendelssohn wrote to protect thought against coercion, whereas Helvétius (at least in Berlin's reading) thought that any conscience was not "free" insofar as it led to actions that did not align with the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Yet to Hamann, the two were in agreement on the fundamental point that reason was universal and that it could determine the proper structure of government, authoritative for all times and places. It was this basic point against which Hamann revolted. Hamann's antagonist was the idea that there exists "a single, universal, public, objective structure – natural law or the rational structure of the universe, or anything else invented by philosophers – which can be contemplated by anyone at any time."[27] It was this "rationalist construction" that Mendelssohn and Helvétius (and, according to

[24] FB., 22.
[25] Ibid., 24.
[26] Ibid., 27.
[27] "The Magus of the North," TCE, Kindle Edition, Location 6890

Hamann, Kant) shared, and that Hamann so thoroughly rejected. Berlin himself would devote a great deal of energy to expanding upon this same rejection, and it is no surprise that in his closing line of the essay Berlin renders his unequivocally affirmative judgement that Hamann leveled "the first great shot in the battle of the Romantic individualists against rationalism and totalitarianism."[28]

Yet just a few pages earlier, Berlin had intimated a very different legacy. Hamann's attack on Mendelssohn was not only an attack on "liberal rationalism," Berlin pointed out, but an attack on a Judaism that was taken as representative of that "liberal rationalism" and its motivator. This, Berlin conceded, was a note that would be sounded throughout the "entire anti-rationalist, anti-Semitic literature of the nineteenth century, until it finally reaches a point of violent hysteria in Austro-German racism and National Socialism." To all these writers, "the Jews emerge as the eternal critics, the detached, uncommitted judges of the Christian world. To tolerate them as an organized religion is a concession to that liberalism and rationalism that constitutes a denial of what men are for – to serve the true God, hear his words and feel and will and act them in every moment of their life on earth."[29] This equation of a deadening and stifling liberalism with the legalism of Judaism would eventually prove central to the ideology of modern German antisemitism. If Hamann lodged "the first great shot in the battle…against rationalism and totalitarianism" then it was a shot that splintered and flew in very different destinations.

Yet while Berlin acknowledged the disturbing legacy of Hamann's challenge to Mendelssohn, he was sympathetic to Hamann's broader critique of Enlightenment rationalism not despite that challenge but because of it. This point is clearest in Berlin's account of the figure who, across his various narratives of Romanticism and Counter-Enlightenment played a starring role, Johann

[28] "The Magus of the North," TCE, Kindle Edition, Location 7209
[29] Ibid., 6922.

Gottfried Herder.[30] Like Hamann, Herder rejected the universalizing claims of reason, although he did so not in the name of a particular experience of God but on behalf of the distinctive particularities of culture and place. To Herder, principles and mores were not reflections of timeless truths that might be discovered by anyone at any time, but rather the product of "the people itself, the entire soul of which is poured out in all they are and do."[31] For this reason, to Herder, "every culture has its own unique *Schwerpunkt* ('center of gravity')" – a phrase which Berlin was fond of quoting.[32]

Among the implications of this argument is that the insights of philosophy are as diverse as the cultures of the world and that each has its own intrinsic value. To Herder, Berlin wrote, "there is a plurality of incommensurable cultures" and "to belong to a given community, to be connected with its members by indissoluble and impalpable ties of common language, historical memory, habit, tradition and feeling, is a basic human need no less natural than that for food or drink or security or procreation."[33] In celebrating "all cultures as equal in the sight of God," Herder dismantled "the notion of the perfect civilization." Such an idea was "not merely difficult to formulate, or impossible to realize in practice, but incoherent and unintelligible."[34] With his affirmation of cultural diversity, Herder leveled "perhaps the sharpest blow ever delivered against the classical philosophy of the West, to which perfection – the possibility, at least in principle, of universal, timeless solutions to

[30] Berlin's most extensive reflections on Herder were his 1965 essay, "Herder and the Enlightenment", in Earl R. Wasserman (ed.), *Aspects of the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1965: Johns Hopkins Press), 47–104; that essay was revised and published in *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London, 1976: Hogarth Press). It was reissued in TCE and PSM.
[31] "The Counter-Enlightenment," PSM, 254.
[32] In addition to "Herder and the Enlightenment," PSM, 403, 410 and 412; see "The Counter-Enlightenment," PSM, 254 and "The Pursuit of the Ideal," PSM, 8.
[33] "The Counter-Enlightenment," PSM, 255.
[34] "Herder and the Enlightenment," PSM, 431.

problems of value – is essential."[35] These are, of course, the greatest compliments that Berlin could offer (although it should be noted that he offered them to others as well).[36]

At the "heart of all Herder's ideas" was, Berlin wrote, the notion of belonging. "Whoever does not feel at home cannot create naturally, freely, generously, unselfconsciously," wrote Berlin in summary of the position. "All his talk about the national character, the national genius, the *Volkseele*, the spirit of the people and so forth in the end comes to this alone."[37] It was in his appreciation of "national consciousness" that, Berlin writes, Herder "rose above his generation; more clearly than any other writer, he conceived and cast light upon the crucially important social functioning of belonging' – on what it is to belong to a group, a culture, a movement, a form of life."[38] For this reason, there is no greater calamity to Herder than exile. "No writer," writes Berlin in typical hyperbole," has stressed more vividly the damage done to human beings by being torn from the only conditions in which their history has made it possible for them to live full lives."[39] It is therefore "terrible arrogance to affirm that, to be happy, everyone should become European."[40]

As we'll see, these arguments are ones that Berlin would embrace almost without alteration in defense of his own Zionism. Yet as obvious as the connection is between Herder and Berlin's own Jewish politics, in Berlin's many writings the resonance goes unmentioned. In the 1973 essay Berlin did note that to Herder "Germans can be truly creative only among Germans; Jews only if they are restored to the ancient soil of Palestine."[41] And in an earlier essay on Herder, he wrote in a footnote that "Herder was fascinated by the survival of the Jews; he looked upon them as a most excellent example of a *Volk* with its own distinct character." This, however, suggests that Herder considered

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[35] Ibid.
[36] Berlin was a fan of hyperbole, and a list of those who leveled the singularly "greatest" of blows on Western monism would include Machiavelli, the aforementioned Hamann, Vico, and Herzen.
[37] "Herder and the Enlightenment," PSM, 414.
[38] "Herder and the Enlightenment," PSM, 412.
[39] "Herder and the Enlightenment," PSM, 415.
[40] "Herder and the Enlightenment," PSM, 415.
[41] "The Counter-Enlightenment," PSM, 251.

the Jews yet another example of any collective group. But this dramatically understates the role that Judaism and Jews played in Herder's understanding of national belonging.

In the article that Berlin cites, F.M. Barnard wrote that "the history of the Jew since their dispersal…came to represent for [Herder] an event of the greatest possible significance in the history of mankind."[42] To Herder, Barnard explained, the Jews are not just "a most excellent example" but the paradigmatic representative of a people and proof of the inextricability of wisdom from cultural particularity. The Jewish people, to Herder, demonstrated that all law and morality emerge not from rational reflection on eternal truths but on the particular needs of particular people in particular contexts. The Mosaic constitution, in this telling, did not reflect some pre-existing rights of individuals but instead brought into being a distinctive people. To Herder, the Jews proved that all great works emerge not from universal maxims but from the context of particular peoples asserting their will to live and live together.

This led Herder to see in Jews and Judaism a particularly forceful example of his broader claim as to the power of culture and context. But it also led him conclude that the Jews were themselves a people apart and essentially different and distinct from the European nations around them. This led Herder to an endorsement of the Zionist program nearly a century before the term would come into use. As Herder put it, "the Jewish people remain…in our part of the globe…an alien Asiatic nation, inextricably tied by its own confession to that ancient law that has been given to it under distant skies…since Israel regards itself in its prayers as a people distinct from all other peoples, how could it be judged differently by other nations?"[43] This insistence on essential and insurmountable Jewish foreignness was, as we saw in the introduction, fundamental to all of classical Zionism.

[42] Frederick M. Barnard, "Herder and Israel," *Jewish Social Studies* 28, no. 1 (1966), 25.
[43] Quoted by Barnard, 30.

While Berlin did not draw much attention to the point in his writings on Herder, he did cast his own Jewish politics in decidedly Harderian terms. Here is how he put it in "Three Strands of My Life:"

> Two thousand years of Jewish history have been nothing but a single longing to belong, to cease being strangers everywhere; morning and evening the exiles have prayed for a renewal of the days of old -- to be one people again, living normal lives on their own soil -- the only condition in which individuals can live unbowed and realize their potential fully; no men can do that if they are a permanent minority -- worse still, a minority everywhere, without a national base…. Such criticisms as I have made of the doctrines of the French Enlightenment and of its lack of sympathy for emotional bonds between members of races and cultures, and its idealistic but hollow doctrinaire internationalism, spring, in my case, from this almost intuitive sense of one's own roots -- Jewish roots, in my case.[44]

Nowhere else in Berlin's writing was he as clear in the relationship between his famous indictment of what he called here "hollow doctrinaire internationalism," his analysis of the Jewish question and his Zionism.

I'll turn to that Zionism at length in Chapter 3. For now, I only want to underscore how dramatically this position departs from the view offered by Mendelssohn and the other "fathers of the Enlightenment." Jews are described here as a people fundamentally alien to the nations of Europe, for whom protections of religious liberty or freedom of conscience – no matter how strong – are by definition insufficient to guarantee or provide practical freedom. While Berlin may not have agreed with Hamann's wholesale dismissal of the distinction between private and public, this view necessarily takes Judaism as a tradition that does not avail itself of such a divide. Jewishness, Herder insisted and Berlin agreed, will always remain a matter of public difference. Any politics that imagines that this difference can be rendered private is a politics that can only prove coercive.

Yet despite the clarity with which Berlin puts this point in the lecture just noted, the passage is significant in part because Berlin so rarely framed his position on such terms. Part of the reason was that the position so described obviously challenges the liberalism for which Berlin was most famous

[44] Isaiah Berlin, "Three Strands of My Life," in PI, 438-439.

(a point to which I'll return in Chapter 3). But it also troubles the pluralism he celebrated. For as much as Berlin may have sympathized with Hamann's and Herder's attack on "liberal rationalism," in his narrative it was not that "liberal rationalism" that led to the fascism that would name the Jews a global enemy. Instead, that fascism was a product of the Counter-Enlightenment to which Berlin was so attracted.

Pluralism and the Path to Fascism

While Herder was an obvious hero of Berlin's pluralism, once situated with the history of the Counter-Enlightenment as Berlin told it, his legacy appears as decidedly mixed. Berlin was adamant that Herder was not a nationalist in the sense of taking his own nation as superior to others, for Herder insisted that different cultures could and should flourish fruitfully "side by side." But "nevertheless," Berlin wrote, "the seeds of nationalism are unmistakably present in his fervid attacks on hollow cosmopolitism and universalism (with which he charged the French *philosophes*); they grew apace among his aggressive nineteenth-century disciples."[45] Or, as he put it in the earlier essay:

> The consequences of Herder's doctrines did not make themselves felt immediately...the full effect was felt only when the romantic movement, at its most violent, attempted to overthrow the authority both of reason and of dogma on which the old order rested. The extent of its explosive potentialities was not fully realized until the rise of modern anti-rationalist movements – nationalism, fascism, existentialism, emotivism, and the wars and revolutions made in the name of two among them…"[46]

Just under the surface of Berlin's celebration of Herder is a worry over the directions which his nationalism might travel.

That worry flowered into more urgent warning in Berlin's portraits of those figures that he argued inherited Herder's legacy, Joseph de Maistre and Johann Fichte. According to Berlin, Maistre attacked the optimistic account of human nature at the center of the Enlightenment, deriding the

[45] "The Counter-Enlightenment," PSM, 254.
[46] "Herder and the Enlightenment," PSM, 431.

notion that men are capable of living peacefully together on account of rational self-interest. Against the promise that "the Enlightenment teaches," Maistre claimed that men are "never so united as when given a common altar upon which to immolate themselves."[47] The only way that men can survive self-destruction, therefore, is under the hard yoke of authority. Reason cannot offer that authority, given that in order to be true to its own premises, any argument rationally defended is open to rational refutation. To Maistre, this was the path to chaos. It is not reason that provides for social peace, he insisted, but faith and fear.

While all this appears distant from Herder, Berlin argued that Maistre's authoritarianism could be traced to the legacy of the defender of the indigenous against Empire. The link was in their shared account of the nation. To Maistre, it was the nation that gave to societies a social cohesion that diversity disintegrated. "Nations," wrote Maistre, "are born and die like individuals; they 'have a common soul,' especially visible in their language." As Berlin put it, to Maistre, "nation and race are realities; the artificial creations of constitution mongers are bound to collapse." Berlin concluded the essay by suggesting what was by now obvious– that "these gloomy doctrines became the inspiration of monarchist politics in France, and….duly inspired nationalism, imperialism, and finally, in their most violent and pathological form, Fascist and totalitarian doctrines in the twentieth century."[48]

Alongside Maistre, Fichte also inherited Herder's view of the nation, but rather than the need for internal authority he underscored the necessity of external violence and conflict in that nation's protection. To Fichte, Berlin points out, only in action rather than rational contemplation are meaning made and life lived. As Berlin quoted him: "we do not act because we know…we know because we act." Nature presses upon us, and only when we act against it, when we resist, do we create and are we then free. "To be free," says Fichte, "is nothing, to *become* free is very heaven."'

[47] "The Counter-Enlightenment," PSM, 264.
[48] "The Counter-Enlightenment," PSM, 268.

According to this theory, writes Berlin, "man must go on generating and creating." In Berlin's portrait, after the invasion by Napoleon, Fichte "began thinking that perhaps what Herder had said of human beings was true, that a man was made by other men, that a man was made a man by education, by language."[49] Fichte took Herder's account of the inseparability of freedom from belonging, and attached it to his theory of creation. In so doing, freedom meant necessarily national freedom, "and for a nation to be free means to be free of other nations, and if other nations obstruct it, it must make war." So, Berlin concluded:

> Fichte ends as a rabid German patriot and nationalist. If we are a free nation, if we are a great creator engaged upon creating these great values which in fact history has imposed upon us, because we happen not to have been corrupted by the great decadence which has fallen upon the Latin nations…if that is what we are, then we must be free at the expense of no matter what, and therefore, since the world cannot be half slave and half free, we must conquer the others, and absorb them into our texture.[50]

With these words, Berlin offered the broad outlines of what in his view were the central tenants of fascist politics.

In tracing the legacy of Herder in two thinkers Berlin took as foundational to modern fascism, we're left with a narrative that does not easily fit the tidy division between monism and pluralism so often ascribed to Berlin. Rather than liberal pluralism challenging a totalitarian monism, pluralism emerges as both a check against the suffocating blindness of rationalism and as a dangerous forerunner of Nazism.

While this is a less familiar narrative than the one often attributed to Berlin, it is one that he returned to frequently.[51] The 1959 "European Unity," for example, is dominated by a nostalgia for the universalism that in so many other works Berlin derides. Prior to "the second half of the eighteenth century," Berlin writes, the world was taken by the great majority of thinkers as "a single,

[49] RR, 90.
[50] RR, 91.
[51] All reprinted in CTH.

intelligible whole." All people were assumed to have "certain unchanging characteristics in common, called human nature." All were thought to be in possession of "a faculty called reason, which enabled its possessor to perceive the truth, both theoretical and practical." These are the sorts of lines Berlin generally uses to set up his attack on monism. But here Berlin lamented that this belief in a universal and timeless fact of human nature collapsed in the modern period – and this was, to put it mildly, not at all a good thing. "In the twentieth century, this claim to universality, whether of reason or any other principle, is no longer taken for granted."[52] Nazism is the most obvious political manifestation of this rejection of the basic equality of all human beings, Berlin argues, but it is only the most extreme expression of an attitude that infects all nationalism. According to the logic, "my gods are in conflict with those of others, my values with those of strangers, and there exists no higher authority – certainly no absolute and universal tribunal – by which the claims of these rival divinities can be adjudicated." The only possible outcome is war.

As we'll see at length later in this dissertation, this formula echoes Max Weber's famous account of the warring gods that dominate modern life. But in these passages, that pluralism is cast in darker light than is generally expected from Berlin. Here, Berlin lamented that while the classical and premodern thinkers considered the question of the good life to be discernable by reason or eternal truth, in the modern period we have "the image of the heroic individual, imposing his will upon nature or society: of man not as the crown of a harmonious cosmos, but as a being 'alienated' from it, and seeking to subdue and dominate it."[53] In this view, ideals by which we might structure our lives are not considered aspects of nature, nor of God, nor of anything beyond the self. Instead, "the ideal presents itself in the form of a categorical imperative: serve the inner light within you because it burns within you, for that reason alone."[54] This is the image of the "Romantic hero," whose aim "is

[52] "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," CTH, 187.
[53] "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," CTH, 197.
[54] "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," CTH, 199.

to realize the personal vision within him at whatever cost; his worst crime is to be untrue to this inner goal that is his, and his alone."[55]

To Berlin, this emphasis on the importance of individual decision led to the more radical idea that decision, in itself, was of paramount value irrespective and even in opposition to those rules, laws, or discoveries considered universal. The notion that freedom entails a decision that aligns with universal reason is eventually transformed – by Fichte initially, later by Nietzsche – into the idea that freedom stands in opposition to universal reason, for only the individual person or the individual nation in its acts of creation can be free. As Berlin put it in "European Unity and its Vicissitudes:"

> If values are not found but made, if what is true of the arts…applies more widely in the field of human relations, then each inventor must seek to realize its own invention, each visionary impose his own vision, each nation its own goal, each civilization its own values. Hence the war of all against all, and the end of European Unity. Irrational forces are now set above rational, for what cannot be criticized or appealed from seems more compelling than what reason can analyze; the deep dark sources of art and religion and nationalism, precisely because they are dark and resist detached examination, and vanish under intellectual analysis, are guarded and worshipped as transcendent, inviolable, absolute.[56]

Here, action is prized for its irrationality, violence embraced for its destructiveness, and power adored for its own sake. In the story so told, fascist totalitarianism is a product not of modern monism but is produced by the ferocity of the attack against that modern rationalism. The Enlightenment's equation of reason with science provokes the Counter-Enlightenment's revolt, which descends into a celebration of the will understood explicitly as a rejection of reason's universality.

There are several reasons that this story is less commonly associated with Berlin than the familiar binary. The first and most obvious is that Berlin almost always summarized his own position in the terms of the monism/pluralism dichotomy. But given his story of dialectic, why did he do so? One of the reasons was surely that while Berlin held that the most dangerous legacy of the Counter-

[55] "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," CTH, 200.
[56] "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," CTH, 206.

Enlightenment was fascism, he considered communism to be a straightforward descendent of the Enlightenment and its rationalism. Given his own Russian background, the degree to which his experiences with Russian writers and poets shaped his own politics, and above all his view that it was communism much more than fascism that presented the greatest danger to freedom during his lifetime, the scientific rationalism he associated with modern monism presented a greater danger than the irrationalism against which it revolted. The battle for fascism was won; the battle with communism was ongoing.

But there was, I want to suggest, a second reason Berlin generally offered such a misleading and simplified shorthand for his argument. The challenge to Enlightenment rationalism offered by Counter-Enlightenment thinkers and above all Herder offered a framework for Berlin's own Jewish politics and the Zionism he embraced and defended throughout his long life. While the monist/pluralist dichotomy offered a sturdy scaffold for that politics, the story of dialectic I've been describing left that Jewish politics and that Zionism in a much more ambiguous and precarious position. If pluralism is the source not only of an attentiveness to belonging but of a celebration of will that tilts into a nihilist rejection of reason, then Zionism cannot but appear as both necessary for Jewish freedom and a grave threat to that freedom. As we'll see in Chapter 3, Berlin did acknowledge and attempted to navigate this tension in his reflections on both Zionism and nationalism. But in general, he only implicitly suggested that pluralism might descend into its own particular horrors – and when he did he almost always described those dangers as reflecting a tilt back into monism.

While the above account – in which an Enlightenment account of reason culminates in a violent reaction against the idea of reason itself – is not often associated with Isaiah Berlin, it is one frequently attributed to Leo Strauss. Just as for Berlin, Strauss was sympathetic to those who rebelled against Enlightenment conceptions of reason because he found those conceptions deficient

when it came to the nature and power of Jewish difference. And like Berlin, Strauss worried over the implications of the rebellion to which he was attracted. Yet Strauss was not a Russian Jew. He was a German one whose most formative years were spent under the Weimar Republic and who left Germany just before that Republic collapsed and the Nazis took power. To Strauss, the inability of German liberalism to withstand the fascist rebellion proved the definitive political fact of his life. The weakness of that liberalism led Strauss to a much more damning indictment of "modern rationalism," in part because he was even more drawn to the rebellion, and more horrified by its consequence, than was Isaiah Berlin.

Modernity's Waves

In a great many writings, Leo Strauss told a story quite similar to the one summarized above. Like Berlin, Strauss argued that the ascendance of a conception of reason distinctive of Enlightenment provoked a rebellion against reason so understood. And like Berlin, he had a tendency to rotate the cast of the drama. Throughout his long career he amended his view as to which thinker set the whole machine in motion: from Spinoza (the subject of his first full length book in 1930) to Hobbes (the subject of his second, published in 1936) to Machiavelli, who plays the part in Strauss's works after his 1952 *Natural Right in History*. In this chapter I am interested in the broad strokes of the story more than its specifics, and for that purpose the concise narrative Strauss offered in his 1975 "Three Waves of Modernity" is particularly helpful.[57] "Three Waves" is a scant twenty pages, but it presents a dense summation of arguments Strauss had worked out over the previous decades.[58]

[57] Leo Strauss, "Three Waves of Modernity," in Hilail Gildin, ed. *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays By Leo Strauss* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989). Hereafter referred to as IPP.
[58] The main argument of "Three Waves," although with slightly different central figures, is elaborated extensively in *Natural Right and History* and *What is Political Philosophy*.

The modern age, Strauss held, was inaugurated with a rejection of the basic framework of political philosophy as it had been constructed since antiquity. To the classics, the achievement of the best political regime relied on chance. According to Aristotle, for example, the best regime could not be established without the best people, a matter which no ruler on their own could bring into existence. To the classics, Strauss explained, what had always limited the possibility of achieving "the best regime" was "human material," the simple fact that human beings were flawed and generally corrupt. Machiavelli declared that the obstacle could be overcome because that material could be transformed.[59] In declaring what Aristotle found to be impossible only difficult, Machiavelli according to Strauss marked the launch of modernity.

Machiavelli overcame the obstacle, according to Strauss, by lowering the goal. Once social and political stability was recognized as the purpose of politics, human beings could be molded in order to achieve success. Politics no longer required any conception of the good, Strauss suggested, only the guarantee of survival. This revolution transformed the meaning of both virtue and morality. Rather than naming characteristics that accorded with nature or the will of God, Machiavelli held that virtue existed "exclusively for the sake of the commonwealth."[60] And if virtue is not possible outside political society, then morality was not possible outside political society. If this were the case, it followed that political society was not subject to any moral authority beyond itself. After all, "political society cannot be established and preserved by staying within the limits of morality, for the simple reason that the effect of the condition cannot precede the cause or condition."[61] If morality required the existence of the city, then morality must be determined by the city.

On one hand, this amounted to a radical inflation of human capacity. After all, the best regime was now declared possible. According to Machiavelli, "chance can be conquered, or corrupt matter

[59] "Three Waves of Modernity," IPP, 85.
[60] "Three Waves of Modernity," IPP, 86.
[61] "Three Waves of Modernity," IPP, 87.

can be transformed into incorrupt matter." Yet because the telos of politics was now survival rather than any particular conception of the good, the substance of "corrupt" was no longer sin or immorality, but only that which threatened the commonwealth. By simultaneously raising the capacity of what human effort might be expected to achieve while lowering the goals of that achievement, Machiavelli offered a solution to what Strauss termed "the political problem." Rather than the question of how or whether a truly just regime might be achieved, Machiavelli according to Strauss "guaranteed the solution of the political problem because a) the goal is lower, i.e. in harmony with what most men actually desire and b) chance can be conquered." The "political problem" became merely a "technical problem."[62] To Strauss, this revolution marked the dawn of the modern age.

Isaiah Berlin had a radically different reading of Machiavelli, whom he read as a pluralist who, in proposing a political virtue in radical disagreement with Christian virtue, suggested the fundamental incommensurability between different ways of life.[63] These differences in interpretation are crucial for their respective constructive projects, but as much as their interpretations took Machiavelli to represent opposite sides of their dialectic, Strauss's reading confirms the point Berlin insisted upon in his summary of "Enlightenment." To use Berlin's words, Strauss considered Machiavelli to inaugurate modernity by declaring that the "the ideal of creating a wholly just, wholly virtuous, wholly satisfied society was…no longer utopian."[64]

Strauss held that two subsequent developments beyond Machiavelli were necessary to transform reason into what he took to be its distinctly modern iteration, both of which bring Strauss's view of modernity closer to Berlin's. The first was the scientific revolution, through which science came to be seen not as a means of revealing nature but as a mechanism by which to conquer it. "The

[62] "Three Waves of Modernity," IPP, 87.
[63] See "The Originality of Machiavelli," in PSM.
[64] "The Counter-Enlightenment," ATC, 4. See Note 7, above.

purpose of science [was] reinterpreted," wrote Strauss. It was now "*propter potential*, for the relief of man's estate, for the conquest of nature, for the maximum control, the systemic control of the natural condition of human life."[65] According to this view, "nature is the enemy, a chaos to be reduced to order; everything good is due to man's labor rather than to nature's gift: nature supplies only the almost worthless materials."[66]

The second development was a more complete separation of politics from any appeal to nature, which Machiavelli accomplished but which "acquired its full force only when that connection was restored" with Hobbes. As against Machiavelli, to Hobbes the goal of political life was the same as it was for the classics: the achievement of a regime that accorded with nature. But Hobbes redefined nature to entail nothing more than the satisfaction of material self-interest and physical self-preservation. To Hobbes nature "came to be understood primarily in terms of the right of self-preservation as distinguished from any obligation or duty — a development in the substitution of the rights of man for natural law (nature replaced by law, law replaced by right)." Through Hobbes, argued Strauss, "we arrive at the view that universal affluence and peace is the necessary and sufficient condition of perfect justice." Just as for Machiavelli, for Hobbes "the moral and political problem" of politics was merely "a technical problem." Through the redefinition of nature, modern politics found its "natural" purpose in securing safety and security. Through its redefinition of science, it found its means: through rational scientific inquiry, nature could be conquered and manipulated to ensure that goal's achievement.

Rousseau inaugurated the second wave, by protesting against Machiavelli and Hobbes' dramatic lowering of the sight of politics. Rousseau assailed the corruption and degradation and cynicism of modern political life and lamented the loss of virtue as celebrated by the ancients. But Rousseau

[65] "Three Waves of Modernity," IPP, 88.
[66] "Three Waves of Modernity," IPP, 90.

could not effectively reclaim the aspirations discarded by the first wave, because nature was not something to which Rousseau could point as a destination, but only — like Hobbes — as a source. For Rousseau, nature represented a lost realm of harmony, peace, and easy compassion; but it was not a realm to which any return was possible. Society, however free and however virtuous, was a condition of bondage. That bondage could be legitimate or illegitimate depending on whether the laws were a matter of general will or despotism. But insofar as they were a matter of general will, there was no reason to evaluate them in light of "any substantive consideration, to any consideration of what man's nature, his natural perfection, requires."[67] The "ought" to which classical philosophy had pointed was reduced to the "is" of whatever it was the general will declared. This process reached its culmination, Strauss held, with Kant. To Kant, it is only in choosing what is universal according to reason that one is free. With this claim, Strauss suggested, "reason replaces nature" as the arbiter and aim of human life.[68]

Together, the first and second waves dramatically expanded the powers of reason while drastically limiting the purpose of those powers. On one hand, there is nothing authoritative beyond reason or superior to it; to speak of such a possibility is either to state the obvious (all we can know is what we know by reason) or to blaspheme against the dignity of man. On the other, the only purpose that reason serves is to make life easier, to enable the pursuit of pleasure, security, and safety. Reason has been made an all-powerful king, but a king that rules over arid ground.

This is a rule, Strauss suggested, that asks for revolt. But any revolt was now necessarily a revolt against reason. According to Strauss, Nietzsche would lead the rebellion. To Nietzsche, Rosseau was correct about the nature of society, but incorrect about the nature of nature. Human experience was proven to be experience in history, but that history had no telos. There was, therefore, no possibility

[67] "Three Waves of Modernity," IPP, 92.
[68] "Three Waves of Modernity," IPP, 92.

of peace and happiness in practice nor in theory. Once that definitive aim had been rejected then all that was left was history as such, a history without aim or purpose. Ideals that had once had their support in either God or nature or reason or in progressive history, now had no support whatsoever. As such, human history was necessarily "tragic" – it pointed to a destination it knew could not and did not exist.[69] As Strauss concluded the narrative, Nietzsche's "historical insight destroys all known ideals."[70]

If this is the case, then "all ideals are the outcome of human creative acts, of free human projects that form that horizon in which specific cultures are possible." Those who understand this truth recognize that freedom is nothing more than will-to-power, the power to create new realities and new ideals. To Strauss, this can only mean "the will to overpower others."[71] If Rousseau's natural man is compassionate, and Kant's natural man rational, Nietzsche's natural man is cruel. It was this final wave, to Strauss, that provided the intellectual scaffold for fascism. While Nietzsche is no more at fault for the rise of fascism than Rousseau was for Jacobinism, Strauss notes, this means that "he is as much responsible for fascism as Rousseau was for Jacobinism."[72]

The story completes in much the same fashion as did Berlin's narrative described above. The ideals of human reason launched by what Berlin called Enlightenment and Strauss described as modernity's "first wave" lead to an ethic in which the only values considered valid are the ones created through the strength of one's own individual character or culture. Just as for Isaiah Berlin, the history of modern thought to Strauss was shaped by dialectic: reason is declared sovereign only to be defeated by the soldiers it has armed. The question was then whether reason could escape the slide into irrational celebration of the will. Strauss was in general far less convinced than Berlin that

[69] "Three Waves of Modernity," IPP, 94.
[70] "Three Waves of Modernity," IPP, 96.
[71] "Three Waves of Modernity," IPP, 97.
[72] "Three Waves of Modernity," IPP, 98.

it could.[73] The great difficulty, Strauss insisted, was that "the critique of modern rationalism or of the modern belief in reason by Nietzsche cannot be dismissed or forgotten." The power and success of the revolt was, Strauss concluded, "the deepest reason for the crisis of liberal democracy."[74] Strauss is well known for his argument that this crisis can be addressed only by returning to a classical conception of philosophy. In the chapters to come I'll pursue that argument more thoroughly. But that turn to the classical tradition can only be understood as a response not only to the success of the revolt against reason but also to the power of its attraction – an attraction that Strauss felt as much as Isaiah Berlin, and for similar reason.

The most obvious clue to the force and nature of this attraction was Strauss's reflections in a frequently quoted letter to Karl Löwith, in which he confessed that "Nietzsche so dominated and charmed me between my 22nd and 30th years that I literally believed everything I understood of him."[75] The admission is jarring, given Strauss's eventual description of Nietzsche as providing at least partial intellectual scaffold for Nazism. But it is not coincidental that Strauss marks the end of his fascination with the year 1930, and that its period corresponds to precisely those years in which Strauss was immersed in an adamant defense of political Zionism. The nature of that defense, and Strauss's eventual distance from Zionism are the subject of Chapter 4 of this dissertation. What I want to draw attention to in the remainder of this one is the close resonance between the rebellion against reason that Strauss identified as reflective of modernity's "third wave" and the indictment of the liberal solution to the Jewish question that drew Strauss, like Berlin, towards Zionism.

The Attractions of Nihilism

[73] This narrative of inevitability is, to state the obvious, one that can be challenged. For one of the more persuasive challenges to it, see Robert B. Pippin, "The Modern World of Leo Strauss," *Political Theory* 20, no. 3 (1992).
[74] "Three Waves of Modernity," IPP, 98. There, Pippin focuses on Strauss's reading of Rousseau.
[75] "Correspondence of Karl Löwith and Leo Strauss," George Elliot Tucker, trans. *Independent Journal of Philosophy/Unabhängige Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 5/6 (1998), 183.

In late February of 1941, a year after he arrived in New York, Leo Strauss gave a lecture to the weekly faculty seminar at the New School for Social Research, a reading group comprised of fellow refugee intellectuals who had found a home at the institute.[76] At the time of the lecture, "German Nihilism," France had just fallen to the Germans and the United States was still almost a year away from entering the war. The fate of "German nihilism" and the political movement to which it gave rise was far from decided.

Strauss's main argument in the lecture was that German nihilism did not seek destruction for the sake of destruction, but destruction of an order deemed incapable of morality. That order was declared immoral by those who rejected it because it was seen as nothing more than a "meeting ground" for pleasure-seekers and profit. In such a world, the only virtue was self-interest and acquisition — and this was no virtue at all. According to the nihilist response, only a life oriented towards sacrifice and duty could be morally serious. The heart of this passion was not, Strauss insisted, love of war. It was, rather, love of duty. German nihilism was an attack on reason, but only as a battle in war against a way of life that seemed to have destroyed the possibility of obligation, sacrifice, and courage.[77]

This account of nihilism is obviously indebted to Nietzsche, who in journal entries collected by his sister and published the year after he died as *The Will to Power* declared that "nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals."[78] More precisely, as Nietzsche described it, nihilism represented the ultimate destination of one particular value, "the Christian-moral" one. Christianity produced nihilism, according to Nietzsche, because Christianity could not help but produce a revolt against its own morality. Its commitment to truthfulness, he argued, nurtured a rebellion against the interpretation of the world and of history upon which Christian

[76] Strauss, "German Nihilism," *Interpretation* (Spring 1999), Vol. 26 (3), 352-378.
[77] Ibid., 365.
[78] Fredrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1968), 7.

morality relied. Nietzsche succinctly summarized the consequence of this process of self-destruction: the Christian doctrine that "God is Truth" descended into the "fanatical faith 'All is False.'"[79] Once that interpretation has come apart, all claims to value unravel along with it. Nihilism meant, in short, that the "highest values devaluate themselves."

But there was opportunity to be found in the crisis. To be sure, conceded Nietzsche, the first response upon recognition of the collapse of meaning was pessimism, but this was only a "preliminary form of nihilism."[80] This was soon followed by fury and anger, as the pessimist came to recognize that "a soul that longs to admire and revere has wallowed in the idea of some supreme form of domination and administration." All the interpretations and histories and grand narratives of moral purpose are revealed as only one or another versions of what Nietzsche called "monism" – a "whole that is infinitely superior to him," and "to which he had been devoted." According to the logic of monism, the soul's "own value as an individual had only been recognized and known through the value of the greater whole to which he had been subject." But it turns out that "he conceived such a whole in order to be able to believe in his own value."[81] Once that whole can be recognized as a fiction, that value can be reclaimed without its dependence on a lie. Nihilism is therefore a condition for rebirth. The soul realizes that "there is no grand unity in which the individual could immerse himself." And "having reached this standpoint, one grants the reality of becoming as the *only* reality." In forcing a recognition that one's value does not depend on anything beyond oneself, nihilism reveals itself as "an ideal of the highest degree of powerfulness of the spirit." But it is not an ideal with determinate content – it is an ideal that celebrates the power of rebellion, in and for itself, irrespective of what is expressed. This is what makes it nihilistic: it is a negative, but it negates a morality declared as bankrupt.

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[79] Ibid., 7.
[80] Ibid., 11.
[81] Ibid., 12.

Nietzsche's description of the debilitating fictions of "monism" calls to mind of course Isaiah Berlin, and there are clear echoes of Nietzsche's account in the romantic revolt as Berlin narrated it. Strauss borrowed the form of Nietzsche's argument much more explicitly, but like Berlin held that it was not so much "Christian-morality" against which German nihilism rebelled but a particular version of society that had declared sacrifice and courage as dangerous passions that only hindered the smooth functioning of society. Strauss termed this society against which nihilism revolted "civilization," which he defined as "the conscious culture of humanity, i.e. of that which makes a human being a human being, i.e. the conscious culture of reason." The key here is "conscious" – civilization is that culture which takes itself to be reasonable, that takes its own culture to be cultured. Civilization, so understood, understands itself as opposed to tradition, for while tradition bases itself on what is received, "civilization" "has a natural basis which it finds" by virtue of its own powers and achievements. In short, "civilization" is a product of modernity that considers itself a product of modernity; it views its own commitments as following from universal commitments drawn from the conclusions of reason, and therefore as an advance upon those "uncivilized" cultures of the past. Nihilism took root in Germany and not, Strauss suggested, in Japan, because Germany had a civilization worth rejecting. "I wonder," Strauss asks, "whether the fact that Western man lost much of his former pride, a quiet and becoming pride, of his being civilized, is not at the bottom of the present lack of resistance to nihilism."[82]

Strauss's support for such "civilization," however, is hardly straightforward. As noted above, the notion that a society looks only to itself for its values – the mark here of civilization – was to Strauss central to modern political thought as he would come to describe it thirty years later as inaugurated by Machiavelli. As Strauss summarized it already at the New School, the political aim of the Enlightenment was "to lower the moral standards, the moral claims, which previously had been

[82] "On German Nihilism," 365.

made by all responsible teachers, but to take better care than those earlier teachers had done, for the putting into practice, into political and legal practice, of the rules of human conduct."[83] This deflation was the mark of "civilization," and it was against this "civilization" that German nihilism rebelled.

In opposition to "civilization's" conflation of the morally good with self-interest, German philosophers insisted on the tension between the two and on the necessity for a morality of self-sacrifice. And at no place was the difference between nobility and interest, between duty and desire, more obvious than on the battlefield. For "courage," Strauss suggested, "is the only unambiguously un-utilitarian value." This is what provoked nihilisms' ultimate embrace of violence as the condition for its "morality." As much as this philosophy tended towards a sympathy with fascism, its protest against the French Enlightenment's "debasement of morality" was an intellectual testament that sounded "to the lasting honor of Germany."[84] Given this argument, some readers have found in the lecture grounds for Strauss's support for fascism.[85] The trouble with such readings is that they mistake attraction for endorsement. Strauss was indeed attracted to the nihilist revolt, but it was the force of that attraction alongside the obvious calamity to which it led that proved the weakness of that "civilization." This simultaneous indictment and attraction is evident in the essay that was the lecture's clear precursor, Strauss's 1932 review of the book that was the obvious representative of "German nihilism" as he described it, Carl Schmitt's *On the Political*.

In his review of that work, Strauss offered an artful summary of Schmitt's main argument. "The political," Schmitt famously argued, is defined by the conflict between "friends" and "enemies." Liberalism, however, seeks to eradicate such distinctions in the name of stability and peace based on

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[83] Ibid., 371.
[84] Ibid.
[85] See for example, William H. F. Altman, "Leo Strauss on "German Nihilism:" Learning the Art of Writing," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68, no. 4 (2007).

the universal and inherent equality of all. But this eradication is a ruse, a hypocrisy, for "liberalism has thus killed not the political but only understanding of the political, sincerity regarding the political."[86] What liberalism denies is not the political as such but only recognition of it. Against the "myth" of liberalism, the conflict that defines the political is perpetual and incessant, the only question is whether it is acknowledged honestly.

Schmitt, Strauss summarized, held that only conflict could provide a cure for this hypocrisy. Liberalism declared that self-preservation was the paramount purpose of politics; as such, self-sacrifice must be by definition excluded from the political virtues and interpreted as a political vice.[87] For Schmitt, this is tantamount to a politics without purpose. "What the opponents of the political want," Strauss wrote in summary of the position, "is ultimately tantamount to the establishment of a world of entertainment, a world of amusement, a world without seriousness."[88] Schmitt rejected this "civilization" because he saw "in the threatened status of the political a threat to the seriousness of human life. The affirmation of the political is ultimately nothing other than the affirmation of the moral."[89] This is the exact point Strauss would make nine years later in his description of the German nihilist's criticism of liberalism's dehumanizing amorality.

To Strauss, however, while Schmitt was correct in his condemnation of liberalism for its amoral character, his turn to "the political" as defined by friends against enemies only replicated the problem it sought to address. "He who affirms the political as such," wrote Strauss, "respects all who want to fight; he is just as *tolerant* as the liberals - but with the opposite intention: whereas the liberal respects and tolerates all 'honest' convictions so long as they merely acknowledge the legal

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[86] Leo Strauss, "Notes on Carl Schmitt," in Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt & Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 92.
[87] This is a point that Strauss would emphasize was a particular innovation of Hobbes' theory of the social contract, which is why Strauss considered Hobbes the founder of modern liberalism. See for example NRH, 166-170.
[88] Ibid., 112
[89] Ibid., 113

order, peace, as sacrosanct, he who affirms the political as such respects and tolerates all 'serious' convictions, that is, all decisions oriented to the real possibility of war." Schmitt remained beholden to a horizon that deflated all normative or moral distinctions. The only difference was that liberalism rendered those distinctions private to lower their stakes and avoid violence while Schmitt's nationalist rendering of the "political" made them public to raise their stakes and ensure violence. Either way, normative evaluations are vacated from a politics defined and confined to process – legal process according to liberalism and violent war according to "the political."

In light of the earlier essay, the problem with German nihilism as Strauss described it was that sacrifice as such – whether to nation, or to people – was not in and of itself a morality. German nihilism was a symptom and not a cure, a cause without a content. Liberalism and nihilism both shared the same fundamental flaw. The former replaced the moral standards of politics with the aspiration to create universal structures that might protect individual self-interest, while the latter raised those standards to only one, self-sacrifice. Both evaded the question of the content of those standards. It was this essential similarity that, to Strauss, explained why liberalism was so helpless in the face of fascism. Against a morality of violent amorality, liberalism had only the morality of amoral proceduralism.

Those readers who find in Strauss's reflections in the lecture on nihilism or his review of Schmitt some sympathy with fascism miss this rather central point. But those who defend Strauss against the charge of sympathy mistake the degree to which he found Schmitt's criticism of liberalism both compelling and correct. As several readers of Strauss have suggested, Strauss found in Schmitt's indictment of liberalism a powerful summary of his own analysis of the Jewish question, an analysis that as a young man had led him to Zionism.[90] Given Schmitt's career as a noted Nazi jurist, this is a

[90] "It was from Carl Schmitt," Steven B. Smith notes, "that [Strauss} found the theoretical framework within which to locate his Zionism." Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2. Smith goes on: "Strauss learned that conflict, not just between individuals, but between states and

provocative claim. But as noted above in the discussion of Berlin, those who rejected the universalizing premises of "French rationalism" were also the fathers of German antisemitism. In finding in such views resource for his own indictment of the Enlightenment, we've seen how Isaiah Berlin followed along the lines of classical Zionists who saw in antisemitism the logical contours of modern political life. Berlin, however, never explicitly acknowledged this troubling resonance. Strauss, on the other hand, did not hesitate before the most extreme implication of an argument. If antisemitism most forcefully pointed to the failure of liberalism to respond to the Jewish question, then it was from antisemitism that Jews would have to learn.

Strauss would return to this provocative point throughout his earliest published writings. In one of his first pieces, a short editorial from 1923, he condemned Jewish "apologetics" as unable to recognize "the best influence that antisemitism could exercise on our national life:" a sober assessment of the cost of emancipation.[91] According to the standard claims of leading anti-Semites, "existence-as-citizens (*Staatsuburger-Dasein)* demands loyalty to the German state as well as (although this may sound high-flown and impolitic) love of the German people." Legal equality, therefore, requires "repeated express assurances by the protagonists of our emancipation that we maintain no national connection other than to the German nation." To Strauss, this was the "formula" of emancipation, and it was both logical and appropriate. Moreover, it had Biblical precedent and Jewish scriptural authority. Strauss offered as epigraph to his short essay a reference to "Joshua 9:7." The Biblical verse explains the efforts of the Hivites, one of the peoples conquered by Joshua, to seek a treaty with Israel. The verse cited by Strauss reads: "The men of Israel replied to the Hivites,

peoples, is the core of political life." Smith continues to suggest that through Schmitt, Strauss came to "an awareness of the illusions of liberal cosmopolitanism" and with it a conviction that "the fate of Jews could not be entrusted to either benevolent governments or the norms of the international community." Aside from the significant point that Strauss's reading of Schmitt is an indictment, this interpretation also rests on a faulty timeline: Strauss was active in Zionist circles and writing prior to his 1929 review of Schmitt, and never again after.

[91] "A Note on the Discussion on 'Zionism and Anti-Semitism,'" in EW, 79. Originally published as "Anmerkung zur Diskussion über 'Zionismus und Antisemitismus,'" *Jüdische Rundscha*u 28, nos 83/84 (28 September 1923): 501.

'But perhaps you live among us; how then can we make a pact with you?'" Because the Hivites were not foreigners but instead residents of the land of Israel, Joshua could not consider them as anything other than a foreign threat. As framing for Strauss's argument, the lesson is clear: those Germans who do not trust Jewish loyalty are no different from Joshua, and those Jews who sought to develop a distinctive Jewish politics should embrace the same lesson.[92]

This insistence on Jewish foreignness is in substance quite close to Herder's view that Jews were fundamentally alien to Europe. Strauss, however, in keeping with what he would later describe as the distinctive element of "German Nihilism" held that recognition of this difference was not simply appropriate analysis of social reality but a moral demand. Strauss's most provocative argument along these lines was his 1924 article on one of the most notorious founders of modern German antisemitism, Paul de Lagarde – a figure who, Strauss wrote, could help the Jews understand themselves and their present condition.[93] Given the ferocity of Lagarde's antisemitism, this was a somewhat shocking promise. But to Strauss, Lagarde helped illuminate the moral commitment behind the Zionist rejection of liberalism.

Much of the essay is dedicated to Strauss's explication of the nature of Lagarde's anti-Judaism. To Lagarde, Judaism was quite simply a death-force. Lagarde framed this claim through a particular reading of Christian history. To Lagarde, religion properly understood was a creative force that provoked perpetual transformation and improvement. Such a religion was paradigmatically represented in the life and teaching of Jesus, who radically reimagined the nature of human community. But this teaching had been suffocated by the Gospels and the New Testament. Under Paul's influence, Lagarde argued, the early Church transformed an emphasis on the unfolding of God's spirit in the world into a sanctification of Jesus's resurrection. This represented, to Lagarde,

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[92] EW, 73.

[93] Leo Strauss, "Paul de Lagarde," in EW, 90-101. Originally published in *Der Jude: Eine Monatsschrift* (Berlin) 8, no. 1 (January 1924): 8-15.

the Judaization of Christianity, as it was Jewish (as Strauss quoted Lagarde) "to regard as the object of religious feelings what happened once instead of what always happens anew, what is past instead of present."[94] Judaism therefore represented nothing less than a rejection of "reality," a flight from the energies and forces of life itself, a veneration of "law over spirit," and a fetish for "the finished matter before the process." To Lagarde, as Strauss summarized him, "Judaism is the anti-Christian principle pure and simple."[95]

This argument is obviously anti-Jewish in the extreme, but it was hardly novel. It ran quite closely to the position Kant developed in his *Religion Within the Bounds of Mere Reason*. There, Kant had distinguished between a purely rational faith that was accessible through reason and valid universally and a "historical" faith that depended upon revelation. Kant held that the former was represented in a "pure faith" exemplified in a thoroughly rational and rationalized protestant Christianity. Historical faith, on the other hand, was paradigmatically represented by Judaism, which as a tradition of law based on a specific historical moment was authoritative only to those who chose to believe in the event of revelation. To Kant, historical progress of Christianity's journey towards pure faith was quite simply a matter of its eventual escape from its Jewish origins.[96] Exactly as for Lagarde, to Kant Judaism was the "anti-Christian principle pure and simple."

Lagarde, however, amended Kant in two ways. First, he moved up the moment of capture. Whereas Kant had sought to rescue the gospels from what he took to be the "Judaizing" influence of the official church structure, Lagarde accused Paul of "Judaizing" Christianity in the earliest gospels. Second and more importantly, while Lagarde borrowed Kant's understanding of Judaism as fossilized adherence to historical moment, he rejected Kant's understanding of "pure faith." As

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[94] Ibid., 93
[95] Ibid., 94
[96] For a helpful and insightful explication of Kant on this point, see J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), Chapter 2.

against a universally accessible and authoritative religion available to all through the faculties of reason, Lagarde declared the religious principle to be perpetual and incessant change, transformation and creation. While Kant's religion granted authority to the liberal state and its universality, to Lagarde that state represented the latest and most powerful iteration of "Judaism's" corrosive influence on Western thought and life.

In its veneration for the power of the law as a reflection of eternal and static truth, the liberal state represented nothing less than the triumph of the deadening force of Judaism over the creative force of life. To Lagarde, as Strauss summarizes him, the "Jewish spirit has gained mastery over Germany; for liberalism is nothing but secularized Judaism. It too is characterized by a superstitious belief in the rigid, objective, unique and isolated fact." It is therefore "only through a Jewification (*Verjudung*) of the German spirit" that emancipation is even possible. 'Assimilation' as Jews is therefore a contradiction in terms; assimilation is only possible into a state that has been Judaized. To Lagarde therefore, Judaization of Germanism could only be combated by rejecting the liberal idea that the highest principles of justice resided in the law and the state that enforced that law. It was through the nation, and not through the law, that the spirit of individuals found expression. The state was but a garment for the body that was the German nation. And any self-respecting nation, according to Lagarde, recognizes the superiority of itself over others. Therefore the state, if need be, should not hesitate to conquer others if such violence is deemed necessary for the protection or even the growth of the nation.

These positions represent an apex of modern German antisemitism and would come to exert powerful influence on Nazi thought.[97] So what could German Jews possibly learn from them? "In reviewing these demands," Strauss wrote in the essay's concluding lines, "one does well to be clear

[97] For an extensive examination of de Lagarde and his influence on Nazi Ideology, see Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of German Ideology* (University of California Press: 1961), Part One.

about the fact that they are supported by a radical moralism." It was a radical moralism that, Strauss held, hailed from Fichte and that "almost touch[es]" the "radical moralism of the Zionist writers and politicians who stand under entirely different circumstances." But this conclusion only seems to reframe the question. How did Lagarde offer a radical moralism? And how did it "almost touch" that of the Zionists?

Strauss wasn't explicit on the answers to these questions in the early article, but his rationale is not hard to decipher in light of his later reflections on Schmitt and German nihilism. In the 1924 article, Strauss quoted Lagarde's indictment that "modern Judaism always sails under false colors." It is always "political-apologetic," claiming only those aspects of Judaism that align with modern liberal culture: monotheism, a lack of dogmas, and tolerance. To Lagarde, however, monotheism is hardly distinct to Judaism, an absence of dogma is a "moral deficiency," and tolerance reflects a "lack of seriousness; every religion is exclusive."[98] Strauss didn't name him, but the most obvious representative of this view was Mendelssohn and all those that stood in his legacy. It was this Judaism that Zionism rejected. Lagarde helped show that such a rejection was not only a practical response to ongoing discrimination or persecution, but a moral claim on behalf of a Zionism that refused accommodation to the principles of liberalism.[99]

When Strauss condemned Schmitt's "morality" as vacant of moral content, he was implicitly indicting the "moralism" of both Lagarde and his own earlier Zionism. As noted, those who find in Strauss's review an affirmation of Schmitt's position fail to appreciate the force of that criticism. But those who defend Strauss against the charge of sympathy understate the degree to which Strauss saw

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[98] EW, 95.

[99] For an alternative reading of Strauss's review of Lagarde, see Leora Batnitzky, "Leo Strauss's Disenchantment with Secular Democracy," *New German Critique* No. 94 (2005). There, Batnitzky argues that Strauss "revaluated" Lagarde's condemnation of Jewish law against Christian spirit, affirming that law against Christian "spirituality." While Batnitzky is undoubtedly correct as far as the mature Strauss, I read his mature thought to follow upon a break from the views articulated in his 20s. I explore this break further in Chapter 3.

in Schmitt a mirror of the Zionism to which he had been dedicated over the previous decades. When this early cluster of works is read together, however, it is clear to what extent Strauss's story of reason's descent into irrationality was autobiographical. He had been attracted to the revolt, both as a philosopher and as a Jew. As that revolt metastasized into fascism, he determined that the rebellion was as morally vacant as was the liberalism it opposed. As we'll see, this led him to abandon the political Zionism of his youth, but his life's work would be shaped by that initial attraction, as he sought an alternative beyond the dialectic he diagnosed – both for modern political thought generally and for a Jewish politics beyond a horizon defined by it.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have suggested that both Berlin and Strauss told a narrative of modern politics and philosophy in which reason's dramatic elevation produced a rebellion against reason so understood, and eventually led to the collapse of that reason. Alongside this philosophical narrative was a political arc, according to which liberalism's aspiration to a universal legal framework in which individual rights might be protected provoked a provoked a nationalist revolt. Both Berlin and Strauss, I have argued, identified Zionism with that revolt and were sympathetic to it because they agreed with the indictment of liberalism embedded in the Zionist argument. Implicit in that sympathy was a rejection of the terms of emancipation, whereby Jews were granted equal protection under the law in exchange for accepting a Judaism defined as a matter of individual conscience in accord with universal reason. Writing from the other side of the World Wars, the collapse of European liberalism, and the destruction of Europe's Jews, the promise of emancipation could not be perceived as anything other than bankrupt. Those Jewish thinkers who had pointed to the incoherence and limitations of the liberal response to the Jewish question had been proven tragically correct. Yet the nationalism which formed the framework for those same thinkers' Jewish politics

seemed, after the war, even more perilous to Jews and Judaism. The collapse of liberalism in Europe seemed to indict *both* of the dominant options for modern Jewish politics, even as that same collapse seemed to demonstrate the necessity of each. The Jewish experience therefore seemed to affirm the modern liberal order while exposing its failure.

Given the dialectic both described, their relationship to both that liberalism and that Zionism was bound to be ambivalent. It might seem odd to describe either Berlin or Strauss as "ambivalent" about either liberalism or Zionism, given their respective reputations – Berlin as one of the foremost liberals of the 20th century and a life-long Zionist, Strauss as a thinker who, whatever topic he addressed, is rarely described as "ambivalent." Yet the narratives of modernity that both described led each to a necessarily hesitant relationship to what they both took as the alternatives for Jewish life under the conditions of modernity. That hesitancy shaped not only their approach to Jewish politics, but to politics as a whole.

To Horkheimer and Adorno and others who wrote in the Marxist tradition, the dialectic could only be overcome by a new synthesis, by a break that would reconcile the contradictions of both modern capitalism and modern philosophy. To Strauss and Berlin, the fundamental error of modern philosophy was the idea of synthesis itself, the notion that alienation might be overcome by instantiating in political life truths uncovered in philosophy. This aspiration was shared by both the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment, and by all of modernity's Three Waves. What they all shared was the notion that the Jewish question could be, must be, and would be solved. But if modern thought was defined by a particular and novel conflation of philosophy and politics, the question the failure of modern politics provoked was whether the two could be separated. Could the synthesis that modern political philosophy had welded together be sundered? Isaiah Berlin's answer to this claim would provide one of the most famous and influential arguments on behalf of liberalism offered in the 20th century. Leo Strauss's own iteration would provide the framework for

his own widely influential criticism of that liberalism. Yet the extent of that disagreement obscures the degree to which the debate was shaped by shared concerns and shared aims. It is to that debate that we now turn.

Chapter Two

The Inevitability of Tragedy? The Isaiah Berlin-Leo Strauss Debate

Isaiah Berlin was fond of Leo Strauss. They met when Berlin was visiting the University of Chicago, and Berlin remembered Strauss with affection. But they had their disagreements. "He could not get me to believe in eternal, immutable, absolute values," Berlin recalled, "true for all men everywhere at all times, God-given Natural Law and the like." Strauss clung to such "absolutes," Berlin said, because he believed "in a faculty some call 'reason'…some faculty which gives infallible truth in answer to central questions of life." If there was some capacity to determine "absolute good and evil, right and wrong, directly perceived by means of a kind of a priori vision, a metaphysical eye – by the use of a Platonic rational faculty," it was an ability, Berlin sarcastically lamented, "which has not been granted to me."[1]

Despite his warm feelings, this was about as damning an intellectual indictment as he could have offered. Berlin, after all, is widely recognized for having spent much of his career assaulting the idea he summarized as Strauss's. Berlin was relentless in his criticism of what he termed "monism," or the "Platonic ideal:" the notion that "all genuine questions must have one true answer and only one," that there is a "dependable path towards the discovery of these truths," and that once discovered the solutions must "necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole."[2] Given that he spent his life assailing this concept, it's not terribly surprising that Berlin was not convinced of it on a campus visit.

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[1] Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London, UK: Halban, 1991), 32.
[2] These three principles provided the pillars for "monism" as Berlin defined it. He repeated them throughout his corpus. These quotes are from his 1988 "The Pursuit of the Ideal," PSM, 5.

Berlin's memory of the encounter is almost too on the nose to believe: Strauss, attempting to persuade Berlin of the permanence of "absolute" truth discoverable by reason; Berlin, resisting the pressure of Strauss's Platonic persuasions. Regardless of accuracy, the recollection succinctly captures what many take to be the essential positions of these two giants of 20th-century political thought. As those positions are generally summarized, Berlin is the pluralist who asserted that values are multiple and incommensurate while Strauss held that a politics built on such foundations could not justify its own commitments.

Among the writings which one might turn to support these familiar readings is Strauss's searing criticism of Isaiah Berlin. Penned three years after Berlin delivered the lecture that would make him famous, Strauss charged Berlin with offering in "Two Concepts of liberty" a liberalism that had "abandoned its absolutist basis and is trying to become entirely relativistic."[3] Although Strauss was among the earliest to raise the charge, this was a criticism that many would come to level at Berlin.[4] While Berlin never responded to Strauss's attack directly (he even implied, many years later, that he had not read it), he did continually insist that his pluralism was fundamentally distinct from relativism.[5] For both, the stakes of their disagreement could not have been higher. To each, the other represented fundamental errors in modern political thought that had paved the way for totalitarianism.

Given the fame of these two arguments and the stature of their respective advocates, it is somewhat surprising that no scholar has put the two into serious conversation. But there are

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[3] Leo Strauss, "Relatavism," in *Relatavism and the Study of Man*, ed. Helmut Schoeck and James W. Wiggins (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1961).

[4] Among other early readers that offered this criticism, see Gerald C. MacCallum, "Berlin on the Compatibility of Values, Ideals, and 'Ends'," *Ethics* 77 (1967) and Arnoldo Momigliano, "On the Pioneer Trail," *New York Review of Books* (1976). In more recent years the debate has revolved less around whether pluralism is equivalent to relativism than the more specific question of whether pluralism can recommend liberalism.

[5] Berlin insisted on the distinction in various places; for a particularly succinct summary of his argument, see the 1998 "My Intellectual Path," in *Isaiah Berlin, The Power of Ideas (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013)*, 14-15. For Berlin's comments that he had not read Strauss's criticism, see Jahanbegloo, 32.

reasons. First, the disagreement seems so obvious as to render any serious interrogation unnecessary. Moreover, given the obviousness of the dispute, the questions raised by each would appear to have been exhaustively debated in the literature on both. There are few 20th-century political thinkers that have generated more secondary literature than Isaiah Berlin and few questions have generated more pages than the question of whether Berlin's liberalism slides into relativism.[6] While many who have addressed the matter cite Strauss as a representative of the objection, addressing that objection doesn't seem to require more than a passing reference.[7]

As immense as is the literature on whether and how to draw a line between Berlin's pluralism and relativism, Strauss's argument remains more provocative than many more common versions of the charge. As it is generally framed, the issue is whether the liberal can recommend liberalism to others. If the negative liberty that liberalism protects is just one among various values, then how can the liberal assert its primacy?[8] It would seem that the liberal, as Robert Frost famously put it, "cannot take their own side in an argument." Yet as we've seen in the previous chapter, Strauss's chief worry in his reflections on modern political thought was that it drifted into nihilism as understood to entail both a rejection of common morality and a veneration of power for its own sake. In light of this concern, the problem with relativism according to Strauss was not chiefly that the relativist could not justify their own commitments, but that the relativist could not prevent the slide into nihilism.

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[6] Among the notable full-length books that address the matter include William A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); George Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London: Continuum, 2002), Maria Baghramian and Attracta Ingram, eds. *Plrualism: The Philosophy and Politics of Diversity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); and John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1994).

[7] Ella Myers has offered the most extensive engagement of the two thinkers in comparison, in her "From Pluralism to Liberalism: Rereading Isaiah Berlin." Even that comparison, however, is rather brief, as Myers only uses Strauss as set-up for her defense of Berlin from the charge of relativism. Ella Myers, "From Pluralism to Liberalism: Rereading Isaiah Berlin," *The Review of Politics* 72, no. 04 (2010). For an example of a defense of pluralism that mentions Strauss (through Alan Bloom) as characteristic of the charge of relativism and the appeal to "monism," see Steven Lukes, "Making Sense of Moral Conflict," in *Moral Conflict and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 19.

[8] For a helpful summary of this literature, see George Crowder, "Pluralism, Relativism, and Liberalism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin*, ed. Steven B. Smith and Joshua L. Cherniss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

This argument is almost entirely ignored in the literature on whether or not Berlin's pluralism amounts to relativism, including Strauss's own very brief criticism of Berlin's most famous essay. But Strauss extensively explored the relationship between pluralism and nihilism elsewhere, in his reflections on that figure that both he and Berlin took as the obvious predecessor to Berlin's own theory, Max Weber. In a crucial chapter in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss presented the argument that would provide the template for his criticism of Berlin. There, he held that the pluralist presented themselves as epistemologically humble but only affirmed the values of their own social environment while valorizing decision for its sake. The problem with pluralism was not that it was tantamount to relativism but that it encouraged unthinking conformity and degenerated into nihilism. This argument is more interesting than the more familiar accusation that pluralism is unable to justify its own commitments.

Strauss's turn to Weber, however, reveals an unlikely resonance between his position and Berlin's. As hostile as Strauss was towards Weber, he was in fundamental agreement with what he took to be the center of Weber's pluralism – an irreconcilable conflict between the claims of revelation and reason. In Weber's identification of that conflict, Strauss found concise expression of perhaps the central claim of his own political philosophy. That philosophy was not, counter to many familiar readings of Strauss, based on some immutable or eternal notion of justice discoverable by reason that might offer a framework for political life. Instead, it insisted that the great error of modern political thought was precisely the profoundly misguided notion that philosophy could discover truth that politics could then instantiate. All that philosophy can do, insisted Strauss, was clarify the perpetual problems of political life – and all that political philosophy could do was point towards the calamity that awaited those who sought final resolution to those perpetual problems.

This argument and Isaiah Berlin's are more similar to one another than is generally recognized. Both shared a worry over the dangers of modern rational utopianism and an insistence on the

essential limitations and imperfectability of political life. Both agreed that the greatest threat facing the contemporary world was the promise that conflict might be finally and fully overcome through reason. And both insisted that such ambition could only be chastened by recognizing that the most ultimate goods of human life are locked in a permanent tension that cannot be resolved according to reason. Where they disagreed was over what those "ultimate goods" were, and what it would take to recognize and to bear the permanence of the conflict among them.

This chapter will take us somewhat far afield from the questions of Jewish politics to which we'll return in Part Two of this dissertation. The dispute between Strass and Berlin did not revolve around Zionism or Jewish politics explicitly, but around liberalism, its fragility, and what it would take to protect it against modern dangers. But as we'll see in the chapters to come, the arguments that shaped their debate – over the nature of political life and its limits, and what it might take to accept those limits – emerged for both out of reflections on the modern Jewish condition. In order to see how and why this might be the case, and how their mature thought informs and was informed by their approach to the Jewish question, it is helpful to begin by exploring how each conceptualized those limits and why both insisted upon them.

In the first half of this chapter I explore the familiar challenge that Berlin's pluralism descends into relativism and his response to the charge. Doing so takes us through a summary of "Two Concepts," some of its famous conceptual difficulties, Strauss's critique of the lecture and Berlin's response. In that response, I argue, Berlin confirms the substance of Strauss's charge, which is not so much that his pluralism descends into relativism but that it rests on a human anthropology it is unwilling to admit. That claim takes us to an examination of that anthropology, which is indebted above all to Max Weber's claim that the modern condition is shaped by tragic loss. Strauss's reading of Weber and this view leads us to his claim that Weber's pluralism devolves first into conformity and then nihilism. Ultimately however, and in spite of the severity of his criticism, Strauss agrees

with what he takes as Weber's most fundamental point regarding the fundamental incommensurability of the most basic choice faced by human beings. Weber therefore helps us see the fundamental resonance between Berlin and Strauss's efforts to reconstruct political thought, even as his insistence on the inevitability of tragedy clarifies the nature of their disagreement.

The Paradox of Pluralism and the Challenge of Relativism

Isaiah Berlin's 1958 "Two Concepts of Liberty" might be the single most widely cited work of 20th century political thought, often named, along with John Rawls's 1971 *Theory of Justice*, as one of the two seminal texts of 20th century liberalism.[9] Berlin's delivery of the original lecture in 1958 made him one of the world's most famous public intellectuals, and 60 years later it continues to inspire debate.[10] The essay's ambition is difficult to overstate. Berlin attempted to salvage liberalism from what he concluded was a wreckage of its own making. As we've seen, to Berlin the catastrophes of 20th-century European politics – imperialism, genocide, world war – were a consequence of a misguided feature of Enlightenment thought, which he argued was defined by faith in reason, belief in progress, and aims of political perfectibility. In "Two Concepts," Berlin sought to replace this rational utopianism with a pluralism that he drew, in large part, from what he described as the "counter-enlightenment" revolt against that same universalism. Berlin attempted to fortify liberalism with weapons stolen from the armories of its enemies. It was the sort of philosophical and political synthesis that provokes thousands of pages of response.[11]

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[9] Adam Swift summarizes the influence in his textbook: 'if Rawl's *A Theory of Justice* is the most influential book of contemporary political philosophy, Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" is the most influential single essay." See Adam Swift, *Political Philosophy: A Beginner's Guide for Students and Politicians* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019).

[10] In a recent collection compiled to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the lecture, contributors suggest both that Berlin helped lay the philosophical groundwork for the neoliberal regime that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century and that he provides among the most philosophically compelling resources for anti-Imperialist politics. See Bruce Baum and Robert Nichols, eds. *Isaiah Berlin and the Politics of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[11] There is little sign that these pages will abate anytime soon (as this dissertation attests). For recent explorations, see Cherness Joshua L and Steven B. Smith, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

The lecture revolves around a now famous distinction, between what Berlin termed negative and positive liberty.[12] According to Berlin's formula, negative liberty protects freedom from constraint – from coercion or prohibitions that might restrict one's ability to act as one wishes.[13] Crucially, the protection of negative liberty is independent, for Berlin, of the character of the authority that offers that protection. As he puts it in "Two Concepts," "[t]he answer to the question 'Who governs me' is logically distinct from the question 'How far does government interfere with me?'"[14] In short, "negative liberty" is "concerned with the area of control, not its source."[15]

Positive liberty, on the other hand, "comes to light if we try to answer the question, not 'what am I free to do or be?' but 'By whom am I ruled?'" As a number of writers have noted, however, Berlin defined positive liberty with much less precision than he did negative.[16] At various times Berlin referred to positive liberty in very different ways: as the freedom to become a particular kind of person, to live under a particular regime, or to be ruled by particular kinds of people. What tied these definitions together for Berlin was that in all its versions "the 'positive' sense of the word liberty derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master."[17] If a self is to be

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[12] The notion that liberty is best conceptualized through a negative and a positive version is generally traced to Kant, who delineated between a negative freedom of independence from acting according to impulse, and a positive freedom of acting according to the moral law freely chosen through reason. This formulation of liberty as 'positive' and 'negative' continued into the 20th century and came to shape much political theory in the British Academy in the 1930s and 40s Berlin took Kant's formula and reversed the normative thrust of the definitions. For a history of the use of "negative" and "positive" freedom and Berlin's reworking of the definitions, see Joshua Cherniss, *A Mind and It's Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), Chapter 6.

[13] Following on John Stuart Mill, most liberal thinkers restrict liberty through what is known as the "harm" principle, which describes as free only those actions which do not restrict another person's liberty (I am not "free" to steal another's property). Berlin, however, offers a more extreme view, that negative freedom must allow one to do what one wants to do — however good or bad, however self-destructive or productive, however cruel or however just, and however much it may or may not restrict or expand others' liberty. For Berlin, then, anything that restricts the capacity to act — even if it is required for the exercise of others 'negative' freedom (say, prohibition on theft) diminishes individual "negative' liberty – although such prohibitions may increase "overall" negative freedom, when determined in the aggregate.

[14] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

[15] PSM, 203

[16] For a summary of this ambiguity and a helpful typology of "positive liberty" see the introduction to *Isaiah Berlin and the Politics of Freedom*, 6-7.

[17] PSM, 203.

mastered, Berlin noted, it must be mastered *by* someone or something – a someone or something acknowledged as superior, more worthy, more just, more reflective of one's "true" self. But in the name of encouraging a "false" self to overcome its flawed ways and discover its "true" manifestation, he suggested that positive liberty can easily justify all manner of coercion in the name of freedom. For this reason, positive freedom renders "it easy for me to conceive of myself as coercing others for their own sake, in their, not my interest."[18] By dictating that a better or superior self exists to which others must submit, positive freedom threatens the free choice that negative freedom holds as paramount.

This opposition is most readily associated with a religious or theological conception, and one might point to something like the Spanish Inquisition or the conquest of the Americas as obvious examples of how a certain version of a "true" self – the self that recognizes Jesus as the son of God – can be harnessed to justify all manner of brutality. In "Two Concepts," however, Berlin situates positive freedom squarely within the tradition of what he calls Enlightenment. According to Berlin, the Enlightenment's major figures – in his telling Spinoza, Locke, and Kant – all declared that human beings are free only if and when they operate according to reason. By such Enlightenment logic, so long as all human beings act according to reason, all human beings would choose to follow certain laws of behavior. According to this tradition, "a law which forbids me to do what I could not, as a sane being, conceivably wish to do is not a restraint of my freedom."[19] Berlin continues: "All forms of liberalism founded on a rationalist metaphysics are less or more watered-down versions of this creed."[20] In the previous chapter we saw how Berlin considered a revolt against this tradition both philosophically inevitable and politically catastrophic.

[18] PSM, 205.
[19] PSM, 220.
[20] PSM, 220.

In "Two Concepts," Berlin sought to inoculate liberalism against this rebellion by stripping it of this "rationalist metaphysics" and grounding it instead in pluralism. What such a pluralism recognized, he declared, was that in "the world that we encounter in ordinary experience…we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others."[21] Against all monisms which imagine that conflict can be eradicated from personal, social and political life, this pluralism "is truer, because it does, at least, recognize the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another."[22] As a consequence, the basic fact that "the necessity of choosing between absolute claims is…an inescapable characteristic of our human condition."[23] Because there is no one way to live well, and because human goals are in conflict, each person must be able to live as he or she determines it.[24]

The fame of "Two Concepts" is due, in large part, to its polemical power, delivered at the height of the Cold War. Berlin hardly mentions Marx, doesn't use the term communism at all, nor names the Soviet Union. But his argument reframes the Cold War not as a battle between two ideologies – individual rights on one side, solidarity and emancipation on the other – but as a battle between an

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[21] PSM, 239.
[22] PSM, 241.
[23] PSM, 239.
[24] This is not the only way to describe the link between pluralism and liberalism in Berlin's thought, and a number of writers have parsed the connection more precisely. George Crowder suggests that there are four different ways to characterize the relationship. The argument from "indeterminacy" suggests that because no value is obviously primary the choice between values should be protected so that each person can make it on their own; the argument from "necessity" suggests that because people must choose between plural values then that choice should be protected; the argument from human dignity holds that autonomous choice is part of what makes human beings human and should therefore be protected; the argument from anti-Utopianism takes liberalism as the most adequate form for a politics that recognizes political limitation. Crowder argues that each of these arguments is inadequate – the first because it makes the value of choice primary, a claim that pluralism seems to undermine, the second because it takes an explanatory claim as a normative one without justifying the leap, the third because it is not an argument anymore from pluralism but from a specific account of human dignity (which can easily be challenged by noting that autonomous choice is not a comprehensive account of human dignity) and the last because liberalism is not the only anti-Utopian model of political life. Crowder is correct on all these points, although I read them as much more closely related than he does. See Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 78-102.

ideology and that freedom which recognizes the danger of all ideologies.[25] Liberalism, according to Berlin's reconstruction, is the political tradition that recognizes, against all those political regimes which deny this fact through claiming the superiority of one way of life or another, that goods and values are plural.

While this argument helps explain the essay's influence, the piece has occasioned widespread debate within circles of political philosophy because of the philosophical dilemma at its center. As noted throughout the secondary literature, Berlin seems to present two arguments in substantial tension with each other. On one hand, he holds that negative liberty "is more humane [than positive] because it does not (as the system-builders do) deprive men, in the name of some remote, or incoherent, ideal, of much that they have found to be indispensable to their life as unpredictably self-transforming human beings."[26] For this reason, he insists, negative liberty is the "truer" form of freedom.[27] On the other hand, Berlin insists that positive liberty as much as negative represents "an ultimate value which, both historically and morally, has an equal right to be classed among the deepest interests of mankind."[28] So which is it? Is negative freedom the "truer" form against which positive is a constant temptation and threat, or are both positive and negative liberty different versions of freedom, both ultimate but in permanent tension with the other? The two positions provoke a paradox. The liberal who defends their liberalism based on the multiplicity and incommensurability of value seems unable to say why liberalism ought to be recommended at all. Either they insist on the primacy of liberalism and cease to be a pluralist, or they insist on pluralism

[25] For more on Berlin's argument within the broader trends of anti-Communist political thought, see Ian Shapiro and Alicia Steinmetz, "Negative Liberty and the Cold War" in Cherniss, Joshua L and Steven B. Smith, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
[26] PSM, 241.
[27] Ibid.
[28] PSM, 237.

and cease to be a liberal.[29] The issue has, to put it mildly, produced an enormous amount of literature.[30]

[29] One way to approach the trouble is to note that Berlin described goods as relevant at three different levels. At the level of culture, there are values that a society prizes such as economic success or honor or order or creative expression or innovation or tradition (in words he borrowed from Herder, Berlin often called these a society's "center of gravity"). At the political level, there are values such as equality, liberty, and solidarity. And then there are the various goods which an individual human being might pursue: a life of scholarship or political activism, artistic creation of excellence in law (what Berlin often called "aims" or "goals"). Asserting plurality at one of the levels, however, undermines it at the others. Pluralism at the personal level demands that each person determines their own goods for themselves, requiring a regime that recognize the primacy of negative liberty at the political level. But this suggests that various cultures *can* be ranked, based on the degree to which they recognize pluralism. Pluralism at the political level, on the other hand, seems to require that in a given polity liberty has no particular claim to superiority over, say, solidarity or equality. But this undermines plurality at both the personal level and the cultural; at the personal because recognizing those other values requires curtailing negative liberty, and at the cultural level because those cultures that weigh various plural goods must be considered more reflective of the truth of plurality as those that don't. Lastly, if we take plurality to operate at the level of culture, then it would seem that those cultures that recognize plurality at either the political or personal level cannot be ranked against those that do not. But then how could we say that liberalism is any better or worse than another regime? Along these lines, Steven Lukes distinguishes between "forms" of conflict that roughly map onto my characterization of levels. Lukes identifies conflicts between obligations like love of country and devotion to family – what I characterize as "personal"; between "purposes, ends and goals" like liberty or justice or wisdom or loyalty (this runs together values I am separating as political and personal); "holistic" "world-views" or "conceptions of the good," which map onto what I am describing as "cultural" values. Lastly and, most importantly for him, Lukes includes conflicts between "different kinds of moral claims:" consequentialism, deontology, and what Charles Larmore terms "partiality," meaning "particularist duties" to family and community. I don't see a strong difference between the first and last of these "forms;" both refer to conflicts between obligations at the personal level, although the moral language has universal implications. See Lukes, *Moral Conflict and Politics*, 5-9.

[30] Of the many scholars who have written on the issue, George Crowder has dedicated as many pages to this problem as anyone (although William Galston and John Gray are close). Crowder moved from initially arguing that pluralism offered no reason to support liberalism for arguing on behalf of several conditions that allow former to support the latter. For his early view, see George Crowder, "Pluralism and Liberalism," *Political Studies* 42 (1994), for the latter his *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*. John Gray has also argued that Berlin's pluralism inevitably undermines his liberalism and has suggested that ultimately Berlin's liberalism is limited by cultural context. Elsewhere, John Gray has argued that Berlin's argument points to two different conceptions of liberalism, one which prioritizes negative liberty and one which suggests a *modus vivendi* between various different goods, among which negative liberty is only one. Gray argues that the pluralist must reject the former but can accommodate a liberalism based on the latter. See John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000). Among those that have defended Berlin's pluralism as fully supportive of liberalism see Johnathan Riley, "Isaiah Berlin's "Minimum of Common Moral Ground," *Political Theory* 41, no. 1 (2013) and Hans Blokland, "Berlin on Pluralism and Liberalism: A Defence," *European Legacy* 4, no. 4 (1999). William Galston, similar to Crowder, argues that pluralism can be amended or appropriately understood as requiring an emphasis on toleration, and therefore can support a liberalism insofar as that pluralism is one of several commitments upon which that liberalism is grounded. See William A. Galston, "Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Theory," *The American Political Science Review* 93, no. 4 (1999). See also Charles Larmore, "Pluralism and Reasonable Disagreement," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 11, no. 1 (1994). Albert Dzur presents a helpful summary of the issues in the debate in his Albert Dzur, "Value Pluralism Versus Political Liberalism," *Social Theory and Practice* 24, no. 3 (1998). A number of notable theorists contributed to the discussion in the context of a special 1999 issue of Social Research dedicated to the "Liberty and Pluralism," including Sankar Muthu, Georget Kateb, Amy Gutmann, Axel Honneth, Ira Katznelson, Bernard Yack, James Miller, Richard Flathman, Tracy Strong, Chin Liew Ten, Joan Cocks, and Robert Grant. See Mack, Arien ed., *Social Research* 66, no. 4 (1999). Berlin himself is not particularly helpful on the matter – his subsequent reflections on the relationship only muddy the water further. While he argues in "Two Concepts" that liberalism follows from pluralism, he would later say in an interview that the two commitments were logically independent. See Jahanbegloo, 44. In a reply to Crowder, Berlin (with Bernard Williams) rejected Crowder's (early) argument that pluralism is necessarily irrational and argued that as such pluralism was not in any contradiction with liberalism. That defense, however, was less an argument on behalf of a

Among the earliest to raise the challenge was Leo Strauss. While Strauss's discussion of "Two Concepts" amounts to only a few pages in a rather short essay entitled "Relativism," he succinctly presents arguments that would come to dominate much of the literature on "Two Concepts" over the coming half-century. Strauss began by noting that to Berlin the multiplicity of ends and the necessity of choice among them are an empirical fact; we know it from our own experience. The fact that we experience various goods as pulling on our conscience confirms the existence of those various goods; this in turn demonstrates the objective superiority of a liberal regime that protects the negative liberty in which those ends might be chosen freely. As Strauss summarized this move, the normative claim follows from the explanatory: for Berlin, "experience, knowledge of the observable Is, seems to lead in a perfectly unobjectionable manner to knowledge of the Ought."[31] And yet, Strauss notes, Berlin is concerned not only with the empirical fact of negative freedom, but with its normative weight. For Berlin, the frontiers which protect negative freedom are "sacred," they are "inviolable" and "absolute." But, Strauss noted, Berlin is careful to reject any particular metaphysical or even rational justification for this "absolute." Strauss quotes a long paragraph from "Two Concepts" in which Berlin runs through a list of various justifications for negative freedom — natural right, divine law, natural law, utility, subjectivity, cultural practice— before concluding that "what these rules or commandments all have in common is that they are accepted so widely, and are grounded so deeply in the actual nature of men as they have developed through history, as to be, by now, an essential part of what we mean by being a normal human being. Genuine belief in the inviolability of a minimum extent of individual liberty entails *some such absolute stand*."[32]

necessary relationship between liberalism and pluralism as a defense against the claim that they are necessarily in opposition. See Berlin and Williams, "Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply.," *Political Studies* 42, no. 2 (1994).

[31] "Relativism," 137.

[32] "Relativism," 138. The italics are Strauss's.

Strauss jumps on Berlin's use of the term "absolute," and goes to work. Strauss reminds readers that Berlin had also described positive liberty as holding "an equal right to be classed among the deepest interests of mankind." Political life will therefore require compromise to one or the other of both "absolute" values. Therefore, the absolute claim on behalf of a sacred private sphere cannot be fully satisfied; "it must be diluted, for the opposite claim has an equal right." But what does it mean for a given principle to be "absolute" if it is not primary over others? Strauss asks a question that many future readers would pose: if Berlin holds that negative liberty is only one among various plural goods, then why should it be protected when it comes into conflict with other values? Strauss summarizes: "liberalism, as Berlin understands it, cannot live without an absolute basis and cannot live with an absolute basis."[33] For this reason, he concludes, Berlin captured the phenomenon by which liberalism has "abandoned its absolutist basis and is trying to become entirely relativistic."[34]

Readers tend to quote Strauss's line as a concise shorthand for the general accusation that pluralism descends into relativism, with relativism understood as a commitment that is only "relative" to the given norms of a particular society or a particular personal disposition.[35] But Strauss's argument is not strictly that pluralism as such is tantamount to relativism. It is that Berlin's pluralism appeals to an absolute – i.e. the absolute of liberty as negative freedom – while rejecting that absolute. Strauss notes that when Berlin holds that negative liberty is "grounded so deeply in the actual nature of men as they have developed through history," he asserts two claims in tension with each other. First, negative liberty is grounded in the "actual nature" of human beings. Second, in "history."[36] But if that "nature" has emerged in history, then either that history is natural in the sense

[33] As he would put it succinctly in his 967 lecture "Jerusalem and Athens," pluralism rejects monism, yet by "by virtue of being an ism, pluralism is a monism." JPCM, 379.
[34] Ibid.
[35] For a thorough examination of the various kinds of claims to which "relativism" as a charge relates, and the limitations of most all of them, see Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), especially Chapter Four.
[36] PSM, 235.

that it has ascended to the only destination to which it could have arrived according to nature, or it is contingent and the present discovery of liberty as based on the plurality of value has no more authority than any other account of freedom at any other time.[37] Either liberty is an "essential part of what we mean by being a normal human being" or there is no reason to affirm it other than current circumstance. The former seems to be a decidedly "monist" claim, as it rests on an account of eternal human nature that would seem to be discoverable by reason at all times and place. The latter, however, takes liberalism as a matter of transient and arbitrary convention. It was this incoherence and denial of its own first principles that, to Strauss's mind, rendered Berlin's lecture "a characteristic document of the crisis of liberalism."

While Berlin never responded to Strauss directly, he did respond to the objection that his pluralism descended into relativism, most thoroughly in the 1980 "Alleged Relativism of Eighteenth-Century Thought."[38] There, Berlin turned as resource to two of his most frequently cited inspirations, the eighteenth-century thinkers Giambattista Vico and Johan Gottfried Herder. Both, he argued, displayed the distance between pluralism and what he described as "relativism, in its modern form." That modern form, in Berlin's rendering, is "a theory of ideology according to which the ideas and attitudes of individuals or groups are inescapably determined by varying conditioning factors, say their place in the evolving social structures of their societies, or the relations of production, or genetic, psychological or other causes, or combination of these."[39] According to this doctrine, "the judgement of a man or a group, since it is the expression or statement of a taste, or emotional attitude or outlook, is simply what it is, with no objective correlate which determines its

[37] In his 1968 introduction to the book in which "Two Concepts" was published, Berlin elaborates the argument that pluralism reflects a modern discovery over a pre-modern falsehood. See FEON, xl-xlii.
[38] "Alleged Relativism of Eighteenth-Century Thought," CTH.
[39] CTH, 80.

truth or falsehood."[40] Whether or not this is a thorough summary of the charge of relativism, it touches close enough on one horn of the dilemma as Strauss described it – that Berlin's liberalism reduced liberalism to a matter of social convention.

But Vico and Herder, Berlin argued, are not prey to this shortcoming for three reasons. Both, he held:

> look upon life as affording a plurality of values, equally genuine, equally ultimate, *above all equally objective*; incapable, therefore of being ordered in a timeless hierarchy, or judged in terms of some absolute standard. There is a *finite variety of values and attitudes*, some of which one society, some another, have made their own, attitudes and values which members of other societies may admire or condemn (in the light of their own value-systems) but can always, if they are sufficiently imaginative and try hard enough, contrive to understand – that is, *see to be intelligible* ends of life for human beings situated as these men were….this doctrine is called pluralism.[41]

As against the relativist who considers all preferences equally legitimate, the pluralist recognizes values as objective, finite, and intelligible.[42] Berlin didn't do much to expand on these three essential characteristics of his pluralism, but we can offer a bit of detail. By "objective," he seemed to mean that values exist independent of any particular moment or culture, as products of something essentially and permanently human.[43] By finite, he meant that values were of a certain limited number, that they were therefore not a matter of personal expression or creativity.[44] Of the three principles, the one to which he gave the most attention was "intelligibility." To Berlin, we know that values are not "relative" to social context because we know we can comprehend something as a

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[40] Berlin pointed to Marx and Freud as his exemplars of this position, as thinkers for whom our intellectual, emotional and political lives were products of economic or familial contexts over which we have little (if any) control. This is perhaps an odd definition of the relativist charge, seeing as both Freud and Marx had a rather robust notion of what forms of consciousness were worth pursuing and affirming and which were misguided, regardless of context. CTH, 84.
[41] CTM, 83-84.
[42] As noted above, Berlin makes this point with particular concision in "My Intellectual Path," POI, 14-15.
[43] In "My Intellectual Path" this is how Berlin puts the point: "I think that these values are objective – that is to say, their nature, the pursuit of them, is part of what it is to be a human being, and this is an objective given….there are certain values, and only those values, which men, while remaining men, can pursue." POI, 14. This summation of the idea confirms the view of those who suspect that Berlin so lowers the notion of "values" to be anything that anyone pursues.
[44] See again "My Intellectual Path:" "The difference this [fact that values are finite] makes is that if a man pursues one o these values, I, who do not, am able to understand why he pursues it or what it would be like, in his circumstance, for me to be induced to pursue it." POI, 14.

value: we know it when we see it, even if it isn't a value we would embrace.

At times Berlin referred to this common floor of communicability as the "human horizon." If the purposes of practices could not be communicated, if "I cannot conceive what it would be like to pursue such a life" then, Berlin concluded, "I cannot even call their values subjective."[45] If human life occurs within a horizon of shared meaning, then those practices or commitments or values that cannot be comprehended can and should be rejected. More importantly, if cultures can recognize one another's values then there is ground for judgement and rational for rejection. Both Vico and Herder, Berlin explained, were pluralists who felt no compunction with condemning another society. "Vico," Berlin noted, "experiences no intellectual discomfort – nor need he do so – when he damns in absolute terms the social injustice and brutality of Homeric society."

But are all values we can comprehend values we must recognize as among those that are plural and incommensurate? If so, then the "human horizon" would seem to be so low that it has to include every way of life ever embraced by human beings, including the most brutal. If not, then there are those ways of life that only the properly rational might recommend. But isn't the whole idea of incommensurability that judgement cannot be offered on grounds that all would be rationally required to accept? If so, then it's not clear how we can say why, for example, generosity should be any more laudatory than material acquisition. Or why the purity of the Aryan race is less admirable a political goal than multi-racial democracy. [46]

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[45] PSM, 10.

[46] Berlin himself would note that however repugnant was Nazi ideology, it was nonetheless "recognizable" – although the way that he puts the point only confuses the matter further. In "My Intellectual Path," he wrote that "I find Nazi values detestable, but I can understand how, given enough misinformation, enough false belief about reality, one could come to believe that they are the only salvation. Of course they have to be fought, by war if need be, but I do not regard the Nazis, as some people do, as literally pathological or insane, only as wickedly wrong, totally misguided about the facts, for example in believing that some beings are subhuman, or that race is central, or that Nordic races alone are truly creative, and so forth. I see how, with enough false education, enough widespread illusion and error, men can, while remaining men, believe this and commit the most unspeakable crimes." Berlin says two different things here: first that because Nazi values are recognizable, they are therefore not pathological; and second that they are contrary to empirical fact. But if they are contrary to empirical fact, then why isn't belief in them pathological?" POI, 15.

The trouble reveals why the paradox of pluralism is constitutive of that pluralism. It is as clear why Herder condemned Homeric society and modern European imperialism as it is why Berlin condemned totalitarianism. But as soon as the pluralist objects to such politics, as soon as they assert the primacy of pluralism, they cease to be a pluralist. In order the resolve the paradox, Strauss pointed out, the pluralist is forced to accept either a "decayed Platonism which is underlying the notion of timeless values" or a pluralism authoritative solely within "the society to which the social science [of pluralism] belongs, i.e. on history."[47] Those who defend Berlin's pluralism against the charge of relativism generally take one of these two options and then go about deflating the concerns that might follow from it.[48] Berlin's framework, however, rests on a clear normative endorsement for a particular way of life over and against all others – namely a way of life that recognizes pluralism, and the tragic choices that pluralism demands.

Embracing the Tragic

As we've seen, Berlin insisted that human beings exist in a world of incommensurate goods and that choice among those goods is therefore inescapable. This is the "empirical Is" that Strauss pointed out provides the foundation for Berlin's pluralism. This would seem to suggest, however, that those who refuse to acknowledge such a world are blind and deluded – the same accusations always made by a "higher self" to a lower, and the signal feature of the positive liberty against which Berlin warned. For this reason, as Charles Taylor has pointed out, it's not clear how negative liberty

[47] IPP, 22.

[48] For an example of the effort to deflate worries over the account of human nature that runs under Berlin's argument, see Jonathan Riley, "Isaiah Berlin's "Minimum of Common Moral Ground"," *Political Theory* 41, no. 1 (2013). For an example of the effort to deflate the concern that liberalism relies on cultural convention, see John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, Chapter 6. While Gray suggests that there that liberalism not necessarily need any universal authority, elsewhere he argues that pluralism necessarily undermines liberalism. See Gray, "Where Liberals and Pluralists Part Company," *International Journal of Moral and Political Studies*, Vol 6 (1): 17-36.

can resist a clear conceptual separation from positive.[49] It seems to rely as much on a picture of the "true" self as does the notion of freedom against which it is opposed.

Among the writings of Berlin's that suggest a stark dualism that rests just behind his pluralism, his reflections on the Russian writer Alexander Herzen are particularly illuminating. Throughout those writings, Berlin described Herzen's fury at all those who assert that political history is governed by some stable and standard set of rules and principles.[50] Here is how Berlin summarized (in a characteristically long sentence) the "most important" of Herzen's "ethical and philosophical beliefs."

> That nature obeys no plan, that history follows no libretto, that no single key, no formula, can, in principle, solve the problems of individuals or societies; that general solutions are not solutions, universal ends are never real ends, that every age has its own texture and its own questions, that short cuts and generalizations are no substitute for experience; that liberty – of actional individuals, in specific times and places – is an absolute value; that a minimum area of free action is a moral necessity for all men, not to be suppressed in the name of abstractions or general principles so freely bandied by the great thinkers of this or any age, such as eternal salvation, or history, or humanity, or progress, still less the State or the Church or the proletariat – great names invoked to justify acts of detestable cruelty and despotism, magic formulae designed to stifle the voices of human feeling and conscience.

It would be difficult to find in Berlin's many dozens of intellectual portraits a more exact summary of commitments he often described as his own.

Herzen, however, made this argument in terms rarely explicit in Berlin's writing – that these abstractions were only secularized versions of older religious creeds. Berlin quotes Herzen, writing in 1848, declaring that "the French are the most abstract and religious people on the world," they "turn everything into an idol, and then woe to him who does not bow the knee to the idol of their day." In

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[49] Charles Taylor, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty," in *The Liberty Reader*, ed. David Miller (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006).

[50] Berlin wrote several essays Herzen. They are "A Revolutionary Without Fanaticism," originally published as the Introduction to Herzen's *From the Other Shore* in 1956 and more recently in *The Power of Ideas*; his introduction to Herzen's "My Past and Thoughts," published in 1968 and republished as "Herzen and His Memoirs" in PSM. Almost all of the ideas present in those two essays can already be seen the 1955 "Herzen and Bakunin," republished in Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

various figures of the French Enlightenment, Herzen lamented, "you will meet everywhere Christianity and romanticism adapted to our own morality; everywhere dualism, abstraction, abstract duty, enforced virtues and official and rhetorical morality without any relation to real life."[51] Herzen warned that:

> [T]hese formulae grow into terrible weapons in the hands of fanatical doctrinaires who seek to bind them upon human beings, if need be, by violent vivisection, for the sake of some absolute ideal, for which the sanction lies in some uncriticized and uncriticizable vision – metaphysical, religious, aesthetic; at any rate, unconcerned with the actual needs of actual persons – in the name of which the revolutionary leaders kill and torture with a quiet conscience, because they know that this and this alone is – must be – the solution to all social and political personal ills."[52]

Berlin would rework this language only slightly three years later in his warnings against "positive liberty." But Herzen's framework brings to the surface a claim only implicit in "Two Concepts:" that pluralism represented a shucking off of misguided metaphysics, a liberation from various secularized theologies.

From this point, Berlin insisted that only choices among goods that are *recognized* as incommensurate could be choices that are free. All choices that follow from the application of some universal rule, even and especially the "truth" of reason, are marks of slavish heteronomy. This is an autonomy defined by its enemy – namely, any philosophy that suggests that the best way of life is one that could be determined by appeal to *any* universal, be it God or reason. All such universals are idols, secularized versions of various religious orthodoxies. While Berlin would often temper this point, the overtly religious terms of Herzen's attack with its rejection of "idols" bowed down to are ones to which Berlin would repeatedly turn to illustrate the dangers of monism, including in "Two Concepts":

> One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals – justice or progress or the happiness of future generations, or the sacred mission or emancipation of a nation or race or class, or even liberty itself, which

[51] RT, 101.
[52] RT, 101.

> demands the sacrifice of individuals for the freedom of society. That is the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or in the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution. [53]

Berlin's metaphor of the "altar" underscores the basic framework of the argument: that all "final solutions" to human problems are based on misguided theologies, whether they appeal to the God of the Bible or the God of Reason. All fail to recognize the fact of pluralism, and therefore all are false.

This conflation of reason and revelation points to a parallel that Berlin himself noted, between pluralism as he defined it and the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre.[54] In his famous 1946 lecture, "Existentialism is a Humanism," Sartre described a visit from a student torn between leaving home to fight for the resistance or caring for his dying mother – a mother shocked by her husband's support for the Fascists and in mourning over the death of her other son in the war.[55] To Sartre, the dilemma demonstrated that "no rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do: no signs are vouchsafed in this world." In unmistakably theological terms, Sartre concluded that "this is what 'abandonment' implies, that we ourselves decide our being."[56] For Sartre the choice of how to act in such a moment was a matter of "invention," of self-creation. Through a decision of will, we create who we are: the sort of person for whom family comes first, or the sort of person for whom devotion to political justice is paramount. We either recognize that there is nothing to which we

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[53] PSM, 237.

[54] Berlin noted his sympathy with existentialism on several occasions. In the most extensive, he wrote that in "their own queer way, some modern existentialists, too, proclaim the crucial importance of individual acts of choice. The condemnation by some among them of all philosophical systems, and of all moral (as of other) doctrines, as equally hollow, simply because they are systems and doctrines, may be invalid; but the more serious of them are no less insistent than Kant upon the reality of human autonomy, that is, upon the reality of free self-commitment to an act or a form of life for what it is in itself. Whether recognition of freedom in this last sense does or does not entitle one logically to preach to others, or judge the past, is another matter; at any rate, it shows a commendable strength of intellect to have seen through the pretensions of those all-explanatory, all-justifying theodicies which promised to assimilate the human sciences to the natural in the quest for a unified schema of all there is." PSM, 187.

[55] Jean-Paul Satre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in Walter Kaufman, ed. *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Penguin, 1975), 354.

[56] Ibid., 357.

might appeal for guidance, and we create ourselves – or we live in denial of our own freedom, what Sartre terms "bad faith."

Berlin and Sartre both reject the idea that there is some standard or universal scale which could determine the appropriate decision and both insist that freedom entails and requires decisions that are radically ours and ours alone, for which appeal to any authority – including the authority of reason – is only a form of slavishness. But Berlin is much less explicit about this point. The reason is clear: it is a portrait of a "true" self that recognizes the fact of pluralism and a "false" self that clings to monism in "bad faith." At various moments however Berlin was clear that this sharp dualism was implicit in his broader claim. This is how he put the point in 1988 in "The Pursuit of the Ideal:"

> We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss. Happy are those who live under a discipline which they accept without question, who freely obey the orders of their leaders, spiritual or temporal, whose word is fully accepted as unbreakable law; or those who have, by their own methods, arrived at clear and unshakeable convictions about what to do and what to be that brook no possible doubt. I can only say that those who rest on such comfortable beds of dogma are victims of forms of self-induced myopia, blinkers that may make for contentment, but not for understanding of what it is to be human.[57]

Here, pluralism is quite clearly a matter of sight against blindness, delusion against wisdom, courage against weakness, honest appraisal against "bad faith."

The quote, however, suggests a crucial difference between Berlin's position and Sartre's. In a late lecture, Berlin introduced his pluralism by distinguishing it from three solutions to the dilemma presented by the tragedy of Antigone – whether the laws of the city or of family are primary. Sophocles offers one solution, Berlin suggested, while Hegel and Sartre offer others.[58] Berlin, however, rejected all three "solutions." To Berlin, Hegel and Sartre and Sophocles all attempted to soften the loss that either choice entails. Berlin wasn't explicit on what he took to be Sartre's "solution," but if we are only what we create then what we create does not necessarily demand any

[57] "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in PSM, 11.
[58] PSM, 11. Berlin suggested that all three "implied" a "solution" to the tragedy, but he only described Hegel's, and that in only a sentence.

lingering loss. The student who chooses to stay with his mother becomes the sort of person who would stay with his mother. It would make as much sense to mourn the choice not taken as it would to mourn the absence of someone who never existed.

To Berlin's pluralist, however, the values not chosen are binding, present, real. What distinguishes the pluralist from the existentialist is, finally, this awareness of cost. "If, as I believe, the ends of men are many," wrote Berlin in "Two Concepts," "and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social."[59] Berlin's pluralist does not try to resolve or soften the force of tragedy, they recognize it: this is what makes the pluralist a pluralist. As Steven B. Smith has noted, this insistence on the necessity of loss provides the "moral center" of Berlin's thought and gives what Smith calls Berlin's "tragic liberalism" its distinctive shape.[60] It was this recognition of the tragic nature of all life that, for Berlin, enabled the critical insights of both Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment to be maintained while the excesses of both constrained. If loss is recognized as constitutive of human life, then there is by definition no future of perpetual peace and harmony in which conflict would eventually disappear. The promise of Enlightenment with its vision of a peace achieved through the progress of reason and the Counter-Enlightenment's celebration of a unity of soul and nation could both be revealed as incoherent. If loss was inherent to all decision both political as well as personal, then the will was by definition constrained by values that existed independent and apart from it.

This centrality of the inevitability and necessity of tragedy explains why Berlin would suggest in the introduction to the collection in which "Two Concepts" was published that "the classical – and still, it seems to me, the best – exposition of this state of mind is to be found in Max Weber's

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[59] PSM, 239.

[60] Steven B. Smith, "The Tragic Liberalism of Isaiah Berlin," in Steven B. Smith, *Modernity and its Discontents: Making and Unmaking the Bourgeois from Machiavelli to Bellow* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

distinction between the ethics of conscience and the ethics of responsibility in 'Politics as a Vocation.'"[61] In that famous lecture, as already mentioned in the introduction, Weber held that political life was driven by what he termed the "ethics of responsibility," an ethics that measured actions by their result and that was in perpetual and inherent conflict with "an ethics of conviction" based on principle to certain rules of conduct regardless of their consequence. I'll explore Weber's argument further below and in much greater detail in Chapter Five of this dissertation, but for now I want to suggest that Berlin's reference is illustrative for bringing into focus the centrality of tragedy to Berlin's account, as well as the problem which that tragic framework sought to address.

As we saw in the first chapter, Berlin understood pluralism as a product of what he described as the Counter-Enlightenment and its revolt against the stultifying, homogenizing and ultimately inhumane effects of dominant Enlightenment conceptions of reason. Few gave such a memorable description of this condition as did Weber, who famously argued that the modern world was "disenchanted," void of God's authority or any other metaphysical truths, leaving us in an abyss of meaning. The void had been filled by what Weber described in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as an "iron cage" or "steel shell" (*stahlhartes Gehäuse)*-- "that mighty cosmos of the modern economic order which is bound to the technical conditions of mechanical and machine production."[62] To Weber, this economy and culture of rational planning was embodied politically in the bureaucracy, which threatened a novel form of domination. As he put it in 1917, the modern "bureaucratic organization, with its specialization of trained skills, its divisions of jurisdiction, its rules and hierarchical relations of authority" was "an animated machine." This machine was "busy fabricating the shell of bondage which men will perhaps be forced to inhabit someday." That shell would become all-encompassing "if a technically superior administration *were to be the ultimate and sole*

[61] Isaiah Berlin, "Introduction," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), lvii.
[62] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2002), 120-121.

value in the ordering of [the] affairs" of social and political life. Such a bureaucracy, Weber warned, "could accomplish this much better than any other structure of domination."[63]

To Weber, however, the crisis also presented opportunity. If values could be shown to be multiple, irreducibly plural, and in perpetual conflict, then our disenchanted age not only presented grave danger but the possibility for a new courage. The world vacated by divine authority could be filled either by the technical distribution of resources or by a resolute embrace of conflict among values that could be recognized as inevitable and perpetual. In his vocation lectures, Weber called upon his audience to rise to this challenge.[64] In his telling metaphor, these different value systems were rival gods, stripped of their prior form yet retaining their power. "The numerous gods of yore," he wrote, "divested of their magic and hence assuming the shape of impersonal forces, arise from their graves, strive for power over our lives, and resume their eternal struggle among themselves."[65] The death of God has produced a resurrection – if only we can open our eyes to see it, and its possibility. In terms that echo much of what Berlin would write forty years later, Weber insisted that "the conflict between these gods is never-ending. Or, in nonfigurative language, life is about the incompatibility of ultimate possible attitudes and hence the inability ever to resolve the conflicts between them." Each choice represented a loss; "by serving [one] particular god," you were bound to "give offense to every other god."

Isaiah Berlin was not so histrionic, and the difference in tone is not strictly a matter of style. As I'll explore at greater length in Chapter Five, while Weber insisted that dedication to a particular way of life or value represented a betrayal of all others, Berlin insisted on the possibility and necessity of compromise among them. The point is crucial for how we might understand the implications of

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[63] Max Weber, "Parliament and Government," cited in Dana Villa, *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 193.194.
[64] Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 2004).
[65] Ibid.

Berlin's pluralism for political life. But for now, I want to note the strong similarity between Berlin's emphasis on the lingering weight of the values and goods unchosen and Weber's portrait of the warring gods. What binds the two together is the shared insistence that tragedy, in the sense of some measure of loss, cost, or sacrifice to goods or values considered ultimate, is simply and necessarily an inevitable consequence of the modern human condition.

Weber, however, accented the modernity of this condition far more than did Berlin. For Weber, it was a condition shaped by an era in which divine authority could no longer demand assent. Berlin's account had none of the sense of nostalgia that colored Weber's. Instead, as Strauss noted, Berlin described the recognition of pluralism as a distinctly modern achievement while insisting that pluralism itself was a transhistorical fact of nature only fully revealed in the wake of the Enlightenment's dethronement of religious authority. But as much as Strauss assailed Berlin on this point, when it came to the condition Berlin described his judgement was more ambiguous – as Strauss's reading of Weber attests.

From Pluralism to Nihilism and Back Again

In the essay in which he discussed "Two Concepts," Strauss moved quickly from a discussion of Berlin to a reading of Lukacs, a response to an earlier criticism of Weber and then to a critique of Existentialism and Nietzsche and Heidegger – where it then ends abruptly.[66] The essay is exceedingly dense, even by Strauss's standards. But the form alone suggests at least three arguments central to Strauss's mature political thought: that Weber and Heidegger most forcefully capture the problem Berlin's liberalism reflects; that that problem extends through the traditions of Marxism, German social science, existentialism and phenomenology and onward into British empiricism and 20th-

[66] Leo Strauss, "Relativism," in *Relativism and the Study of Man*, ed. Helmut Schoeck and James W. Wiggins (Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1961).

century liberalism; and, as the abruptness of the ending suggests, that although the problem is clear, the matter of whether and how it might be escaped is not. All of these themes Strauss would develop in what is perhaps his most well-known and widely read book, *Natural Right and History,* originally delivered as lectures at the University of Chicago in 1949 and published in 1953. In that work, Strauss offered a lengthy reading of Weber's pluralism that quite clearly provided the template for his later criticism of "Two Concepts" – although his reading of Weber suggested a rather different charge than the blunt accusation of relativism he would level at Berlin.

While Strauss's lectures predate Berlin's "Two Concepts" by nearly ten years, his description of Weber's pluralism offers a handy summary of the position as it would come to be associated with Berlin. As Strauss put it:

> [Weber] denied to man any science, empirical or rational, any knowledge, scientific or philosophic, of the true value system: the true value system does not exist; there is a variety of values which are of the same rank, whose demands conflict with one another, and whose conflict cannot be solved by human reason. Social science or social philosophy can do no more than clarify that conflict and all its implications; the solution has to be left to the free, non-rational decision of each individual."[67]

There is, Strauss noted, a kind of categorical imperative in this pluralist framework. While such a view strips reason of the capacity to determine whether a given value is worth pursuing, his pluralism in its initial formulation still upholds a distinction between the honor in holding to values one has freely chosen as against the dishonor of succumbing to impulse. This is parallel to the point noted above in respect to Berlin's affirmation of tragedy, although Strauss notes that the normative "value" to be celebrated at least in "Science as a Vocation" is values themselves - having them, claiming them, sticking to them, whatever they are. As Strauss summarized Weber's position (with a syntax that nods to the *shema*, the Jewish prayer): "Follow God or the Devil as you will, but, whichever choice you make, make it with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your

[67] NRH, 41-42.

power."[68]

But, Strauss notes, this position raises a dilemma for the social scientist. While Weber suggested that "excellence [means] devotion to a cause," while "baseness means indifference to all causes," the social scientist is that person who can recognize the incommensurate value of all causes passionately pursued. This perspective, however, requires indifference to those causes.[69] Reason not only cannot determine the value to be pursued, but it stands in the way of that dedication that constitutes honor or excellence. According to Strauss, this dilemma led Weber to valorize only the "vitalistic" values - values that pertain to one's own personal identity and self-creation. Weber's "categoric imperative" that "Thou shalt have ideals" became "Thou shalt live passionately." As Strauss summarized it, the "final formulation of Weber's ethical principle would [have to be] 'Though shalt have preferences' – an Ought whose fulfillment is fully guaranteed by the Is."[70] What is "valued" is ultimately whatever it is one chooses to value because that is what one chooses. This amounts to a valorization of the will empty and devoid of content precisely because that will has no content other than itself. This is the substance, as we've seen, of nihilism as Strauss inherited the concept from Nietzsche.

This is a damning argument. But in the chapter itself, this accusation is only prelude; it occurs only a quarter of the way into its forty pages. Strauss is less interested in the drift into nihilism than the contradiction Weber's pluralism represents, for as Strauss notes, Weber's "work would not be merely dull but absolutely meaningless if he did not speak almost constantly of practically all intellectual and moral virtues and vices in the appropriate language, i.e., in the language of praise and blame."[71] But by his own logic, Strauss noted, Weber's commitment to, for example, "intellectual honesty" "has no basis but his non-rational preference" for such commitments.[72] The trouble with

[68] NRH, 45.
[69] NRH, 46.
[70] NRH, 47.
[71] NRH, 51.
[72] NRH, 48.

such a view to Strauss, as already noted, was not that it rendered all judgements arbitrary. It was that it valorized decision for its own sake while obscuring the basic commitments upon which those decisions relied.

Strauss made this point more explicitly in a series of lectures delivered in Jerusalem the year after the publication of *Natural Right and History*. There, Strauss argued that the problem of pluralism was not nihilism as such but "philistinism," Strauss's shorthand for unthinking conformity. The notion that intellectual honesty or support for liberal democracy are, as the pluralist declares, commitments that "one can with equal right choose or reject is a mere movement of the lips."[73] These are, in fact, quite dearly held commitments. The pluralist's "ethical neutrality,' Strauss suggests, "is not more than an alibi for thoughtlessness and vulgarity: by saying that democracy and truth are values, [the pluralist] says in effect that one does not have to think about the reasons why those things are good, and that he may bow as well as anyone else to the values that are adopted and respected by his society." This outlook "fosters not so much nihilism as conformism."[74] While the pluralist approach seems to suggest a radical freedom, it instead "tends to lead to the neglect of the primary or fundamental questions and therefore to thoughtless acceptance of received opinion."[75] In his chapter in *Natural Right and History*, this point drove Strauss's extended argument that Weber's social science aspires to objectivity but only replicates the values of the society in which the social scientist resides.[76] There, Strauss eventually asks whether Weber actually proved "the allegedly demonstratable premise that the conflict between ultimate values cannot be resolved by human reason" or only posited it based on a "moral preference."[77] Among the reasons to think that it was a

[73] "What is Political Philosophy," *Introduction to Political Philosophy*, 16. Strauss is here describing the perspective of "the social scientist positivist," of whom Weber was the "greatest representative" See IPP, 19.
[74] IPP, 16.
[75] IPP, 21.
[76] NRH, 52-64.
[77] NRH, 64.

claim unproven, Strauss suggests, is that Weber dedicated, among his many thousands of pages, only a scant 20 or to demonstrating it. Those pages, Strauss suggests, were his most famous, the 1919 lecture "Politics as a Vocation."

It was there, as already noted, that Weber developed the argument that political life is defined by an "ethics of responsibility" which considers the justness of action based on its consequence as against an "ethics of conviction," which considers an action appropriate if it accords with certain essential principles. Strauss suggested that Weber's pluralism ultimately reduced to this basic conflict, for it most fully reflects and requires a choice that entails grave loss: either one chooses the ethics of conviction and denies one's responsibility for others or chooses the ethics of responsibility and compromises one's own principles. Strauss notes that this claim was only "the generalized version of an older and more common view, namely, that the conflict between ethics and politics is insoluble: political action is sometimes impossible without incurring moral guilt." As Strauss put it, it turns out that the whole of Weber's pluralism stems from what he calls the consequences that follow from "the spirit of power politics."[78]

Weber, however, offered his own novel contribution to this "common view." Traditionally, those who held that the conflict could not be solved considered that it at least might be mitigated or hoped it could be. But Weber insisted on the fundamental inescapability of the conflict. The reason was not only that universal peace was philosophically illegitimate or practically fantastic. It was that, in Weber's view (as Strauss quotes him), "it would be the 'condition of the last man who invented happiness"' – a reference to Nietzsche's opening parable in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which depicted a world governed entirely by material pleasure and social conformity.[79] And that condition could remain even in a condition of perpetual war; after all, the warrior is at home in battle as the

[78] NRH, 64
[79] NRH, 65.

bureaucrat is in the office. "Conflict would not be supreme," Strauss wrote, "if guilt could be escaped."[80] In order for the strife to go all the way down, Weber held that we were simultaneously compelled to accept the war and to reject it. This was only possible if the two ways of life were deemed both absolute and mutually exclusive. In order to make guilt a "necessity," Weber had to "combine the anguish bred by atheism (the absence of any redemption, of any solace) with the anguish bred by revealed religion (the oppressive sense of guilt)." It was only in this combination that life was rendered tragic, and in so doing given "depth" and "made meaningful."[81] Rather than stripping life of meaning the modern age with its warring gods and its "disenchantment" enabled this new life of "nobility." But only in recognition of the nature of this ceaseless conflict could the full measure of our tragic condition be realized.

Given his preceding assault on the incoherence of Weber's pluralism and its descent into conformity and thoughtlessness, one would expect Strauss to reject this conclusion in entirety. And Strauss did suggest that Weber did not and could not prove that all values were plural nor that reason was incapable of evaluating or judging between them or reconciling conflict among them. But suggested concluded that he had shown that there was one particular form of ethics incompatible with another particular form – an ethics based on revelation and an ethics based on reason. But despite the force of this criticism, this position was not only one with which Strauss agreed, but was fundamental to his political and philosophical thought.

In the concluding pages of the chapter, Strauss dramatically departs from analysis to speak in his own voice. Both philosophy and revelation, he declared, share a fundamental premise: that "only through knowledge of the good can [human beings] find the good." The fundamental question

[80] NRH, 65.
[81] Ibid. Or, as Strauss summarized it in "What is Political Philosophy?" Weber "postulated the insolubility of all value conflicts because his soul craved a universe in which failure, forceful sinning accompanied by still more forceful faith, instead of felicity and serenity, was to be the mark of human nobility." IPP, 19.

facing human beings is therefore how to know the good. And it is on this question that revelation and reason part ways. According to revelation, reason on its own is unable to uncover the good on its own, and we must turn to the obedient love only God reveals. According to reason, however, such obedient love is a form of intellectual slavery, and we must devote ourselves to a life of free insight. "No alternative is more fundamental than this," Strauss declared: "human guidance or divine guidance."[82]

To Strauss just as for Weber, the conflict between these two alternatives – reason and revelation – was perpetual and inevitable. "The dilemma cannot be evaded by any harmonization or synthesis," he wrote. "For both philosophy and the Bible proclaim something as the one thing needful, as the only thing that ultimately counts, and the one thing needful proclaimed by the Bible is the opposite of that proclaimed by philosophy: a life of obedient love versus a life of free insight."[83] These two antagonisms have never succeeded in refuting one another: "All arguments in favor of revelation seem to be valid only if belief in revelation is presupposed; and all arguments against revelation seem to be valid only if unbelief is presupposed."[84]

The dilemma so posed, however, seems to tilt the argument towards revelation. If "human knowledge is always so limited that the need for divine illumination cannot be denied and the possibility of revelation cannot be refuted," Strauss wrote, then "philosophy has to grant that revelation is possible." But this seems to decide the matter "irrevocably against philosophy and in

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[82] NRH, 74.

[83] The degree to which Strauss is here speaking in his own voice is evident from how closely his language in the chapter mirrors that of the "Progress or Return" lectures delivered a couple years later, in 1952. As Strauss put it there, modern philosophy has sought to harmonize revelation and reason, by either subordinating reason to revelation, in which case reason is held to prove revelation, or subordinating revelation to reason, in which case revelation is taken to support what is made evident by reason. But "[t]hese attempts at harmonization were doomed to failure for the following reason: each of these two roots of the Western world sets forth one thing as the one thing needful, and the one thing needful as proclaimed by the Bible is incompatible, as it is understood by the Bible, with the one thing needful proclaimed by Greek philosophy, as it is understood by Greek philosophy… the one thing needful according to Greek philosophy is the life of autonomous understanding. The one thing needful as spoken by the Bible is the life of obedient love." Progress or Return, JPCM, 104.

[84] NRH, 75.

favor of religion." If philosophy cannot demonstrate conclusively that the "philosophical life is not necessarily, not evidently the right life," then "the life devoted to the quest for evident knowledge available to man as man, would itself rest on unevident, arbitrary, or blind decisions." This would seem to only confirm the thesis of faith, which is that any life without faith is incoherent and inconsistent. As Strauss concluded, "The mere fact that philosophy and revelation cannot refute each other would constitute the refutation of philosophy by revelation."[85]

These are among the most perplexing lines in the whole of *Natural Right and History*, and a great deal has been written on them.[86] Strauss is generally considered, after all, to offer a defense of classical philosophy. So why does he so undermine philosophy? Strauss's affirmation of the persistent possibility of revelation does not, however, necessarily undermine philosophy as such but rather presents a framework for its limits.[87] If philosophy can never disprove revelation, then philosophy can never attain a full account of what Strauss often referred to as "the whole," that is the full meaning, source, and purpose of existence. This meant that philosophy was, by definition, a quest, a search for that meaning and that source and that purpose. If revelation remains a possible option, then philosophy can never claim the whole of truth. Because philosophy cannot by definition assent to revelation, it must remain in pursuit of that truth. But because philosophy cannot disprove revelation, it will always remain a quest and not a discovery. If philosophy is, by definition, the quest for truth rather than knowledge of truth, then rather than undermining philosophy it is the possibility of revelation that makes philosophy possible, that ensures its survival. Philosophy is only secured by the recognition that it cannot claim victory against revelation, nor can it admit defeat.

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[85] NRH, 75.
[86] For the most extensive elaboration of this argument, see Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem,* trans. Marcus Brainard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[87] What it may well undermine is philosophy's insistence that philosophy is the best way of life. I'll return to this point later in this chapter, and in Chapter Six.

In a lecture at the Chicago Hillel the year after the publication of *Natural Right and History*, Strauss would note that there is something deeply disconcerting about the fact that neither philosophy nor religion could refute one another on grounds the other might accept. But he would insist that it is also what gives Western civilization its "vitality." The very life of that civilization, he declared, is "the life between two codes," and as a consequence of this tension there was no reason that civilization "should give up life. But this comforting thought is justified only if we live that life, if we live that conflict. "No one can be both a philosopher and a theologian or, for that matter, some possibility which transcends the conflict between philosophy and theology or pretends to be a synthesis of both," he declared. "But every one of us can be and ought to be either one or the other, the philosopher open to the challenge of theology, or the theologian open to the challenge of philosophy."[88] In contrast to Berlin, Strauss insisted that for those who have the courage to choose either revelation or philosophy, each avenue allows a life that is *not* tragic. As Strauss put it in "Progress or Return," a central claim of philosophy is that "man, in spite of what the theologians say, can live as a philosopher, that is to say, untragically."[89] If philosophy is a quest that requires only pursuit of knowledge, then error is constitutive of the way of life and not a failure within it. Similarly, if revelation requires a faith that can never be rationally defended, then its inability to ground itself in reason is no source for lament.

The obvious question, however, is what could possibly be the practical political role for a philosophy that can only clarify problems? In his answer to this question, Strauss suggested a framework that drew him even closer to Berlin even as it further clarifies the depth of the chasm between them. Two decades before *Natural Right and History*, in the midst of the war then still raging, Strauss reflected on the dangers that followed from philosophy's abandonment of its

[88] JPCM, 116.
[89] JPCM, 131.

traditional role. In a lecture to the New School faculty delivered just after he arrived in the United States in 1942, "What Can we Learn From Political Theory?," Strauss began by challenging the terms of the title (which he did not choose), insisting that the word "theory" itself suggested the trouble. Insofar as politics is considered a "theory," he argued, it presumes the impossibility of philosophy – for theories always compete with one another as rival explanations of events, whereas philosophy presumes the possibility that there is something called truth and that it can be pursued. This point would seem to affirm the familiar view of Strauss as insisting upon the permanence of a natural and eternal truth discernable by reason. But Strauss insisted that "the very term philosophy implies that we do not possess the truth." As soon as one takes "any fundamental question of political philosophy," one can "show that no answer exists which is universally accepted."[90] Instead, in the shorthand that he would deploy for many decades, philosophy "is, at best, possession of clear knowledge of the *problems* – it is not possession of clear knowledge of the *solutions* to the problems."[91]

But, Strauss asked, how could a political philosophy that only clarified perpetual problems say anything useful about political life at all? In the context of the war that had flung him out of Europe, Strauss noted that no study in political philosophy is required to determine whether to support the allies or the Nazis. So, he asked, "if political philosophy was an evident failure," then why were at least some brilliant minds in history convinced of its necessity?

The central claim and discovery of political philosophy, Strauss declared in a point to which he would return through the coming decades, was that there existed a thing called "nature" independent of and distinct from convention. Whereas convention was the name for one's own way of life, philosophy insisted that there was a way of life that could be considered best according to

[90] Ibid.
[91] Leo Strauss, "What Can We Learn from Political Philosophy," *The Review of Politics* 69 (2007), 517.

nature. In proposing that nature pointed to an ideal regime, political philosophy described a utopia. But crucially it was a Utopia understood as a "wish and prayer." Strauss, however, distinguished this Utopian wish from the "modern utopianism of the social engineer." The social engineer is the product of the modern revolution and its rejection of the classical view. As we saw in the first chapter, the definitive character of modern political thought as Strauss understood it was that the standards suggested by classical philosophy were lowered "in order to guarantee the realization of these lower standards." The expectation that followed from such a shift was that "people would no longer interfere with that natural, automatic process which would bring about social harmony but for people's foolish interreference with that process."[92] To Strauss, the "decisive fallacy" in this view "is the assumption that frustration is avoidable, that a life without some sort of other frustration is possible at all, or that full satisfaction of wants is possible."[93] While the syntax is unmistakably Strauss's, it is a position that could easily have been declared by Berlin.

Given their respective reputations, it is surprising to find Strauss tie this modern utopianism more closely to an economic picture than Berlin ever did. The whole modern framework, he suggested, is "inseparable from economism," which Strauss defined as the view that the purpose of politics is to secure a high standard of living. Such a picture of politics rests on the prior premise that human beings are "decisively determined by economic impulses and economic factors."[94] Modern utopianism relies on the assumption that economic growth is both possible and befitting of the "natural" needs of human beings. Such a view, to Strauss, is reflective of the simultaneous ambition and resignation indicative of modern political thought. This indictment of modern liberalism as relying upon a "natural" self in fact defined by capitalist assumptions is well known

[92] Ibid., 523
[93] Ibid., 525.
[94] Ibid., 526.

from feminist, queer, and anti-racist indictments of liberalism. It is, needless to say, rarely associated with Leo Strauss.

As we saw in the last chapter, Strauss did not call this view monism or even liberalism but simply "modernity." The definitive feature of modern political philosophy for Strauss was the notion that the perfect regime was both realizable and, in a sense, necessary – insofar as reason declared its eventual achievement inevitable. Political philosophy as the classics understood it, on the other hand, recognized its role only as clarifying the perpetual problems of political life that could not ever be fully resolved. Chief among those problems was that human beings cannot be made good by the force of political power, and as such a regime of justice according to nature is necessarily one that human beings cannot bring about through their own will. In forgetting this basic truth, modern political thought and its promise of an achievable utopia is "bound to lead to disaster because it makes us underestimate the dangers to which the cause of decency and humanity is exposed and always *will* be exposed." Strauss wasn't explicit about what the nature of those dangers; in 1942 they were undoubtedly obvious to his listeners. To Strauss, the political purpose of classical philosophy properly understood was quite simple: "to counteract this modern utopianism."[95]

Strauss's account of political philosophy shares a surprising resonance with certain formulations Berlin offered for his pluralism. In his own account of the work of political philosophy, for example, Berlin would articulate a position very similar to Strauss's. In the 1962 "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" Berlin argued that political theory or political philosophy (unlike Strauss, he used the two interchangeably) "seems to present problems which preserve a considerable degree of continuity and similarity from one age and culture to another."[96] The continuity of these debates reflected something persistent about the nature of human beings – namely, that they were the sort of

[95] Ibid., 527.
[96] PSM, 86.

creatures that debated their own nature. For this reason, Berlin drew a tight link between the possibility of political theory and freedom itself. "In a society dominated by a single goal," he wrote, "there could in principle only be arguments about the best means to attain this end – and arguments about means are technical, that is, scientific and empirical in character: they can be settled by experience and observation or whatever other methods are used to discover causes and correlations; they can, at least in principle, be reduced to positive sciences."[97] In insisting upon the insolubility of fundamental dilemma, political theory offered a check against all political science that sought to reduce human beings to instruments and subjects of technical administration.[98]

In view of the similarity in these positions, we might reconstruct the nature of their dispute in terms more generous than either offered the other. The problem with Berlin's argument, from Strauss's perspective, was that it rejected the ontology upon with it relied. That ontology posited a world of permanent and universal values in conflict, with human beings forced to tragically choose among them. This was as much a claim about the nature of the universe and of the human than could be found in any text of classical philosophy or medieval theology, and it relied as much on a human anthropology as anything offered by Plato or Aristotle. But unlike both, it rejected the notion that there were ways of life that could be shown superior to others – including the way of life that recognized pluralism. In so doing, just like the Christian morality that Nietzsche argued gave rise to its opposition, any politics built upon this framework was bound to arm its own enemies. While

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[97] "What Can We Learn from Political Philosophy," 528.

[98] Berlin made a very similar argument in his 1949 "Political Ideas in the 20th-Century." There, he argued that what is new in the 20th century is the view that the perennial questions of political philosophy are little more than the neurotic obsessions of the antisocial obsessive, eventually cured through a restructuring of society that might silence such unproductive anxieties. To adopt this modern conception is, as Berlin puts it, "to hold that outside the purely technical sphere, words like 'true,' or 'right', or 'free,' and the concepts which they denote, are to be re-defined in terms of the only activity recognized as valuable, namely the organization of society as a smoothly working machine providing the needs of such its members as are permitted to survive." The very first example Berlin offers as to the kinds of political questions that the 20th century begins to "obliterate" is the question of whether "liberty is not compatible with coercion by the majority in a democratic state." Berlin certainly regarded European liberalism as a "milder form" of the phenomenon under consideration, but he held that "there is substantial similarity between all the variants of the new political attitude," from communism to fascism to liberal democracy itself. FEL, 21, 25, 27.

Christianity encouraged an ethic of truth that eventually rebelled against the Christian interpretation of history, pluralism encouraged an ethic of decision that when pushed to its logical conclusion required a rejection of pluralism. In this, it could not prevent the slide into nihilism.

From Berlin's point of view, the problem with Strauss's argument would have to be that even if it presumed that the "whole" could never be known, it still relied on the notion that there was a "whole" that was worth pursuing. It still rested on a faith in the possibility of truths to be found in nature, even if it acknowledged that such truths could never be fully possessed. It therefore was still beholden to an untenable monist fantasy that could no longer be sustained. It still imagined that tragedy could be escaped. Strauss at times conceded something close to this objection, as when he admitted that any recovery of classical philosophy faced a profound challenge in reviving a tradition that rested on a teleology that seemed to have been destroyed by modern science.[99]

The crucial point from Strauss's perspective, however, was that in stripping reason of the capacity to judge between different ways of life at all, Berlin's pluralism followed from Weber's in destroying the capacity to recognize the necessity and superiority of those ways of life that allow the limits of politics and the limits of reason to be accepted. As Strauss conceded at the conclusion of his 1942 lecture, the permanent distance between conventional justice and true justice that philosophy insisted upon is "hard to face…without becoming cynical." But, he insisted, "it is not impossible." Do "we cease living with reasonable joy," he asked, "do we cease doing our best although we know with absolute certainly that we are doomed to die?" There are only two reasonable ways of facing our finitude, both mortal and political. On one hand, "the philosophers

[99] At times Strauss conceded something like this objection, as when he noted in the introduction to *Natural Right and History* that the achievements of modern science have undermined classical philosophy. There, he wrote that "we are all in the grip of the same difficulty," namely that "natural right in its classic form is connected with a teleological view of the universe." But this view, wrote Strauss, "seems to have been destroyed by natural science. Any adequate recovery of classical philosophy, Strauss conceded, would require a solution to that problem – and he admitted that, at least in those lectures, such a solution is not one that he would attempt to provide NRH, 7-8.

advise us to love fate, stern fate." On the other hand, "the Bible promises us God's mercy." This is not necessarily a great solace, he conceded, as "the comfort that comes from God is as little pleasant to the flesh as is the love of fate."[100] The flesh, "which is weak, wants tangible comfort." But "that tangible comfort – a man-made eternal peace and happiness" is a promise that can only produce a hell. For that reason, Strauss concluded, "we have to choose between philosophy and the Bible." There was no other choice. The two options offered the only means for living within the limits of reason while providing a position from which to condemn all political efforts to overcome those limits – and *only* philosophy and revelation offer that means.

In light of this position, Strauss's indictment of pluralism is not only or even primarily that it reduces all choice to preference, nor that it cannot justify its commitments, nor that it lacks the courage of its own convictions – or even that it can't help but affirm the accepted values and conventions of a given society. These are, to be sure, in Strauss's view characteristic features of liberalism and profound weaknesses. They help explain why liberal regimes, on his account, have such a difficult time defending against those political movements that threaten liberalism. But the pluralist danger is more specific. The pluralist denies that there are ways of life that can be shown as superior to others. In so doing pluralism erases the only means we have by which the inherent and perpetual limits of life – limits produced by the incommensurability between revelation and reason, philosophy and politics – can be accepted. In so doing, pluralism illuminated the tragedy while robbing us of the only resource we have by which to meet it.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter and the last, I've worked to bring Strauss and Berlin closer together than they are usually thought to be by suggesting the centrality of tragedy to both of their projects.

[100] "What Can We Learn from Political Philosophy," 529.

In the last chapter, we saw how they wove similar narratives of modern political philosophy, as each described how Enlightenment notions of reason provoked a backlash against the idea of reason itself. In this chapter, I've explored how they reconceptualized politics in order to insist upon the permanence of tension between incommensurate goods. Where they differed, I have suggested, was in what they took to be the goods in conflict, how they conceptualized that conflict, and in what it would take to preserve and protect that conflict. As we've seen, Berlin insisted that the dilemmas of life and politics could only be recognized as permanent once the goods that shaped those dilemmas were taken as plural and incommensurate, and the losses demanded of all choices accepted as inevitable. What was necessary, Berlin insisted, was acceptance of our tragic fate as creatures doomed to choose and suffer some degree of loss; such an acceptance was the condition for freedom. Strauss agreed that we had to accept our fate, but that fate was one which provided two and only two alternatives by which we might accept our limits and escape our tragic condition: philosophy and revelation.

The debate I've charted points to some obvious questions. Recognizing the centrality to Strauss's thought of his insistence on the incommensurability of philosophy and revelation raises the question of whether and how Strauss can suggest any practical or even philosophical remedy for the political maladies that he so relentlessly described. If all that philosophy and religion can offer is restraint on political utopianism and identification of the dilemmas, then how can we make normative claims about justice, injustice and domination? When it comes to Berlin, a recognition of the human anthropology upon which his pluralism rests may help respond to objections that his pluralism is "relativistic." Yet Berlin's emphasis on the necessity of loss in political life raises the specter to which Strauss pointed in his reading of Weber. The pluralist, Strauss suggested, cannot avoid valorizing decisions of the will in and of themselves, and in so doing cannot but celebrate commitment regardless of the nature of that commitment. Given that Berlin took pluralism to a

chastening force against justifications of political expediency, this would seem a powerful indictment.

We'll turn to Berlin and Strauss's responses to these objections in Part Three of this dissertation. Giving adequate consideration to those questions, however, requires a more precise and explicit consideration of specifically what kind of dilemma both Berlin and Strauss insisted were permanent, and why. And answering that question demands considering their reflections on the modern Jewish condition, and their complicated and ambivalent relationships to the Zionism to which they were both attracted.

Part Two: Normalization and Its Discontents

"I don't believe in God. I believe in the Jewish people who believe in God."

- Golda Meir, Israeli Prime Minister 1969-1974[1]

"This country exists as the fulfillment of a promise made by God himself. It would be ridiculous to ask it to account for its legitimacy."

- Golda Meir, again[2]

[1] Danielle Berrin, "'Lioness' Details Golda Meir's Fight," *The Jewish Journal*, February 14th 2018. http://jewishjournal.com/tag/lioness-golda-meir-and-the-nation-of-israel/
[2] Ibid.

Chapter Three

The Magic Lamp: Isaiah Berlin's Zionist Liberalism

Isaiah Berlin was given to asking Jewish friends a hypothetical: if they could cease being Jews by rubbing a magic lamp, would they do it? Would they recommend that all Jews do the same? For Berlin the answer was easy. Whatever the gains of Jewish belonging, history, tradition – they were not worth the cost.[1] Berlin offered another metaphor to illustrate his point. Throughout history, the Jews were akin to oysters, laboring through strife and pressure to create precious pearls. Such jewels might be exceptionally beautiful, but what if the oyster simply wanted to live unbothered? To exist without all the turmoil that produced a pearl? What if, as Berlin put it, "the oyster wished to live an oyster's life, to realize itself as an oyster, not solely to serve as the unhappy means of enriching the world with masterpieces of art or philosophy or religion that sprang from its suffering"?[2]

To Berlin, this was the achievement of Zionism: it allowed the oyster to live an oyster's life.[3] As memorable as the metaphor might be, it suggests a significant tension between Berlin's Zionism and the famous defense of liberalism discussed in the last chapter. As we just saw, in "Two Concepts of Liberty" Berlin defined negative liberty as freedom from interference while describing positive liberty as referring to "the sources of rule" and argued that liberalism protected the former against the temptations of the latter.[4] Across their many internal debates, however, Zionists all argued that

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[1] Richard Wollheim describes this question as one that Berlin "often repeated." Richard Wollheim, "Berlin and Zionism," *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*, 166. Avishai Margalit recalled how Berlin's the question troubled his own thinking on whether Jewish survival was worth Jewish suffering. See Isaiah Berlin, *The First and the Last* (New York: New York Review Books, 1999), 112.

[2] Isaiah Berlin, "A Nation Among Nations," *Jewish Chronicle*, May 4 1973, 28–34.

[3] Among the places where Berlin made this point is "The Achievement of Zionism," delivered as a lecture at the Institute of Jewish Affairs in 1975, available at the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library, http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/achiezio.pdf (accessed September 2020).

[4] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind* (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2000). I discuss this essay at greater length in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

freedom for Jews could only be secured so long as they ruled over themselves.[5] Zionism appealed, that is, to the "sources of rule." According to Berlin's definitions, it would seem unambiguously a project of "positive liberty."

A great many readers of Berlin have noted the tension and sought to address it. While a few of Berlin's interpreters have suggested that the two positions represent contradiction, most who have explored the matter argue that rather than departing from his account of liberalism, Berlin's Zionism follows from the distinctive features of it. According to these readings, Berlin was a Zionist because he held that among the rights that liberalism ought to protect is the right to belong, to participate in one's communal and cultural traditions.[6] We saw in the first chapter the degree to which this commitment shaped Berlin's criticism of the liberal tradition of the Enlightenment and his attraction to what he called the Counter-Enlightenment. In light of that discussion, it might seem that Berlin at least suggests how both liberalism and nationalism might be held together, and how Zionism and liberalism at least in theory can sit in harmony. Many have turned to Berlin as offering just such a

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[5] What various Zionist's meant by "freedom" and "self-rule" was of course a matter of vigorous debate. For an overview of that debate, see Shimoni, *The Zionist Ideology (Brandeis University Press, 1995)*, Part Two.

[6] William A. Galston offers a succinct summary of the synthetic reading: "Berlin was both a Zionist and a liberal, and he saw no necessary contradiction between them." William A. Galston, "Moral Pluralism and Liberal Democracy: Isaiah Berlin's Heterodox Liberalism," *The Review of Politics* 71 (2009), 191. Michael Walzer makes a similar argument, noting that Berlin's political position brought together communal attachment and individual freedom in what he terms the "liberal nationalist" position of which his Zionism was indicative. See Michael Walzer, "Liberalism, Nationalism, Reform," *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*, 169-176. John Gray largely agrees, suggesting that Berlin's Zionism follows seamlessly from his view that all people have the right and need to belong to their historical culture and his political conclusion that such a right was unavailable to the Jews of Europe. John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin: An Interpretation of His Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2003),149-153. In her recent essay, Fania Oz-Salzberger argues along similar lines, holding that both Berlin's support of and worries over Zionism follow from his broader political thought. See Fania Oz-Salzberger, "Isaiah Berlin on Nationalism, The Modern Jewish Condition, and Zionism," *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin* ed. Joshua Childress and Steven B. Smith (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge UK), 2018. Avishai Margalit, on the other hand, contends that the tension between Berlin's political thought and his Zionism was deep and ultimately rested on a split between his emotional and his philosophical commitment, with each "simply belong[ing] to different layers in his soul." Avishai Margalit, "The Crooked Timber of Nationalism," in *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*, 147-159, 157. Richard Wollheim takes a similar approach, arguing that Berlin was far more sympathetic to Zionism than his political thought as a whole would imply. Richard Wollheim, "Berlin and Zionism," in *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*, 161-168. In his intellectual biography of Berlin, suggests that Berlin held a "deep ambivalence to Jewish Nationalism" and that this ambivalence shaped unresolved "dilemmas" that dominate Berlin's work. Those dilemmas and tensions, however, are muted throughout Dubnov's book. By the end, Dubnov concludes that "there was no contradiction between Berlin's diaspora Zionism and his antitotalitarian liberalism. In fact, the two reinforced each other." See *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 2, 10, and 197. I'll return to Dubnov's argument later in this chapter.

model, or at least for pointing towards one. The trouble is that the most straightforward reading of "Two Concepts" seems to present a rather stark opposition between liberalism and any recognizable account of Zionism. Almost all the classical Zionists argued that Zionism was necessary at least in part to create a particular kind of Jew, one not deformed by the conditions of exile. It was necessary, that is, to "normalize" the Jewish people, to make of them a nation like any other. This seems to posit a "normal" self as against an "abnormal" one, and to equate freedom with achievement of the latter and ascent from the former. This is of course precisely what Berlin warns against in his account of positive liberty. It would seem that as much as suggesting how liberalism and Zionism might cohere, Berlin suggest that the two are in necessary and permanent opposition.

The force of this point is almost wholly ignored by those who have addressed Berlin's Zionism. The main reason is that readers simply accept Berlin's account of Jewish national identity, rather than recognizing it as itself a reflection of the tradition of Zionist thought with which Berlin was aligned.[7] Situating Berlin within that tradition tightens considerably the tension between his Zionism and his more famous liberalism. Yet as much as Berlin's Zionism was indebted to dynamics against which he so famously warned against, it isn't easy land a simple charge of contradiction for reasons made clear in the last chapter. As we've seen, Berlin not only warned against positive liberty but declared it an "absolute value." This simultaneous affirmation of and warning against positive liberty shapes what I have suggested is the unresolvable paradox at the center of his liberalism. When read in light of this paradox, Berlin's Zionism reflects not contradiction but rather a particularly forceful iteration of the dilemma at the center of this thought. But once recognized as such, both that dilemma and that Zionism emerge in new light.

[7] The major exception here is Ari Dubnov, whose work on Berlin I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation and to whom I'll return later in this chapter.

From Hunched Backs to Straight Spines: Zionism and Self-Realization

In the months after Israel's declaration of independence, Arthur Koestler, the Jewish-Hungarian novelist and journalist, declared that the founding of the state presented a definitive moment of choice for the world's Jews: either move to Israel and recognize their place in the Jewish nation or assimilate and eventually disappear into the countries in which they lived.[8] Koestler was far from alone in making this claim, and Berlin took his demand as occasion to offer a defense of both Jewish life outside of Israel and Zionism.[9] In his response, "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation," Berlin denounced Koestler's argument as reinforcing the condition which Zionism had sought to alleviate.[10] "The creation of the State of Israel," he wrote, "has restored to Jews not merely their personal dignity and status as human beings, but what is vastly more important, their right to choose as individuals how they shall live." It was a choice that Jews had been denied throughout European history, a choice "without which life is a form of slavery."[11] Israel gave to the Jews the opportunity to escape minority status, and it was the opportunity – not life as a majority or under Jewish sovereignty – that made Jews free. To demand that Jews worldwide either disappear or emigrate was to replace the freedom Israel afforded with its counterfeit. Life under Jewish sovereignty was one good among others; it was not the fulfillment of Jewish destiny, but an enlargement of individual choice.

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[8] Koestler was a fascinating figure in his own right, and his Zionism – like every one of his political commitments, fluctuated wildly over a tumultuous life. See Bernard Avishai, "Koestler and the Zionist Revolution," *Salamangundi, Salamangundi*, No 87 (Summer 1990), pp. 234-259 and Susie Linfield, "Arthur Koestler: The Zionist as Anti-Semite," in *The Lion's Den: Zionism and the Left from Hannah Arendt to Noam Chomsky*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).
[9] The most famous encounter within this debate was the "exchange of views" between then Prime Ben-Gurion and then President of the American Jewish Committee Jacob Blausten. See Charles S. Liebman, "Diaspora Influence on Israel: The Ben-Gurion: Blaustein 'Exchange' and Its Aftermath," *Jewish Social Studies*, Volume 36 Number 3-4 (July-October 1974), pp 271-280.
[10] Isaiah Berlin, "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation," *The Power of Ideas*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 197-226.
[11] Ibid., 222.

It is understandable that many readers of Berlin have taken this argument as evidence of the close harmony between Berlin's Zionism and his liberalism. Berlin's claim, after all, seems to justify Zionism as an expansion of choice, the realm which negative liberty aims to protect.[12] This is not only complimentary to Berlin's main argument in "Two Concepts," but also seems congruent with his writings on nationalism. Throughout those writings Berlin distinguished between forms of nationalism that support and follow from pluralism, and those that destroy it. To mark one from the other, he drew a distinction between "national consciousness" – which he celebrated as a feeling for the distinctive culture and character of one's own people – and its deformed ideological offspring, "nationalism."[13] The crucial difference was that "national consciousness" takes national belonging as one good among a plurality of others, whereas "nationalism" demands recognition of the nation as the good from which all others follow.[14] While national consciousness arose out of a rejection of universal rationalist claims that erase particular culture, nationalism proposes a universal claim of its own. It would seem that pluralism endorses "national consciousness," while pluralism rejects "nationalism." Given this framework, it makes sense that so many readers find such tight links between Berlin's writings on liberalism, his work on nationalism, and his Zionism.[15] These

[12] In his intellectual biography of Berlin, Arie Dubnov argues that Berlin synthesized his project of Jewish normalization with his liberalism by rejecting the standard Zionist claim that Jews could only be made normal by living among their own. Instead, Berlin asserted that it was in the choice to live under Jewish sovereignty or not to live under it that made Jews "normal." Arie Dubnov, *The Journey of a Jewish Liberal*, in particular 318-319. In addition to the intellectual biography, Dubnov advances this argument in "Between Liberalism and Jewish Nationalism: Young Isaiah Berlin on the Road Towards Diaspora Nationalism." *Modern Intellectual History* Vol. 4, No. 2, 2007, pp. 303 -326. In her recent essay, Fania Oz-Salzberger agrees, writing that that to Berlin Zionism "freed all Jews by becoming an available alternative." While Oz-Salzberger concedes that Zionism, like all nationalisms, offered Jews a measure of positive liberty, "Zionism and the State of Israel singularly gave the Jews negative liberty: more doors are open to me, and because one of them offers self-government of Jews by Jews, my scope of political choices has expanded from zero to several." Fania Oz-Salzberger, "Isaiah Berlin on Nationalism, The Modern Jewish Condition, and Zionism."

[13] For Berlin's most extended reflections on nationalism, see "Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power," in Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux: 1997).

[14] This is a very brief summary of a distinction for which Berlin provides a great amount of detail. For excellent summaries of the typology, see the David Miller already noted and Oz-Salzberger, 175-181.

[15] The exception here is Joan Cocks, who rejects Berlin's distinction between national consciousness and nationalism and by extension his defense of Zionism. See Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), in particular Chapter 4.

interpretations are certainly correct insofar as they reflect Berlin's main claims in "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation." But they don't account for the form in which Berlin makes those arguments, which dramatically challenge this basic framework. Throughout the essay, Berlin appeals to a series of metaphors which suggest the degree to which, for him, Zionism is not simply or even primarily a matter of expanding the arena of choice but in transforming the kind of self that can choose.

Berlin began with a pair of parables that described the condition he would go on to suggest that Zionism cures. In the first, Berlin described the emancipated Jews of Europe as "travelers who by some accident find themselves among a tribe with whose customs they are not familiar."[16] In order to fit in they study the habits of the natives relentlessly. They learn their ways and pride themselves on how fluently they speak the local language. Yet they are puzzled that the natives continue to think of them as strangers, and they redouble their efforts to acclimate. But the more that they try to fit into the tribe, the more the tribe comes to resist their efforts – a resistance that the strangers cannot fathom. The stranger and the native become locked in an endless cycle: "The more desperately the strangers argue [that they belong], the more vividly their differences from the natives stand out; indeed, the anxiety to deny the difference is itself a barrier to its disappearance."[17]

What makes these particular strangers distinct is that, as opposed to others who have become members of the tribe, these foreigners want to be recognized as members of the native tribe while retaining their own distinct culture. "Other strangers – Normans among the Franks, Huguenots among the English, Gauls in Asia Minor – have been content to recognize themselves for what others took them to be," Berlin writes," namely "strangers."[18] But these particular foreigners "are unique in retaining their peculiar attributes, especially their religious views, while stoutly denying that these peculiarities are of crucial importance, or relevant to their relationship to the society in which

[16] POI., 201.
[17] Ibid., 205.
[18] Ibid.

they dwell."[19] The ultimate consequence is that these strangers are locked in a state of "desperate embarrassment" – whether they recognize it or not.

While Berlin's tale was novel, the argument was not. In the introduction, we saw one clear precedent in Pinkser's description of the Jews as a ghost people wandering through Europe. The title of Berlin's essay, however, suggests a different source, Ahad Ha'am's classic essay of 1891, "Slavery in Freedom." The homage is telling and surprising. As against the political Zionism of Herzl, Ahad Ha'am – the pen name of Odessa-based writer Asher Ginsberg – argued that Zionism ought to strive toward a spiritual and cultural center that would revitalize Judaism as a national and cultural tradition. To Berlin, it would seem that such a project was at odds with the whole purpose of Zionism as he described it. In the terms of his metaphor, the aim was not to produce a shinier pearl but to release the oyster from its work of pearl-making. And indeed, Berlin's few explicit mentions of the cultural Zionism that Ahad Ha'am is considered to have founded are critical for precisely these reasons.[20] Yet Berlin's analysis of the modern Jewish condition in "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation" mirrors that offered by Ahad Ha'am a half century earlier.

In "Slavery and Freedom," Ahad Ha'am presented an extended indictment of Western European Jews for the lengths they went to in order to win approval from their gentile neighbors. To Ahad Ha'am, such Jews had accepted the price demanded for inclusion in Europe's West, attempting to rid themselves of a national identity they knew in their hearts but could not admit to

[19] Ibid., 206.

[20]As he put it in "The Origins of Israel: "Certainly among the early Zionist pioneers there were those who spoke as if what they wished to create was a cultural enclave, a super-university, a shrine, a temple at once sacred and secular whose task would be spiritual and educational, and not a community occupied with the daily tasks of ordinary life. Yet I cannot think that it is the duty of any man to produce works of genius and irradiate the world with wisdom." *POI,* 190. Berlin's debt to Ahad Ha'am, however, is less surprising in light of Chaim Weizmann's influence on Berlin. For Weizmann's influence on Berlin, see Dubnov, *The Journey of a Jewish Liberal*, Chapters 5 and 6. For Ahad H'am's influence on Weizmann, see Jehuda Reinharz, "Chaim Weizmann: The Shaping of a Zionist Leader before the First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, Issue 2 (April 1983): 2015-231.

the world nor themselves. This denial was, he wrote, a "spiritual yoke which throttles."[21] The condition may go by the name "emancipation," wrote Ahad Ha'am, but it was slavery, and in two respects. First, in requiring that Jews deny their loyalty to other Jews emancipation demanded a moral slavery. And in diluting a national identity into a thin gruel of ethical universalism that has no distinctively Jewish content at all, liberal Judaism amounted to an intellectual slavery.[22] Such a condition, Ahad Ha'am wrote, was one "of undisguised embarrassment."[23]

Fifty years later, Berlin would portray the process of emancipation in similar terms. As opposed to the Eastern Jews that remained ensconced in traditional life, Western Jews were "more ambivalent," "lacking the protective influence of a social establishment of their own." Emancipated Jews "turned out to be, at times, embarrassed, inadequate and wanting, a species of spiritual casualties, often gifted and interesting, subtle, sensitive and exceptionally penetrating, but for some unexplained reason a source of disquiet and malaise to themselves and others."[24] These emancipated Jews may have declared themselves champions of progress, but "they have throughout carried within them the uneasy feeling that their stoical ancestors, locked nightly into their narrow and hideous ghettos, were not merely more dignified, but more contented, than they; prouder, better, more hated, perhaps, but less despised by the outer world."[25]

This is all standard Zionist argument. But such polemics had insisted that emancipation was not only insufficient but inferior to the freedom that ghetto life, with all its external constraints, had provided. This would seem a rather peculiar argument for a thinker most famous for his defense of negative liberty. After all, however imperfect emancipation may have been, it lifted the external

[21] Ahad Ha'am, "Slavery in Freedom," *Selected Essays by Ahad Ha'am*, (New York: The Jewish Publication Society of America: 1912), 191.
[22] Ibid., 191.
[23] Ibid., 179.
[24] POI, 200.
[25] Ibid.

constraints that are generally considered constitutive of negative liberty as Berlin defined it.[26] Berlin, however, followed Ahad Ha'am in insisting that such external constraints were meaningless if, in order to gain acceptance, one were forced to deny who one really is.

The crucial question here, of course, is how to define "who one really is." But before turning to that point, suffice it to note that as framed this appeal to a "natural self" is quite clearly a species of that positive liberty that Berlin insisted be distinguished from negative. The point is made all the more manifest by the second metaphor Berlin deploys, one that would so trouble some friends that Berlin would not let the essay be republished in his lifetime.[27] After narrating the story of the village and the foreign visitors, Berlin writes that the Jews who found themselves strangers among the natives "acted like a species of deformed human beings, let us say hunchbacks, and could be distinguished into three types according to the attitudes they adopted towards their humps."[28] The first strategy was to pretend that they were, in fact, not hunchbacked, and to deny the existence of any irregularity. To those that pointed out their hunch, they produced various documents and articles attesting to their straight-backed normality. The second was to claim their hunched backs with pride and declare that anyone who poked and prodded and ridiculed was only envious of their special status. The third was to attempt to ignore their hunches, and to simply act as if their deformity did not exist. "Among themselves," Berlin writes, "they did occasionally mention the forbidden topic, and even recommended one another various kinds of ointment, which, it was rumoured, if rubbed in nightly, for many hundreds of years, would very gradually lessen the size of the hump or – who knows? – might even remove it altogether."

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[26] For negative liberty as pertaining to "external" vs. the "internal" constraints of positive liberty, see among others Charles Taylor, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty," in *The Liberty Reader*, ed. David Miller (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006).

[27] Christopher Hitchens recounts Berlin's All Souls colleague Keith Joseph's anger at the essay in "Moderation or Death," *London Review of Books* 20 (no. 23) 26 November 1998.

[28] Isaiah Berlin, "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation," in *The Power of Ideas*, 215.

To Berlin, each of these strategies – the assimilationists who denied their hunches and proclaimed their equal standing, the observant Jew who wore them with pride, and those who recognized their dilemma but hoped it would disappear through advancements of reason and progress – ended in failure. "What if," he asks, "what was desired was the removal of humps on a mass scale -- if, in short, anything was preferable to a hump -- then there was nothing for it: only an operation [to cut off the hump] would secure adequate results."[29] This, to Berlin, was the Zionist solution. Zionism's "triumph," Berlin wrote, "consists in the fact -- and I believe it to be a fact -- that the Jews of Israel, certainly those born there in recent times, are, whatever their other qualities and defects, straight-backed." Their hunches had been removed. "This astonishing event has transformed the situation of the Jews beyond recognition and made all previous theories and activities which flowed from it obsolete."[30] Through the operation, Jews had been cured. The Jewish question solved.

Among the many things to say about this crass metaphor, the first is that it is not easily explained in terms of negative liberty. The problem for the hunchbacks was not that they needed to choose between living among non-hunchbacks or hunchbacks; what they needed was to rid themselves of their hunches. In subsequent writings on Zionism, Berlin would opt for the less grotesque metaphor of the oyster and the pearl, but the point remained the same. Zionism was a cure for an abnormal condition. Not only does this picture seem at odds with the negative liberty Berlin so famously defended, it seems to reflect precisely the dynamic of positive liberty that so troubled Berlin.

This point is brought into focus by the work of the Zionist writer whose argument Berlin's metaphor most directly follows upon, Max Nordau. For Nordau, "consciousness of nationality"

[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

went hand in hand with a transformation of Jewish bodies (and, most especially male bodies) from the bent over cripple associated with the ghetto – the hunchbacked – to a muscular hero of the (new) nation. To overcome centuries of frailty, Jews had to, in Nordau's words, "take up our oldest traditions: let us once more become deep-chested, tightly muscled, courageous men."[31] As many have noted, the Jewish body Nordau rejected as deformed relied on well-known anti-Semitic prejudice, and it is no surprise that Berlin's metaphor so offended his colleagues. But what is most striking about Berlin's debt to Nordau is that, more than any other Zionist thinker, Nordau's writing reflects tendencies Berlin would so famously warn against.

Nordau was the author of numerous articles and plays and novels, as well as giant tomes of cultural criticism, most significantly the 1892 *Degeneration*. Written just as Nordau was beginning to engage with Zionism, *Degeneration* offered a picture of European culture corroded and weakened by the breakdown of social order. Nordau argued throughout the book that cultures and individuals were either progressing or "degenerating," becoming either more rational and in line with scientific advancement or withering away. In his definitive study of Nordau, Michael Stanislawski summarizes the politics that follow: "political institutions cannot be effectively modified faster than the characters of citizens are modified."[32] The question was then what might modify citizens, and according to what should they be modified?

It would be hard to find a more explicit articulation of the kind of politics against which Berlin cautioned in his most famous lecture, and the final lines of *Degeneration* provide unmistakable evidence for Berlin's worry. "Whoever considers civilization to be a good that has value and deserves to be defended, must mercilessly crush the anti-social vermin under his thumbs," Nordau declared. "We cry: get out of our civilized society! If you return to us, we will pitilessly beat you to

[31] Cited in Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea*, 92.
[32] Michael Stanislawski, *Zionism and the Fin De Siecle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism From Nordau to Jabotinsky* (Berkely: University of California Press, 2001), 22.

death with our clubs."[33] This is, to put it mildly, extremely troubling stuff, and it is not surprising that some later fascists found inspiration in *Degeneration*.[34] Some, however, have argued that Nordau nonetheless ought to be considered within a liberal tradition, given that the ultimate cause of degeneration in his account is a failure to adequately embrace rationality and scientific progress.[35] But it is precisely the fact that Nordau can be interpreted as both a classical liberal and a forerunner of fascism that underscores Berlin's point in "Two Concepts." Nordau's social Darwinism is Janus-faced: on one hand "rational" and "humanist" and on the other blatantly brutal. It is this duality that makes Nordau such a striking example of precisely the tendency Berlin sought to diagnose and describe in his most famous lecture.

Berlin's reflections on the hunchbacked nature of Jewish life in Europe was, however, penned almost a decade before his famous warnings against positive liberty. Perhaps it was, as Ari Dubnov has suggested, precisely the dangers he diagnosed in Koestler's demand that led him to his worries over nationalism more broadly and Zionism especially.[36] The trouble with such readings, however, is that while Berlin worried over nationalism and late in life expressed dismay over the direction of Israel's politics, in the decades after his first reflections on Zionism Berlin would only more sharply distinguish between a deformed, unnatural Jewish self and a Jewish self normalized by nationalism.

Seven years after "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation" (and just ten months before "Two Concepts"), Berlin gave a lecture to the Jewish Historical Society of England on the life and work of Moses Hess, considered by Berlin (and many others) as the founder of modern Zionism.[37] The

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[33] Citied in Ibid., 279.
[34] For the fascist reception of Nordau, with which he insists is inappropriate to Nordau, see George L. Mosse, "Towards a General Theory of Fascism," in *Fascism: Critical Concepts in Political Science* ed. Roger Griffin and Matthew Feldman (London: Routledge, 2004), 159.
[35] George L. Mosse, *Confronting the Nation: Jewish and Western Nationalism* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1993), 161-175.
[36] Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin*, 198-199..
[37] Isaiah Berlin, "The Life and Opinion of Moses Hess," in *Against the Current*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 267-316. For Berlin's remark that Hess "virtually founded" Zionism, see page 267.

talk is, on the whole, a testament of deep admiration. Berlin described Hess's 1852 *Rome in Jerusalem* as a "masterpiece," "exceptionally penetrating," a book of "shining honesty," "fearlessness," and "imagination."[38] Whatever its errors or flaws, the work was "important and true" – and the issues it addressed "have become, if anything, more critical than they were in [Hess'] own lifetime."[39] According to Berlin, Hess was the first writer in the modern era to tell his fellow Jews what was in fact the case - that they are a nation. This idea flew against all the various recommendations for accommodation or assimilation on offer to Jews throughout the 19th century.

> They were told to cling to their ancient faith; to abandon it; to adjust it to modern life; to dilute it; to emulate German culture by critical examination of their own antiquities; to be historians, scholars, higher critics; to enter Western civilization by their own door; by doors already built by others; not to enter it at all. But in this great babel of voices, no one had yet proposed to them to recognize themselves *for what they were* - a nation: odd, sui generis, but still a nation: and therefore to give up nothing, avoid self-deception, not to seek to persuade themselves that what was not theirs and had never been theirs was dearer to them than what was truly their own, not to offer up, with pain and an unbearable sense of shame, what alone they could truly love, their own habits, outlook, memories, traditions, their history, their pride, their sense of identity as a nation, all that they, like other peoples, were and lived by, everything, indeed, that they could respect in themselves or others respected.[40]

As Berlin tells the story, Hess was able to name that truth from which so many ran, that Jews were not a religious body bound by similar belief nor a people with a particular gift for ethical insight but a nation tied together by a common history and destined for a common land. Again, this is an unsurprising claim within the annals of Zionism. What is striking is not that Berlin found such views in Hess, but that he so fully endorsed them. This is all the more surprising when one returns to Hess's text in light of Berlin's exegesis.[41]

Like Ahad Ha'am in "Slavery and Freedom," Hess's main target in *Rome and Jerusalem* were Jews who took Judaism as a commitment to universal ideals of human freedom and dignity, what Hess

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[38] Ibid., 267, 304.
[39] Ibid., 268.
[40] Ibid., 309. Emphasis added.
[41] Moses Hess, *Rome and Jerusalem,* trans. Meyer Waxman (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1918).

termed "Jewish rationalists." Rather than gaining entry to an emancipated Europe, such Jews denied their Jewish identity only to continue to suffer persecution – and deservedly so, in his view, as such self-denial was accurately perceived as pathetic and base. The Germans or the Italians, Hess wrote, "may tolerate us and even grant us emancipation, but they will never *respect* us as long as we place the principle *ubi bene ibi patria (where there is bread, there is my country)* above our own great national memories."[42] Deracinated from their own land, Jews were but a pale shadow of a true nation.[43] "Only with national rebirth," declared Hess," will "the religious genius of the Jews, like the giant of legend touching mother earth, be endowed with new strength and again be reinsured with the prophetic spirit."[44]

This national rebirth, Hess argued, will follow as a consequence of the spread of science and knowledge of natural law. To Hess, the only difference between natural law and human choice is only that "[n]ature follows this law blindly while man, when perfectly developed, obeys it consciously and voluntarily."[45] To be free, in Hess's definition, is therefore to recognize and obey this natural law.[46] Such rationalism leads to nationalism, as reason discerns what is naturally true – and nations are naturally true. As knowledge and reason spread, nations will recognize their destiny. With this narrative, Hess embraced a Hegelian account of religion while reversing the roles of Judaism and Christianity. For Hess, it was Judaism that sublimates Christianity, as Jewish nationality

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[42] Ibid., 74.
[43] Again, note the echoes to Leon Pinsker's, "Auto-Emancipation"
[44] Hess, 77.
[45] Hess, Rome and Jerusalem, 131.
[46] This is how Hess puts it: "We call every being free, in the natural sense, which can develop its own destiny, its inner calling, according to its natural inclinations, without any external restraint. That being is free, in the moral sense, which follows its calling with consciousness and will, whose will coincides with the divine law or will. Every other form of will is only arbitrariness, which does not partake of the divine essence of willing, but owes its existence to passions and natural instincts. This ability to follow the desires and passions which lead astray from the path of reason and morality, man possesses only when his inner essence is not sufficiently developed. Man can certainly not be proud of this negative ability, which is no more than a disease, a disease indicating lack of development." Ibid., 134.

and community would come to replace Christianity's atomizing force.[47] The final chapter culminates in the description of a coming crisis when the nations of the world will be undone by revolution, after which the Jews will take their place as a model for a new social arrangement.[48] The work's last lines are emblematic of the tone: "[A]fter the last catastrophe in social life, when the spirit of humanity shall have reached its maturity, will our people, with the other historical people, find its legitimate place in universal history."[49]

One would expect that these claims would sound all kinds of alarms for Isaiah Berlin. The work is reflective of so much that Berlin indicts in 19th century political thought – the narrative of progress, the utopianism, the demand for personal and cultural rebirth, the cosmic idealism (it is telling that Hess's great philosophical hero was a figure Berlin took as a paradigmatic "monist," Spinoza).[50] But that didn't stop Berlin from finding in Hess a kindred critic of enlightenment rationalism.

> [Hess] believed that nobody should be made to sacrifice his own individual pattern of the unanalyzable relationships — the central emotional or intellectual experiences — of which human lives are compounded, to offer them up, even as temporary expedient, for the sake of some tidy solution, deduced from abstract and impersonal premises, some form of life derived from an alien source, imposed upon men by artificial means, and felt to be the mechanical application of some general rule to a concrete situation for which it was not made.[51]

To Berlin, Hess represented an insistence on empirical and lived reality, an attentiveness to local attachments against all rationalist schemes that might blur and overwhelm the specificity of experience in the name of some abstract aim or idea. Such declarations are familiar iterations of Berlin's sensibility. They reflect, however, not only a remarkable creativity of interpretation. Berlin's

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[47] Hess also reversed the relationship among Judaism, Christianity and capital familiar to Marx (a story to which Hess had contributed, through his influence upon "On the Jewish Question") by setting Christianity's emphasis on individual salvation against Judaism's emphasis on communal obligation. Ibid., 50-55.
[48] Ibid, 160-178.
[49] Ibid., 178.
[50] For Berlin on Spinoza as a monist, see "From Hope and Fear Set Free," PSM 103, 110, 110, 117.
[51] Ibid., 316.

reading of Hess suggests the ways that, imbedded in his insistence on the necessity of attention to cultural belonging, is an appeal to Jewish self-transformation.

Berlin's claim in the passage, familiar to his work as a whole, is that Hess resisted the procrustean bed of Enlightenment rationalism, insisting upon the legitimacy and importance of the "central emotional or intellectual experiences" of human life in all its distinction and particularity. But for a bed to be procrustean, there must be a body that can't fit it. Immediately following the above citation, Berlin would declare that "[a]ll that Hess, towards the end of his life, wrote or said, rests on the assumption that to deny what inwardly one knowns to be true, to do violence to the facts for whatever tactical or doctrinal motive, is at once degrading and doomed to futility."[52] This may be an inspiring call to listen to one's own conscience and experience. But Hess was, as already noted, arguably the first modern Zionist. However one describes his achievement, it was not attentive insistence on "the facts" of empirical reality. It was a call to bring into the world a new Jewish identity. In Hess's view, to be sure, only a Jewish national aligned with the laws of nature. But in this he only underscored Berlin's claim that positive liberty rests on a vision of two selves, one declared irrational and the other true.[53] This dichotomy would continue to shape Berlin's reflections on Jewish identity over the coming decades.

Among the essays in which Berlin calls upon this basic framework are his reflections on Karl Marx and Benjamin Disraeli he wrote in 1970.[54] As Berlin told their stories, both invented a group with which to identify, a collective washed free of the incurable taint that clung to Jewishness in 19th

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[52] Ibid.

[53] Ken Kolton-Fromm has rightly argued that Berlin's lecture on Hess is much more reflective of Berlin's self-image that of Hess's work. As he puts it, "Berlin portrays Hess in ways that mirror his own perception of his own Jewish self." This is undoubtedly the case, but it only confirms my main argument, which is that mirror shows back a reflection that relies on a distinction between recognition of a "true" self and denial of that self. See Ken Koltun-Fromm, "Discovering Isaiah Berlin in Moses Hess's Rome and Jerusalem," in *Isaiah Berlin and the Enlightenment* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 183.

[54] Isaiah Berlin, "Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx and the Search for Identity" originally appeared in *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England 22* (1968-69) (London, 1970: Jewish Historical Society of England). Reprinted in AC.

century Europe. For Disraeli, this was the Jewish race; for Marx, the working class. As Berlin described both figures, their political programs were attempts to answer the question, "what section of mankind, what nation, party, class" do you belong?[55] For Berlin, there was only one true answer to the question. They belonged to the Jews. But this was a truth that neither could accept, as "[t]heir origins irked both; they could not accept them, or their own selves, for what they were."[56] Unwilling to recognize their own people, both invented a false home in which they might belong.

Berlin's great Jewish hero, Chaim Weizmann, modeled the opposite approach. In a 1958 lecture in London, Berlin described Weizmann as recognizing early in his life that Jews in the Diaspora were destined to live lives of deformity, debasing themselves before an anti-Semitic culture that would never accept them no matter the extent of their self-denial. "Personal integrity and strength were not enough: unless their social and political position was somehow altered – made normal – brought into line with that of other peoples, the vast majority of Jews would remain permanently liable to become morally and socially crippled, objects of compassion to the kindly, and of deep distaste to the fastidious," summarized Berlin. "For this," he declared, incapsulating Weizman's position, "there was no remedy save a revolution – a total social transformation – a mass emancipation.[57]

In this mass emancipation, Weizmann was the exemplar, a representative to his people of the freedom which they might someday themselves acquire. To Berlin, Weizmann modeled what they might be. "Despite his eminence in the world, he sacrificed nothing," wrote Berlin, "he compromised not a whit - and retained all his Jewish qualities intact, and was accepted by the world neither in spite of them, nor even because of them, but as a matter of course, quite naturally and normally, as a representative of one people among other, neither superior nor inferior, but an equal

[55] Ibid., 358.
[56] Ibid., 359.
[57] PI, 44.

— all this makes his image unique in the annals of the Jews."[58] Weizmann showed his fellow Jews how to accept themselves as themselves, rather than flee for the comforts of some foreign or imagined collective.

Writing in *The Jerusalem Post* in 1954, Berlin wrote of the power of Weizmann's model.

> Jews who needed to wear the clothes of something actually un-Jewish – Communism, or the romantic chauvinism of some modern State, or the army uniform of some respectable country, or membership in some distinguished social or professional or intellectual group — these Jews, who were normally released only by violent 'transvestism' of this kind, were miraculously restored to their human dignity, if only for a moment, by this man who offered them nothing but *their own true attributes*."[59]

This is a portrait of almost magical power, as Weizmann grants to those lost in the delusions of modern myth the capacity to convert back into their own true selves. But the metaphors deployed only confirm the basic distinction upon which all of Berlin's writing on Jewish identity and Zionism rely. There are attributes that one puts on, like clothes - and then there are attributes that one recognizes as one's own. There is the gender one is given, and the one performed. There is the hump, and there is the person free from it. There is a self that is natural, and the one that is false. Zionism was the movement that freed the Jews because it allowed them to be the only kind of Jews worth being.[60]

One striking consequence of this Zionism is that the actual existence of a Jewish homeland is extraneous to the personal transformation that Zionism allows. Berlin concluded "Slavery and Emancipation" by making this implication explicit. As a consequence of the founding of Israel, he wrote, the choices of how to be Jewish – whether to "parade" Judaism or "conceal it," whether to

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[58] Ibid, 50.
[59] Isaiah Berlin, "Chaim Weizmann's Leadership," in *The Power of Ideas*, 227-242.
[60] Arie Dubnov has helpfully described this as a "Diaspora Zionism," in that it transforms Zionism into an asset and condition of freedom for Jews whether or not they live in Israel. Yet Dubnov emphasizes, like many others, Berlin's argument that Zionism expands Jewish freedom of choice, and therefore finds in it the first inklings of Berlin's claims on behalf of negative liberty. But as we've seen, Berlin's argument is not only or even primarily that Zionism provides freedom of choice as much as it transforms Jews from considering themselves enslaved to recognizing themselves as free. See especially Arie Dubnov, *"*Between Liberalism and Jewish Nationalism: Young Isaiah Berlin on the Road to Diaspora Zionism.*"*

be communists or nationalists or fascists or humanitarians is "no longer the matter of tragic and desperate concern to the Jews as a whole which once it was." Such decisions have been transformed by Zionism into individual matters. It is in "this sense that the creation of the State of Israel has liberated all Jews, whatever their relationship to it. And this it will have done even if, in a dark hour, it should be overrun and lose its independence. This is a calamity not to be contemplated; yet even if it occurred, the State would have performed its task of emancipation."[61] The argument, striking as it might be, follows in logic from Berlin's defense of Zionism as necessary to convert Jewish self-denial into Jewish self-acceptance. But it makes no sense at all in light of the argument taken by Dubnov and others as so central to his Zionism, that the founding of Israel provided an expansion of choice and Jewish opportunity. To state the obvious, if the state were "overrun" it could no longer serve that task. But that, as Berlin made abundantly clear, was not the primary task of Zionism. It was to show Jews who they really were.

Normalizing the Exception

So are we to conclude that Berlin's liberalism and his Zionism are in blatant contradiction? Or instead does Berlin's Zionism instead betray general contradictions in his account of liberty? The question is not merely of theoretic interest. The liberal Zionism with which Berlin is often associated is generally taken to be in a state of crisis, as the Zionism that he defended in practice led to the dispossession of more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs from their homes and over a half-century of military occupation in the West Bank and decades of siege in Gaza. As an agreement to end the conflict has receded from view, it seems to many that liberals can only support Zionism by betraying their most basic commitments. So does Berlin reflect an inherent incoherence to any liberal Zionism, or does he offer a way of holding together the two commitments?

[61] POI, 225.

Berlin does not allow provide an easy or straightforward answer to the questions. While it is tempting to conclude that his Zionism is in blatant contradiction with his liberalism, for reasons explored at length in the previous chapter the charge doesn't easily stick. As noted, Berlin says two very different things in "Two Concepts": that negative liberty is the only "true" form of freedom and "positive liberty" its parasitic counterfeit; and that *both* "positive and negative liberty" are among the "absolute" goods of humankind.[62] We saw how Strauss (among others) pointed to this tension as reflective of a fundamental contradiction in Berlin's liberalism. So does his Zionism only confirm the objection?

Adding to the difficulty is that while Berlin famously insisted on the irreconcilable tension between positive and negative liberty, he also argued that they were dependent on one another. In an often-overlooked section of "Two Concepts" entitled "The Search for Status," Berlin offered an argument that stands in some tension with the rest of the essay but mirrors the position he developed with respect to Zionism. There, he held that when considering who one is in the world, one's identity is shaped, made, and defined by others. To possess the attributes of "Englishmen, or Chinese, or merchant," he wrote, entails being "recognized as belonging to a particular group or class by other persons in my society, and this recognition is part of the meaning of most of the terms that denote some of my most personal and permanent characteristics. I am not disembodied reason."[63] As Berlin put it in a footnote:

> I cannot ignore the attitudes of others with Byronic disdain, fully conscious of my own intrinsic worth and vocation, or escape into my inner life for I am in my own eyes as others see me. I identify myself with the point of view of my milieu: I feel myself to be somebody or nobody in terms of my position and function in the social whole.[64]

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[62] Alan Ryan puts this dilemma succinctly in "Isaiah Berlin: Contested Conceptions of Liberty and Liberalism," in Joshua L. Cherness and Steven B. Smith, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 217.
[63] PSM., 226.
[64] Ibid., 227, footnote 2.

When we are not recognized as capable of determining for ourselves what we want, or when we are viewed as incapable of certain avenues or possibilities, we imagine ourselves to be restricted in the way others imagine us. It is for this reason, Berlin wrote, that "the lack of freedom about which men or groups complain amounts, as often as not, to the lack of proper recognition." From this position, "when I demand to be liberated from, let us say, the status of political or social dependence, what I demand is an alternation of the attitude towards me of those whose opinions and behavior help to determine my own image of myself."[65] Our own possibilities are tied up in how others view us. And in many cases, it is reasonable to conclude that the only people who could supply such recognition are people "like me" — people from my community, who share my background to some significant extent, who can offer me recognition of the sort that only someone who knows me can grant.

Berlin conceded, however, that such recognition doesn't fall easily into the dichotomy he presents throughout the essay.[66] The right to live among those who offer recognition is clearly not a feature of negative freedom. But it seems to be a condition for that liberty. After all, Berlin's central claim in the section is that one's "own image" determines the extent to which one can or cannot access the opportunities that are, or are not, available, and that such a self-image is shaped by the attitudes of others, including the attitudes of those by whom one is ruled.[67] This would seem to be features of what throughout the essay Berlin describes as positive liberty. The claim on behalf of recognition, therefore, seems to undermine both Berlin's insistence that positive liberty can be sharply distinguished from negative and his claim that positive liberty is a counterfeit freedom corrosive to negative. Instead, it seems insofar as recognition is a species of positive liberty, then positive liberty it is in fact a condition for the exercise of negative liberty.

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[65] Ibid., 227

[66] "Yet it is not with individual liberty," Berlin writes, "in either the 'negative' or the 'positive' sense of the word, that this desire for status and recognition can easily be identified." PSM, 229.

[67] Nancy Hirschmann develops this point in Nancy J. Hirschmann, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom," *Political Theory* 24, no. 1 (1996).

As much as this claim stands in tension with the rest of "Two Concepts," it offers the obvious framework for Berlin's Zionism.[68] To Berlin, the problem with minority status was that it could not provide for Jews the recognition upon which negative liberty depends. The only means by which Jews could achieve such recognition was by being recognized and recognizing themselves as part of Jewish nation. According to this view, however, national identity – its recognition, acceptance, and protection – is not one good among others in tension with negative liberty, but the basic condition for freedom properly understood. The obvious consequence is that those who fail to recognize the nation as the source of one's identity are not and cannot be free. But if this is the case, then it is hard to see how, in the terms of the distinction that runs through Berlin's reflections on nationalism, a "national consciousness" that takes national belonging as one good among many can avoid the drift into a "nationalism" that declares the nation as the ultimate good upon which all others are dependent. Rather than softening the contradiction, Berlin's argument on behalf of recognition seems to deepen the trouble.

While Berlin only intimated this difficulty, several of his readers and students have sought to resolve it. In his thorough essay on Berlin's nationalism, David Miller suggests that while Berlin doesn't offer clear normative conclusions for how a liberalism of negative liberty and an appreciation of national belonging ought to cohere, he does suggest some basic parameters for what might amount to a "liberal nationalism."[69] Among them, Miller suggests that such a liberalism must consider the state as purely instrumental when it comes to protection of the right of individuals to participate in national culture. Nonetheless, Miller holds that it is a clear prerogative of a state so defined to ensure the survival and flourishing of that culture. Miller concludes that "people are

[68] Cf. Arie Dubnov, *"*Between Liberalism and Jewish Nationalism: Young Isaiah Berlin on the Road to Diaspora Zionism.*"*

[69] See David Miller, "Crooked Timber or Bent Twig? Isaiah Berlin's Nationalism." *Political Studies* 53, no. 1 (2005): 100–23.

happy only when living according to familiar customs and habits, and they need political independence to sustain that accepted way of life."[70] With this argument, Miller offers a defense of what many have taken as a basic liberal nationalist, and by extension liberal Zionist, position.

Yet As Yael Tamir suggests in a book that began as a dissertation under Berlin's direction, political independence as such is not necessarily a condition of being able to live according to "familiar customs and habits."[71] Moreover, for any state that contains multiple nationalities, the extent to which the state represents and encourages a single culture obviously can and in practice does restrict the capacities of minority cultures to pursue their own traditions. For this reason, Tamir argues (surprisingly, given her book's framing as a defense of liberal nationalism) that the only way to balance liberal freedom with a right to national belonging is to disentangle the idea of sovereignty from the notion of national self-determination. Her practical rationale is that in the contemporary world the boundaries of states generally include citizens of numerous national identities. But she also holds that a shared life in states that contain those who claim different national identities tempers the xenophobic tendencies of rigid and homogenous forms of nationalism. For these reasons, she concludes that "the ideal of the nation-state should therefore be abandoned in favor of another, more practicable and just."[72] The argument provides a somewhat surprising conclusion coming from a scholar who became Minister of Immigration and Education and Immigration in the Israeli government. But throughout her analysis, it's clear that the question motivating her study is whether and how Zionism might accommodate liberal commitments. She argues that it can, but only once national sovereignty is separated from claims of national belonging.

Berlin himself never suggested such a radical criticism of the nation-state as such, and when it came to Jewish nationalism he was thoroughly dismissive of the territorial and autonomous

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[70] Miller, 117.
[71] Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
[72] Ibid., 150.

arguments that imagined that Jewish national survival could be secured absent state sovereignty.[73] But normatively, it's hard to see how a liberalism that understands itself in opposition to positive liberty, even one that recognizes a "right to belong" as among those rights that negative liberty must protect, does not lead to Tamir's position.[74] So why did Berlin not pursue this direction?

Certainly, one reason was simply because he found it impractical. But it also followed from his analysis of the Jewish question. As we've seen, in Berlin's view the Jewish problem was produced by the inability of liberal legal protection to provide the recognition that he argued was the practical condition for an autonomy. Recognition required a national identity, and only a state could provide it. With these claims, Berlin extended the basic criticism of liberalism offered by Zionism. His reflections, however, suggest the most obviously problematic aspect of this argument: those upon whom recognition is considered to rely are only likely to recognize one as an equal to the extent that one exhibits commitment to a way of life deemed worthy of recognition. To Berlin, that way of life was a national way of life, and to be legible in the modern world a nation required a state.

Berlin seemed well aware of this dilemma in "Two Concepts" and his writing on nationalism. So are we therefore back to concluding that his Zionism can only be explained as a contradiction to his liberalism? Only if we presume a coherence in that liberalism. But as discussed at length in the last chapter, that liberalism rests on a pluralism that is shaped by a defining paradox. As noted, that paradox is well known: pluralism provides both the theoretical scaffold for liberalism while

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[73] In "Slavery and Freedom" Berlin wrote: "There are still to be met among us the pathetic descendants of the old Bundists and Yiddishists, the modern advocates of '*galut* nationalism', which is based on the notion of modern nations as a motley amalgam of highly diverse and quasi-autonomous communities, in which Yiddish-speaking Jewish groups, living lives full of picturesque native colour, with folk song and ancient crafts, and quaint traditional customs, would form a rich, if exotic, ingredient. These sorry absurdities…would scarcely be worthy of mention if they did not, by offering a totally unreal vision of what modern societies were or could be, succeed in deluding innocent persons, even at this late hour, to their personal doom." *POI,* 222.

[74] When it comes to Zionism, one way of reconciling this view with support for Jewish sovereignty is by arguing that given the exceptional experience of Jews in Europe, emergency conditions override the general rule. This is the argument Chaim Gans pursues in Chaim Gans, *A Just Zionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). John Gray suggests that Berlin defended Zionism on these grounds, but I see little evidence for this reading in Berlin's reflections. See John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 159-153.

undermining that liberalism. As Strauss helped illuminate, that paradox followed from Berlin's simultaneous insistence that negative liberty was the "absolute" that captured what is natural to human beings as human beings, and that both positive and negative liberty are "ultimate" goods worthy of protection. Berlin's reflections on recognition only complicate the matter further. In light of that argument, positive liberty as the freedom to be recognized as a member of a nation is the condition for negative liberty and a grave threat to that liberty. But so long as this was described as a universal feature of political life, then any particular contradictions of Zionism or the modern Jewish condition to which it responded could be recognized as reflective of permanent and inherent dilemma universal to political life.

In insisting upon an inevitable conflict between national belonging and autonomy, Berlin reframed the terms of the question that Zionism sought to solve. Rather than normalizing the Jewish condition by granting to Jews the self-rule that was the condition of individual autonomy, Zionism offered to Jews the same tragic choices that define political life – the same precarious balance between national belonging and individual autonomy, the same delicate compromise between collective life and individual freedom. In so doing, Zionism "solved" the Jewish question. But it could only do so once the Jewish question – as a question of whether individual autonomy could be reconciled with national self-determination– was recognized as the sort of question which no politics could solve. Negative liberty and positive were in constant and unstable tension. Zionism could only normalize the Jewish condition once the blueprint for the political world into which the Jews assimilated was redrawn along terms that accommodated the peculiar dilemma of the modern Jewish condition. In light of this argument, the most telling remark in his response to Koestler is a quip he offered as a humorous aside: "The Jews [are] are a peculiar people," he wrote, "only because they are just like everybody else, only more so."[75]

[75] POI, 224.

Conclusion: from liberal Zionism to Zionist liberalism

In Berlin's writings on nationalism, he warned that national consciousness is most often transformed into its malignant offspring of nationalism when a particular nation is oppressed, dominated, and humiliated. Under such conditions, the oppressed nation, he wrote, responds like a "bent twig," snapping back violently in order to assert its dignity and power.[76] In Berlin's insistence on Zionism's resolution of the Jewish question, he oddly never considered the wisdom of his own analysis – that there were few people whose "twigs" had been more bent than the Jews in the wake of European genocide and that might therefore be particularly tempted by the dangers of the nationalism he diagnosed. Despite those implicit warnings, the distinctive and particular contours of his Zionism suggest why and how the liberal Zionism with which he is associated might encourage tendencies against which he warned.

These tendencies are suggested by the manner in which Berlin tempered whatever worries he had when it came to Zionism by trusting in what he took to be a basic liberal disposition of Jews and almost entirely ignoring those who most obviously bore the cost of that nationalism, the Arab Palestinians who lived and live in the region required for Jewish national realization.[77] These are, as several have charged, at best quite troubling evasions.[78] But they follow from the form of Berlin's Zionism, which as we've seen considers the practical effects of Zionism as an actual political project

[76] See "The Bent Twig: On the Rise of Nationalism," in AC.
[77] In his 1953 "The Origins of Israel" he wrote that in Israel "as a result of this violent clash and collision of various cultures a common denominator is emerging, something identifiable and fascinating, namely a politically liberal, egalitarian human being with a mentality not unlike that of the Italian Risorgimento: on the whole, left of centre, of a kind rightly admired by English liberals and radicals in the nineteenth century." *POI,* 194-195. Such descriptions have been rightly challenged by those who find in them a troubling tendency to imagine that Israelis represent all that Berlin admires. Oz-Salzberger calls this an "embarrassing romanticism tinged with Hegelian dialectic." Oz-Salzberger, 186.
[78] The most damning criticism was leveled by Edward Said, "Isaiah Berlin: An Afterthought" in Edward Said, *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (New York: Vintage, 2001).

extraneous to its transformative power on those individuals who then are brought to recognize their true Jewish selves. The great irony of liberal Zionism as Berlin articulated it is that it turns out to be unconcerned with the liberalism of Zionism. Instead, it insists that Zionism is the condition for the exercise of negative freedom for Jews, wherever they live. Rather than a liberal Zionism, this is best described as a Zionist liberalism. This is perhaps counter-intuitive, but it helps illuminate some of the reasons why the liberal Zionism with which Berlin is sometimes considered representative has come into such crisis.[79]

According to Berlin's argument, autonomy for individual Jews requires recognition of a national identity that only Zionism can provide. With this claim, as we've seen, Berlin insisted that Jewish self-respect and even Jewish freedom are conditional upon support for Zionism. It is not surprising therefore that those who challenged Zionism's equation of Judaism with nationalism and nationalism with state sovereignty would meet with such caustic attack from Berlin, and that those who dispute such conflation are today condemned by those "liberal Zionists" that stand in Berlin's legacy. After all, according to such a logic, any departure from Zionism is by definition an assault on Jewish freedom and Jewish identity. This argument throws any liberal Zionism crafted along the model into hopeless contradiction: on one hand insisting on the paramount value of individual choice and even individual Jewish self-creation, on the other implying that anyone who rejects Zionism be considered a threat to Jewish freedom. Under any conditions such a politics would be hard pressed to avoid contradiction. Under the actual conditions of Israel-Palestine, in which Zionism required the displacement of hundreds of thousands and today rests on military rule over millions, the view is one that cannot but become mired in hypocrisy, as it demands a radical questioning of that which it considers cannot be questioned.

[79] See the response to Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism*.

Those conditions point to a second trouble. In suggesting that the tension between national belonging and autonomy is simply produced by a conflict among incommensurate goods inherent to all politics, the suffering experienced by human beings wronged as a consequence of that tension can be described as inevitable loss rather than grave injustice. If national belonging for some requires that others are rendered second-class citizens, then this is a matter of tensions inherent to the nature of political life. To imagine otherwise is naïve. Moreover, if national identity is considered a condition for liberty, then in moments when the two come into conflict, claims of national belonging will by necessity outweigh those of individual autonomy. This seems a surprising and problematic conclusion for any liberalism, and I'll explore its implications more fully in Chapter Five.

Between the two figures of this study, Strauss is most generally considered both the far less committed liberal and the much more committed Zionist. Yet many of the criticisms I have suggested above were ones that Strauss intimated in his insistence that Zionism could not solve the Jewish question. He came to that conclusion after almost a decade immersed in Zionist politics, a time during which he wrestled with a question to which Berlin's Zionism gestured but which troubled Strauss to a far more significant degree: if Zionism represented a normalization of the Jewish people, then what exactly were they being normalized into?

Chapter Four

The Empty Shell: Leo Strauss and the Problem of Jewish Politics

In 1903, Theodore Herzl received what he had spent nearly a decade struggling for – a commitment from one of Europe's imperial powers to establish a Jewish national homeland on colonized land. After meetings with British Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain and the visit of an exploratory committee formed at the sixth Zionist congress in 1903, the British Government agreed to allocate a plot of land on which the Jews of Europe might settle and establish "conditions which will enable members to observe national customs." There was only one problem: that land was in Uganda.

The proposal provoked outrage among Zionists, the vast majority of whom envisioned a Jewish homeland in the land of Palestine. But some prominent members of the movement pushed for acceptance of the agreement, and not only on pragmatic grounds. Among those who urged an approval of the British offer was the Yiddish journalist Hillel Zeitlin. Like many, Zeitlin held that Zionism was not only a struggle for Jewish security and refuge, but a movement to establish Judaism on modern footing, unbeholden to the powers of religious authority. But, he warned, a return to the land of Israel would risk throwing Zionism into the arms of those powers it sought to escape. "The same tradition that burdens us in diaspora," he predicted, "will burden us a thousand times more in *Eretz Israel*, because that is its home. The rabbinic power over the masses will not be weakened there, as the freethinking Zionists hope, but on the contrary will get stronger and stronger."[1]

Zeitlen was prescient. Over a century later, in his 2017 *The Paradox of Liberation,* Michael Walzer

[1] Quoted in Ehud Luz, *Parallels Meet: Religion and Nationalism in the Early Zionist Movement, 1882-1904* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 271-272

would ask how the Zionist revolution against religious authority has come to be so dominated by religious forces it sought to overcome.[2] In Walzer's view, the singular mistake of Zionists was to assume that over time Judaism would simply relinquish its hold over Jewish life as the forces of secularism prevailed. They didn't bother to consider what substantive cultural or religious content might replace it. Into this vacuum came those who saw Zionism and the state of Israel either as a misguided and even heretical structure that could be manipulated to serve Jewish law or as a power that could hasten the coming of the messianic age.[3]

With this analysis, Walzer offers a criticism of, among others, the Zionism of Isaiah Berlin as discussed in the last chapter. While Berlin's Zionism of normalization sought to overthrow the delusions of exilic Judaism, Walzer suggests that in practice it left a void quickly filled by the religious commitments it sought to dispel. With this criticism, Walzer not only challenged the Zionism of Isaiah Berlin and reiterates Zeitlin's early worries. He echoed a criticism and analysis offered by over a century ago by Leo Strauss.[4]

Strauss offered that criticism on only a handful of occasions, but in several autobiographical reflections Strauss himself subtly suggested that the matter might be more central to his work than the infrequence of those mentions would suggest. In the first sentence of the 1965 preface *Spinoza's Critique*, the then 65 year old recalled that the author of the original 1930 work "was a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grip of the 'theological-political predicament.'"[5] The same year, in the introduction to the German edition of his 1936 work on Hobbes, Strauss would write that since that early work's publication "the theological-political

[2] Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015). Walzer reflects on three cases, but it is clear that the case that most concerns him is Zionism.
[3] Walzer offers this account in Chapter Two, "The Paradox Illustrated: Zionism vs. Judaism," 34-67.
[4] Strauss presented his analysis of Zionism with only slight differences in his 1952 "Progress or Return," the 1962 "Why We Remain Jews" and the 1965 Preface to *Spinoza's Critique.* See JCPM, 92-93; 318-320; 142-143.
[5] Leo Strauss, "Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*," in JPCM, 137.

problem has remained *the* theme of my investigations."[6] A turn to his early writings, however, reveals that the young scholar gripped by that "predicament" was immersed in a militant defense of what he would later describe as the "straightforward political Zionism" to which he was "converted" at the age of 17.[7] These references suggest that the theme Strauss declared as *the* central one of his scholarship was inextricably bound up with his early engagement with Zionism. So what was the "theological-political predicament"? In what respect did his early involvement in Zionism have him "gripped" by it? And given that he almost entirely ceased writing about Zionism after 1928, how did those early reflections shape his mature reflections on the theme? But what was that predicament?

Given the primacy of place which Strauss gave the term, almost all who have written seriously on Strauss have explored what precisely he meant by the "theological-political problem."[8] The phrase comes of course from Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologica Politicus*, the subject of Strauss's first book. As discussed in the introduction, in that work Strauss argued that Spinoza's rejection of revelation was not as complete as it appeared. Spinoza had argued that revelation could not be proven rationally; but to the believer that recognized the nature of revelation this was not a criticism that carried weight. A belief in revelation only relied on the inability of philosophy to provide evident and complete knowledge of the whole. And this Spinoza had not and could not provide.[9]

The trouble with the politics Spinoza had helped inaugurate, however, were not simply that they rested on premises that could not be proven. More troublingly, they had stripped politics of religious authority while failing to replace it with any alternative morality. As we saw in Chapter One, while

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[6] Leo Strauss, "Preface to *Hobbes Politische Wissenschaft*," in JPCM, 453.
[7] Leo Strauss, "A Giving of Accounts," in JCPM, 460.
[8] Of this literature, particularly helpful explications are Leora Batnitzky, "Leo Strauss and the 'Thelogical-Political Predicament'," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); David M. Myers, "Anti-Historicism and the Theological-Political Predicament in Weimar Germany: The Case of Leo Strauss," in *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2003) and Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem,* trans. Marcus Brainard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[9] See SCR, especially 145-146.

Strauss indicted Carl Schmitt's definition of the political as vacant of morality, he agreed with Schmitt that the liberalism Spinoza had helped inaugurate could not supply a moral compass. This was, in short, the theological-political predicament: what might provide moral content to a modern politics that understood itself in opposition to religious authority?

As extremely cursory summary, this begins to explain how Strauss's mature thought might be helpfully described as reflections on "the theological-political problem." But it also seems to make his description of the guiding theme of his earliest writing all the more perplexing. How was Strauss's early engagement of political Zionism a reflection of the "political-theological predicament?" Over the last two decades, a number of noted scholars have explored this question.[10] Such efforts meet an immediate problem, which is how to explain the dramatic shift in Strauss's work between his early commitment to Zionism and his later criticisms of it. One approach is to emphasize continuity, and see in Strauss's early Zionism the arena in which he developed his critique of liberalism.[11] The other is to emphasize the break, and note how Strauss departed from Zionism as he came to question the philosophical coherence of the militant atheism that, as we'll see, was at the center of his political Zionism.[12] While both approaches reflect important dynamics in Strauss's

[10] Work on the early Strauss was inspired in large part by the publication of his early writings first in German with the publication of Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften* ed. Heinrich Meier. 3 vols. (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1996-2001), and in English with Leo Strauss, *The Early Writings (1921-1932),* Ed. and trans. Michael Zank (Albany: State University Of New York Press, 2002). Among those that have explored the early writings, I have especially learned a great deal from Steven B. Smith, "Leo Strauss's Discovery of the Thelogico-Political Problem." *European Journal of Poltiical Theory* 12, no. 4 (2013): 388–408; Eugene Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile* (Brandeis Univeristy Press, 2006), in particular Chapter 2, "The Formation of a Weimar Conservative Jew (1921-1932)"; David Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Philosophy, Prophecy, and Politics in Leo Strauss's Early Thought* (Albany, NY: SUNY University Press, 2008), especially Chapter 1, "In the Grip of the Theological-Political Predicament;" Benjamin Lazier, *God Interreupted: Heresy and the European Imagination Between the World Wars* (Princeton University Press, 2008), Part 2 "The Pantheism Controversy;" Leora Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas*, especially Chapters 7 and 9.

[11] Jerry Muller, for example, takes Strauss's early political Zionism as the source of his later anti-Utopian politics, the commitment through which he first came to recognize the limits of liberalism and learned to appreciate the force of national identity and the role of power in political life. See Jerry Muller, "Leo Strauss: The Political Philosopher as a Young Zionist." *Jewish Social Studies* 17, no. 1 (2010): 519-540. Along similar lines, Samuel Goldman argues that Strauss turned to the model of ancient Rome as "an antidote to the weaknesses that beset the Jewish diaspora." Samuel Goldmam, "Roman Virtue, Jewish Hope: Leo Strauss on Roman Politics, Judaism and Zionism." *History of Political Thought* 39, no. 3 (2018): 522.

[12] This is in general the approach of Eugene Sheppard in *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*. See Chapter 2.

thought, neither account for the depth of the ambivalence that runs just under the confident polemic of Strauss's early writing.[13] That ambivalence, I'll argue below, explains not only why Zionism's internal contradictions led Strauss into the "grip" of the theological-political predicament, but illuminates the centrality of his eventual departure from and critique of Zionism to his thought as a whole. It also points to what remains most relevant and provocative about his analysis for those troubled by the directions in which Zionism has traveled.

The Problem of Jewish Politics

A half century after he left Berlin, Gershom Scholem would reflect that for young people living under the Weimar republic, Zionism was not primarily a practical political program but "a moral decision, an emotional one, an honesty-seeking response. The honesty did not express itself in the desire for a state, but in a revolt against the lie that Jewish existence was."[14] That "lie" had been exposed by the blood-letting and destruction of World War I, which seemed to prove the liberal optimism of an older generation both morally and politically bankrupt. In the wake of the war, remembered Scholem, young people "living in a liberal-Jewish German assimilationist environment had the feeling that [German Jewish assimilationists] were devoting their entire lives to self-delusion."[15]

As Steven Ascheim has argued, this revolt against self-delusion was reflective of a "quintessentially Weimarian intellectual" sensibility. That sensibility was dominated by "essentially post-liberal ruminations, posited on the ruins of a destroyed political and cultural order that sought

[13] Of those who have written on Strauss's Zionism, Simon Taylor has most emphasized the degree to which Strauss's later ambivalence is reflected in the earlier writing. I build upon Taylor's reading, although I find a much stronger relationship between See Simon Taylor, "Between Philosophy and Judaism: Leo Strauss's Skeptical Engagement with Zionism." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 78, no. 1 (2017): 95–116.
[14] Gershom Scholem, "With Gershom Scholem: An Interview" originally published in Spring of 1975. In Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays*, ed. Werner J. Dannhauser (Phildalphia PA, Paul Dry Books: 2012), 2.
[15] Ibid.

novel – and usually radical – answers to the problems of a fundamentally transformed European civilization."[16] Jewish thinkers shaped by this intellectual ferment saw their main enemy as the Jewish embrace of *Bildung*, that distinctive product of the German enlightenment. *Bildung*, as Ascheim summarized it, "envisaged a gradual, unfolding process of self-formation that applied not only to the life of individuals but eventually to its realization for all of humanity."[17] The unmoveable cornerstone of such an ethic was the idea of historical progress, as various variations of *Bildung* tied individual self-development to national and global advancement. It was this cornerstone of the German Enlightenment that the First World War detonated.

Ascheim doesn't include Strauss as one of the representative figures of what he calls the "Jewish revivalists" of the Weimar period, but the degree to which Strauss was imbedded in this movement is evident by the often implicit but nonetheless clear target of his editorial assaults throughout the decade.[18] As Ascheim notes, the Jewish thinkers most invested in the post-liberalism of Weimar took as their primary opponent Martin Buber, who they perceived as the last gasp of *Bildung* Judaism and in whom its limitations, to them, were most evident.[19] Throughout Strauss's writing of the decade, Buber hovers just in the background, the unnamed but ever-present target (and, as the founder of *Der Jude*, the monthly magazine for which Strauss often wrote, his frequent publisher).

Throughout the first decades of the 20th century, Buber argued that Judaism could only flourish amid Jewish collective life.[20] Buber, however, held that a Zionism that only replicated the nationalism of Europe was a Zionism that betrayed its purpose. If Zionism was a rejection of assimilation and the demand that Jews fit themselves to the national and political requirements of

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[16] Steven E. Ascheim, Cultural and Catastrophe: German and Jewish Confrontations with National Socialism and Other Crisis (New York, NY: NYU Press, 1996), 35.
[17] Ibid., 36.
[18] Ascheim's representative examples are Gershom Scholem, Ernst Bloch, Franz Rosenzweig, and Walter Benjamin.
[19] Ibid., 36
[20] Buber's Zionism is of course an enormous topic. For a helpful summary of his position, see Paul Mendes-Flohr's introduction in Martin Buber, *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs* ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

the European Nation-State, a Zionism that only replicated the model of that Nation-State in Palestine was nothing more than assimilation on a national scale. With this argument, Buber stood in the tradition of the cultural Zionism inaugurated by Ahad Ha'am, who as we saw in the last chapter held that Zionism had to be understood and pursued as a project of spiritual revival, in which the Jews' particular ethical, religious, and political gifts might manifest in national community.[21]

To Strauss, what Buber and his followers failed to acknowledge was the degree to which Zionism represented a rejection of Judaism. In insisting upon this point, Strauss followed the two Modern Jewish thinkers who were most influential upon his early life and thought, Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig. Cohen had died just before Strauss enrolled at the University of Marburg, but his association with Marburg was part of what drew Strauss to the school. Strauss's admiration of the towering figure of German neo-Kantianism remained with him throughout his life, even as he came to conclude that Cohen represented the failure of modern Jewish thought precisely because he expressed its most profound achievement.[22] Strauss met Rosenzweig in the early 1920s, taught at the educational institution that Rosenzweig founded, and would later describe him as one of two figures (with Karl Barth) that "marked the reawakening of theology."[23]

Despite their enormous differences, both Cohen and Rosenzweig rejected Zionism because they argued that Judaism was by definition opposed to modern nationalism. For Hermann Cohen, it was only in their disenfranchisement and persecuted state that the Jews presented to the world the unfulfilled promise of democratic equality and human rights. Only as a minority, as a people *not* bound to national sovereignty, could Jews live out the mission of Judaism. To Cohen, Zionism

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[21] See for example, Martin Buber, "Nationalism," in *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs*, 47-57.
[22] For the most detailed exploration of Strauss's debt and challenge to Cohen, see Leora Batnitzky, "Hermann Cohen and Leo Strauss," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 13, no. 1-2 (2004) and Chapter 5, "The Possibility of Premodern Rationalism: Strauss's Transformation of Hermann Cohen," in *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas*. For Strauss's most extensive reflections on Cohen, see his Introduction in Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995).
[23] Leo Strauss, "Preface to *Hobbes Politische Wissenschaft*," JPCM, 453.

represented nothing less than the end of Judaism. While critical of Cohen's messianic liberalism, in his 1923 *Star of Redempetion*, Rosenzweig also argued on behalf of a stark opposition between Judaism and modern nationalism. To Rosenzsweig, rather than through land and the violence which land necessarily required for protection, the Jews were constituted by ritual and by the bonds of family and kinship. It was in their rejection of territory and sovereignty that the Jewish people offered the world an alternative vision of social and collective life, one not dependent upon violence.[24]

To Strauss, Cohen's vision of a Judaism that over time would humanize the nation-states of Europe relied on a profound misunderstanding of European political life. After World War I it was impossible to still believe that the European nations could be inspired to realize some vision of universal human equality. The continent was defined by national difference, and Jewish survival depended on recognizing this unalterable fact. Rosenzweig's picture of a Judaism beyond world history, on the other hand, imagined that the Jews could somehow live outside of political life and avoid the basic choice which pressed upon them. That basic choice, as Strauss understood it, was quite simple: liberalism or nationalism.[25]

Despite his embrace of the nationalist option, Strauss followed both Cohen and Rosenzweig in insisting upon the fundamental opposition between Judaism and Zionism that both diagnosed. But whereas for Rosenzweig and Cohen that opposition led them to their opposition to Zionism, Strauss turned his criticism towards Judaism. In insisting that Judaism as it had developed in *galut* was fundamentally averse to and inhospitable to political life, Strauss followed the dominant currents of political Zionism. But unlike most political Zionists, Strauss refused to consider Zionism a retrieval of a more authentic Judaism or as the recognition of some natural or innate Jewish characteristic. Such appeals denied the revolution that Zionism entailed, and the revolution that Zionism

[24] Franz Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption,* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 328-334.
[25] Leora Batnitzky helpfully describes Strauss's choice in these terms in Leora Batnitzky, "Leo Strauss and the 'Thelogical-Political Predicament'," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, 43.

demanded.

This position led Strauss to attack all the various positions on offer, but it was the cultural Zionists and followers of Buber that provided Strauss with the stone against which he would sharpen his blade throughout the decade. For Strauss, such Zionists were unwilling to recognize the full consequences of the revolution that modernity wrought for Jews and Judaism, what Strauss termed the transition from the *Entwirklichtheit* (unreality, or unreal-ness) of Jewish exile and *galut* to the *Einwirklichung* (reality, or realization) offered and demanded by Zionism. While Strauss attacked the cultural Zionists for intellectual dishonesty, however, his own position forced him to concede that their criticism of political Zionism — that political Zionism was hardly "Jewish" at all — had bite. This point, Strauss conceded, offered the most significant challenge to the claims of political Zionism to which he adhered.

Strauss's first published article, the 1923 editorial "Response to Frankfurt's 'Word of Principle,'" addressed a controversy among Zionist student groups provoked by a proposed merger, in December 1922, between two different wings of the Zionist youth movement.[26] One wing was modeled on a secularized political Zionism indebted to German nationalism, the other a cultural Zionism that embraced a distinctively Jewish spiritual renewal. Strauss was a partisan of the former against the latter, but he argued both appealed to a lost Jewish past while failing to recognize the degree to which their own projects were shaped by a break from that past.[27] The only difference, for Strauss, was that the political Zionists were more honest about the implications of the rupture. The achievements of the Zionist movement, Strauss insisted, allowed its members to be honest about the destination of the intellectual current along which Buber and the cultural Zionists traveled, a current

[26] Leo Strauss, "Response to 'Frankfurt's Word of Principle'" in *EW*, 63-75. Originally published in *Judische Rundschau* (Berlin) 28, no. 9 (30 January 1923): 45-46. On the history of the major German Jewish youth organizations, see Juhuda Reinharz, "Three Generations of German Zionism," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 9 (Fall 1978): 95-110.
[27] EW, 65-66

which flowed from a reinterpretation of the divine as immanent to the eventual rejection of both God and Jewish cultural authority in the name of survival and power.[28]

These values of survival and power, Strauss conceded, were not "Jewish values" – but this was precisely the point. In an extension but reversal of Buber's criticism of political Zionism, Strauss agreed that this embrace of European values was shared by both the young Zionists and the liberal assimilationists to which they are opposed. But where Buber had condemned political Zionism on these grounds, Strauss endorsed it for the same reason. "Now that Jewish nationalism has passed into the contemporary consciousness, one is *finally* allowed to emphasize the specifically German Jewish values," Strauss wrote, "precisely in the interest of Zionism."[29] This phenomenon of what Strauss called "Germanization" was true for both the cultural and the political Zionists — both were united by the drive to enter reality ("*Einwirklichung*"), by the effort to "gain access to history." Strauss described the aims of this entrance in remarkably "Germanic" terms: "land and soil, power and arms, peasantry and aristocracy."[30]

The cultural Zionists, Strauss argued, could not accept that Zionism was a thoroughly novel movement, not a recovery. It represented as much of a radical break from the Jewish past as did liberal assimilation. Borrowing from Pinsker's earlier depiction of the Jews of Europe, Strauss wrote that "entering reality" required forcing open the world of a "ghost people."[31] But those who walked out of the gates were radically transformed by the journey. The world of the shtetl could only be opened by liberalism's division between the religious and the profane, which allowed Jews to consider the public arena and the religious realm as distinct and separate. But that division, Strauss held, is altogether foreign to Judaism, which doesn't allow for such an easy separation between

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[28] EW, 67
[29] EW., 67
[30] EW, 68
[31] See Leon Pinsker, "Auto-Emancipation," in Arthur Hertzberg, ed. *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993).

economy, politics, and worship. The consequence for Jews long prevented from accessing German culture was that the "religious" realm became defined by Jewish practice while the arena of the "profane" —i.e. politics — was flooded with German influence. "The dynamics of Germanization," writes Strauss, "led to the specific form of German Jewish Zionism." That is, while Judaism as a religion was shaped by the Jewish past, Zionism was shaped by the German present.[32] While defending political Zionism against the criticism of the cultural Zionists, Strauss conceded the substance of the indictment: that political Zionism was vacant of Jewish content. But this was because the content of Judaism was adverse to the political demands of modern life.

This was the Zionist dilemma. While Zionists embraced nationalism on behalf of Jewish needs and aims, that nationalism was, by its nature, not only not of Jewish origin but adverse to Judaism and represented its rejection. This is how Strauss put it in that first article:

> This is precisely what constitutes our present-day dilemma, namely that *Germanization was supposed to have just the formal significance of a fortuitous path to the necessary goal of entering into reality (Einwirklichung), while, in fact this path has deviated, and had to deviate, from the content that alone could fill this reality*; for the attitude that held this content together like an iron ring, the spirit that was alive in them, was the spirit of *galut*.[33]

Emancipation, what Strauss sarcastically called here the "fortuitous path" by which Jews might enter reality (*Einwirklichung*), was considered to be nothing more than the means by which Jews might enter European history – the doors to the ghetto suddenly unlocked. But the people behind those gates were shaped and formed precisely by their condition behind those walls. The work of entering-into-reality, therefore, necessarily required a rejection of the principles that had guided that people, what had "held" them "together like an iron ring:" the "spirit of *Galut*." As Strauss puts it in striking terms just after this paragraph, German Jewish nationalism therefore represented a "castration" of the Jewish past – but from the perspective of national needs it was a "positive development." With

[32] EW, 68.
[33] EW, 68. Emphasis in the original.

the jarring metaphor, Strauss imagined a new circumcision that inverted Spinoza's declaration that a return to politics would require that Jews cast off the effeminate nature of Jewish religion (so influential to Zionist appeals of a new Jewish masculinity).[34] The new movement was an amputation. But it was a necessary surgery.

Throughout the 1920s, Strauss continued to insist that Zionism could only thrive if it recognized the full force of its break with the Jewish past. As he pursued this point, he extended the challenge that he only suggested in his first article on the Frankfurt school. It wasn't just the student disciples of Buber that were unwilling to recognize the extent of the break that Zionism represented with Judaism, he argued, but the founding fathers of political Zionism themselves – including the figure that, as we've seen, perhaps more than any other Zionist insisted on the necessity of radical Jewish self-transformation.[35] As noted in the last chapter, there was perhaps no Zionist more hostile to Jewish life in *galut* than Max Nordau.[36] Against the debilitating deformity of rabbinic Judaism, Nordau appealed to a Judaism of honor cast in the mold of the brave warriors of the *bar kochba* rebellion. But as Strauss read him, even Nordau refused to recognize the extent of the break that he himself advanced. The reason was that Nordau like other Zionists imagined a return to a lost past, and in so doing failed to recognize the degree to which Zionism was a product of the emancipatory forces he attacked.

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[34] For this reception, see Daniel B. Schwartz, *The First Modern Jew: Spinoza and the History of an Image* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

[35] Leo Strauss, "The Zionism of Nordau," in *The Early Writings*, 83-90. Also originally published in *Der Jude: Eine Monatsschrift* (Berlin) 7, nos 10-11 (October-November 1923): 657-70.

[36] Steven B. Smith, for example, suggests that there is little in Nordau's writing to justify Strauss's claim that Nordau "makes a principle of the Jewish people's powerlessness - indeed, of its aversion to power." Smith notes, correctly, that this is a strange claim to make about Nordau, a writer whom Ahad Ha'am had derided as enthralled with European notions of honor altogether foreign to Judaism. While Smith is correct on this point, as I read Strauss's criticism of Nordau as having much less to do with an aversion to political power as such than a failure to recognize the extent of the Zionist break from Judaism. See Steven B. Smith, "Leo Strauss's Discovery of the theologico-political problem," 392. For a summary of Ahad Ha'am's review of Nordau's play, see Stansilawski, 86. Strauss's main piece of evidence is not any writing of Nordau's but a complaint written by Herzl in his diary: "Nordau finds me insincere and underhanded in my dealings with princes and with the Jewish people. I think one day he will make public this reproach of his, and thereby disgrace himself, me, and all of us." Quoted by Strauss in *EW*, 84.

In its traditional form, Strauss argued in his essay on Nordau, Judaism retained the idea of Jewish national unity by tying the realization of that unity to the coming of the messianic age. This was a political theology that maintained a distinctly political identity while abdicating any action on behalf of that identity to God. As Strauss put it, "[t]he ideas of Chosenness and of the Messiah uphold under all circumstances the faith in the possibility and necessity [of] a national future, [while] these same ideas prevent that faith from leading to action." To Strauss, this position was constitutive of Judaism, and integral to Jewish survival.

> *All* Jewish customs and ways serve the purpose of segregation from the peoples, hence they are in the service of preserving the national existence; on the other hand, by keeping the people away from the conditions of normal life of a people, they prevent this very life. The absence of a political center has the same effect: the Jewish people cannot be annihilated at any one spot – and on, on the other hand, just for that reason all comprehensive political action is impossible. This therefore is the essence of *galut*: it provides the Jewish people with a maximal possibility of existence by means of a minimum normality.

The crucial point was that Judaism had survived politically precisely because political action and its attendant risks were rejected as heretical. The inseparability of messianism and national political life had ensured Jewish survival through millennia. Emancipation untied this link, but Zionists had failed to recognize the consequence of the separation.

Liberalism (or what Strauss referred to as "assimilation") separated the two by replacing messianism with "missionism" — liberal Jews embraced the new regime of universal rights, and in so doing "secularized the ideas of the *galut* that, for all their mysticism, had a very sober vital function."[37] Such a project was doomed to fail, Strauss argued, for it "completely deludes itself about the attitude of the host nations."[38] Those nations were not interested in Jews as co-citizens, and therefore not particularly receptive to their missionary zeal. Unlike the project of liberal assimilation, Zionism recognized the nature of Jewish difference. But Zionists also separated Zionism from

[37] Ibid., 86.
[38] Ibid.

messianism, insisting that a return to the land of Israel did not depend on the arrival of a messianic age, and this separation was also only possible as a consequence of assimilation.[39] Because Nordau could not admit that Zionism was produced by the forces of assimilation, Strauss declared, he could not recognize how Zionism "continues and heightens the de-Judaizing tendency of assimilation." In so doing, Strauss argued, Nordau "fails to achieve an understanding of the internal legitimacy, the Jewish necessity, of a Jewish development that is influenced by and learns from European nationalism and anti-Semitism."[40] With this argument, Strauss continued to insist on the radicality of Zionism as a rejection of Judaism. But in so doing he ran into an obvious dilemma: how could "de-Judaization" represent "internal legitimacy" for Judaism?

As Strauss continued to insist upon a Zionism that recognized the nature of its revolt against Judaism, this question only grew more difficult. In a 1925 article for "The Jewish Student," Strauss named the dilemma with concision.[41] Jewish politics, he declared is "opposed to [Jewish] tradition." The reason, he explained, was that "tradition, according to its meaning, excludes politics, that is, politics understood as a will sustained by the conscious responsibility of the existence and dignity of a people."[42] Cultural Zionists had attempted "to bridge the opposition by reducing religion to altruistic ethics (Ahad Ha'am) or to the socialism of a 'community' (early Buber) – in short, to a merely interhuman phenomenon, and by perverting into a politics of the 'spirit' the realpolitik devised by Herzl."[43] But Strauss conceded that the problem did not avail itself of any obvious solution. He "objected on principle," he declared, "to any attempt to deprive this crisis of its seriousness through cheap simplification or through even cheaper hopes" such as those who declare

[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., 86-87
[41] Leo Strauss, "Comment on Weinberg's Critique," in EW, 118-124. Originally published in *Der Jüdische Student* 22 (1925): 15-18.
[42] EW., 119.
[43] Ibid.

that in "Palestine this synthesis is sure to come about organically." But what other avenue was there? He concluded there was "no way leading out of this crisis."[44]

As the crisis as it had come to take shape for Strauss, it presented two profound challenges. First, if Zionism represented a rejection of Judaism, then what exactly was the content of Zionism? Second, if Zionism depended upon a rejection of Judaism, how might Judaism be saved from the Zionist assault to it? Throughout the decade, Strauss's writing would circle around these two questions.

Rescuing Revelation

Many decades after he left Germany, in the 1965 preface to the German edition of his work on Hobbes, Strauss would note that it was when writing on Spinoza in the late 1920s that he became forced to "investigate how far the critique of orthodox theology – Jewish and Christian – deserved to be victorious." The impetus was what he described then as the "reawakening of theology" represented by the work of Franz Rosenzweig and Karl Barth. In the context of his preoccupation with the problem of the political Zionism to which he was committed, that reawakening provoked a formidable challenge. For if the critique of orthodox theology was not as victorious as he had assumed, then his militant defense of political Zionism was not as coherent as he imagined. But if that defense was less than coherent, then the Judaism against which it rebelled would prove resistant to the assault that Strauss himself was waging. As Strauss suggested in 1965, it was through Barth and Rosenzweig that he began to question whether his dismissal of religious orthodoxy was as justified as he had assumed.

When it came to Barth, as Samuel Moyn has shown, Strauss's early work was indebted above all to Barth's rejection of "experientialism," the notion that God might be encountered through

[44] Ibid.

individual human "experience."[45] That idea had been most influentially expressed by Friederich Schleirmacher, who in the early 19th century declared that God was known not through rational deduction but through experience and feeling. Barth dedicated himself to attacking this idea.[46] As he put in in the first page of his monumental commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans*, God "is not within him but above him – unapproachably different and unalterably strange."[47] The idea that God's presence was felt in emotional feeling, Barth argued, reduced description of God to affirmation of human experience. As Barth put it, "one cannot speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice." Such theology made God the servant of human beings, turning human emotions and human rationality into idols. To Barth, the political implications of such Christianity were evident in the rubble and blood that the first war had left in its wake. As Barth saw it, it was no coincidence that so many of his own Christian experientialist teachers had supported Germany's war effort. "They have wished to experience the known God of this world," Barth wrote of Schleiermacher's 20th century disciples. "Well! now they have experienced him."[48]

As early as 1914, in his first published article of philosophy, Franz Rosenzweig had offered an analog to this position, implicitly assaulting the religious thought of Martin Buber as borrowing upon and following from a Christian theology of experience.[49] Traditional Judaism, wrote Rosenzweig, takes the future Kingdom of God as the precondition and justification for Jewish law and practice. According to the cultural and spiritual Zionism of Buber and his followers, however, God's promise is only "considered a historical subcase of the yearning for the unity of life inherent in the character of the Jewish people." With this shift, "[t]he ultimate and self-sufficient bearer" of

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[45] Samuel Moyn, "From Experience to Law: Leo Strauss and the Weimar Crisis of the Philosophy of Religion," *History of European Ideas* 33, no. 2 (2007), 174-194.
[46] See "Preface to *Hobbes Politsche Wissenschaft*, JPCM, 453.
[47] Quoted in Moyn, 185.
[48] Quoted in Moyn, Ibid.
[49] "Atheistic Theology," in Franz Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings* Ed. Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000), 10-24.

Jewish longing is transplanted from God to the "Jewish people."[50] In making such a shift, those who offered a Jewish theology of "experience" retained the traditional Jewish view that Jewish life and only Jewish life offers an exceptional and uniquely important path by which unity between self and community might be achieved. In so doing, such a Judaism relies upon the structure of the revelation it rejects. After all, if not through God's election then what would make Jewish experience unique? What Rosenzweig in 1914 called "atheistic theology" could not circumvent the revelation it sought to deny. As long as Jewish life and Jewish politics asserted some specific and unique role for Jewish national life, it relied on a vision of Jewish particularity that was only coherent in the context of Jewish revelation.[51]

Together, Rosenzweig and Barth offered Strauss a theological framework by which to attack cultural Zionism while defending political Zionism as a Jewish politics that recognized the radical division between God's transcendence and Jewish communal needs. But their insistence on the viability of revelation pressed all the more forcefully on the dilemma of Zionism as Strauss had identified it. For if revelation was impervious to philosophical criticism, then the rejection of revelation central to political Zionism as Strauss understood it was bound to fail. Throughout the early writings, one can find Strauss wrestling with this dilemma. On one hand, Barth's indictment of experientialism and Rosenzweig's critique of "atheistic theology" offered a sharp scalpel with which to dissect his cultural Zionist antagonists. On the other, the account of revelation that he defended made him ever more skeptical of the Zionism with which he was aligned.

Strauss toggled between these two modes throughout his early writing, on one hand defending a Judaism of radical transcendence, on the other attacking those Zionists he accused of attempting to give to Zionism spiritual content. The former mode is on full display in his reflections on the

[50] Ibid., 20.
[51] Ibid., 24.

theology of Rudolf Otto, who in 1917 had published his classic *The Idea of the Holy*. In that work, Otto argued that religious experience revolved around an encounter with "the wholly other." Such radical transcendence pointed to a God outside of human experience, and therefore beyond experientialism.[52] But, Strauss noted, Otto could not escape the "particularly Protestant subjectivism" which he sought to overcome. His "idea of the Holy" ultimately rested as much on experience as that theology Otto attempted to reject. While such limitations might be decisive for protestant readers, they were "not binding" on his Jewish ones. Transcendence, Strauss concluded, ultimately means the following: God is beyond experience, "independent of his being experienced by man,"; God is "beyond life," radically apart from and distinct from human beings; and God is beyond the "idea" of God.[53] In collapsing the distance between God and human beings, Christianity had foreclosed the possibility of this sort of transcendence. Judaism preserved it.[54]

These early writings forecast Strauss's eventual reflections on Jewish revelation, but in their context they serve Strauss's polemical attacks on cultural Zionism. Strauss wrote his reflection on Otto in Buber's Zionist journal and framed it by asking how the "Zionist youth movement" might "apply to our own problems [non-Jewish German] philosophical, sociological, or historical theories."[55] In so doing, Strauss was not only insisting on a radical opposition between Judaism as radical transcendence and Zionism as a thoroughly earthly and immanent political project. He was accusing cultural Zionists of turning Zionism into a Judaism of experience, and in so doing

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[52] Leo Strauss, "The Holy," in EW, 76. (Originally published in *Der Jude: Eine Monatsschrift* (Berlin) 7, no. 4 (April 1923): 240-42.)
[53] Ibid., 77.
[54] The last point here offered to a not-too subtle criticism of Hermann Cohen, the figure perhaps most closely associated with the notion that the Jewish god is best understood as an idea, and a primary target of Otto's challenge (they were both faculty at Marburg). Moyn helpfully maps out the theological debates at Marburg in Moyn, 178-181. In these arguments, however, Strauss also closely followed upon Cohen by arguing that Judaism realized a claim presented by protestants but that only Judaism could. See Leo Strauss, "On the Argument with the European Sciences," in EW, 107-117. (Originally published in *Der Jude: Eine Monatsschrift* (Berlin) 8, no. 10 (October 1924), 613-17.) On this, see Leora Batnitzky's discussion of Strauss and Cohen in *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas*, Chapter 5.
[55] EW, 75.

Christianizing Judaism.

While this radically transcendent Judaism was impervious to political Zionism's attack on tradition, the obvious difficulty was that it also undermined the political Zionism Strauss was so busy defending. If political Zionism could not defeat Judaism, this meant that Judaism would remain potent, in all of its radical opposition to Zionist demands. In Strauss's last article dedicated to Zionist themes, his 1928 reflections on Sigmund Freud's *The Future of An Illusion*, he would concede this point even as he offered perhaps his most forceful polemic against those unwilling to face the gulf between Jewish religion and the requirements of worldly politics.[56] Repeating his earlier line of attack, Strauss argued that the cultural Zionists imagined that Jews could have the "breadth and plenty" of their tradition without all the stuff about God's transcendence. They saw Judaism as a reflection of the "spirit" of the Jewish people, rather than a command of God. But once the cultural Zionist "comprehends what he denies, namely, once he comprehends that it is God he denies, then he will lose, once and for all, his appetite for the culture propagated by cultural Zionism."[57] Cultural Zionism could not but lead away from Jewish "culture," either towards orthodoxy or towards a Zionism defined by worldly needs alone.

What the cultural Zionist could not accept was that "the presupposition of the Zionist will to normalization, that is, of the Zionist negation of the *galut*, is the conviction that 'the power of religion has been broken.'"[58] Zionism was not only a political movement, but a movement to reestablish Judaism in a world in which belief in the Biblical God was no longer possible. "In the age of atheism, the Jewish people can no longer base its existence on God," Strauss declared, "but only on itself alone, on its labor, on its land, and on its state."[59]

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[56] "Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*," in *EW*, 201-211. Originally published in *Der Jüdische Student* 25, no. 4 (August 1928): 16-22.
[57] Ibid., 203.
[58] Ibid., 202 Strauss is quoting the translator and Hebraist Jacob Klatzkin.
[59] Ibid.

In light of his reading of Otto, however, this is an odd argument – for wasn't Strauss at the same time working to uncover a Judaism that might resist the dangers of the "age of atheism?" And indeed, as much as his review of Freud's work seems to defend a Zionism of militant atheism, the essay is marked by a telling ambiguity. As much as Freud helped clarify the nature of the choice on behalf of Zionism, Strauss suggested, he also illuminated the limited scope of Zionism's achievement. Freud helped to purge "the religious notions" from Zionism, but on the matter of religion more broadly, "every attempt to justify directly by scientific means the denial of the existence of God is fundamentally deficient."[60] After all, "the realm of scientific knowledge is so limited that science cannot refute religion."[61] This concession, however, seems to undermine much of the preceding argument. If science cannot refute religion, and if belief in God is one belief among equally justifiable positions, it would seem that political Zionism and the orthodox rejection of Jewish nationalism are both equally legitimate. If Zionism is simply "belief in the Jewish nation" as against "belief in God" then it rested as much on an article of faith as did the religious belief it rejected. By the end of the decade, the dilemma of Zionism had shifted for Strauss from a battle between sober analysis and false faith to one between a Judaism of revelation and a Judaism of nationalism. But as the dilemma clarified, the grounds for deciding in favor of the latter over the former dissolved. After all, insofar as both Zionism and orthodoxy represent articles of faith, each was as legitimate as the other.

This was not, however, the only reason Strauss turned away from the unequivocal political Zionism of his youth. In his review of Freud's book, Strauss wrote that Freud helped reveal that political Zionism rested on nothing other than European "civilization." But "better the honest narrowness and barrenness" of that "civilization," he argued, "than the breadth and plenty that the

[60] Ibid., 204.
[61] Ibid., 205.

atheist would be able to purchase only at the price of a lie."[62] But as we saw in Chapter one, by the end of the 1930s Strauss would conclude that European "civilization" ultimately descended into nihilism, a celebration and pursuit of power void of any content other than a celebration of its own strength. In light of that later argument, we can see why later in life Strauss would reflect that throughout his engagement with Zionism as a young man he was caught in the "grip" of the "theological-political predicament." In its rejection of Judaism, Zionism not only rebelled against the Jewish past but against the notion that political authority could reside in anything other than the Jewish people. This notion, Strauss insisted, represented a profound rejection of traditional Judaism. But it also reflected a dynamic that we've seen as central to Strauss's narrative of modernity, by which the measure of justice, morality and political purpose was transported from nature or God to a people considered, in and of themselves, sovereign. As we've seen, Strauss argued that this account not only purged moral and ethical content of political life, but ultimately descended into a rejection of morality itself.

It is therefore fitting but nonetheless striking to find Strauss, in his mature work, turning to Zionism as exemplary of what he took to be fundamental limitations of contemporary political thought. In "What is Political Philosophy," delivered in Jerusalem in 1954, Strauss turned to the founder of Political Zionism Leon Pinsker as representative of political thought that "resort to principles accepted by public opinion" that "dogmatically assume principles which can well be questioned." As example Strauss pointed to the epigraph Pinsker offered in his *Auto-emancipation*, the famous lines of the Jewish sage Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if not now, when?" Strauss, however, pointed out that Pinsker omitted the words the third question, "And if I am only for myself, what am I?" The rejection was, Strauss suggested, crucial for the whole

[62] Ibid., 203.

argument on behalf of Zionism.[63] But it was not an argument that Pinsker defended; instead, Strauss noted, Pinsker simply accepted that political life required a concern for one's own, above and before and in distinction to everyone else.[64]

Given this conclusion, we might expect that Strauss would have distanced himself from Zionism dramatically. But instead, he maintained that the founding of the state of Israel "procured a blessing for all Jews everywhere whether they admit it or not?"[65] He declared that the "nobility of Israel is literally beyond praise, the only bright spot for the contemporary Jew who knows where he comes from."[66] These declarations, one might fairly conclude, call into question my claim that, in Strauss's view, political Zionism was ultimately empty of moral content. But it was not despite but because Zionism reflected problems the moral vacancy of so much modern political life that Strauss remained, however hesitantly and ambivalently, committed to it.

The Ouroboros: The Dialectic of Zionism

After the 1920s Strauss would never again dedicate an entire piece of writing to Zionism, and it is no wonder. His reflections led him into a necessarily conflicted relationship to the movement to which he had been so dedicated. Zionism recognized the illusion of emancipation, and the fact that the Jews would never be accepted as equals by their European neighbors. Yet Zionism rested on a rejection of Judaism that was ultimately untenable. On one hand, this was a good thing – Zionism was unable to defeat Judaism. But on the other hand, this meant that Zionism could never fully

[63] WIPP, 13. Strauss also used the epigraph as summary of political Zionism's main claim in the Preface to *Spinoza's Critique*. See JPCM, 142.
[64] In somewhat frustrating (although typical) fashion, Strauss wrote that "for a justification, one would have to turn to the 3rd and 16th chapters of Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, to a work of a political philosopher" but did not explain what those chapters might show. Those chapters refer, respectively, to Spinoza's interpretation of election and Jewish law. Both, Spinoza held, must be understood as purely instrumental. Election refers strictly to the strength of the Hebrew republic and its longevity, and the laws were simply in order to secure obedience within that political community.
[65] "Preface to *Spinoza's Critique*," JPCM, 142.
[66] Strauss, "Existentialism," *Interpretation* 22, no. 3 (1995), 307.

overcome those forces within Judaism hostile to Zionism. Those forces would remain within it, a clay that would over time come to crack open the casing which held it.

In several later lectures and writings Strauss would succinctly summarize the ambivalent position to which his earlier reflections had led. The cultural Zionists were right, he came to conclude, that Zionism was empty of content without the Judaism political Zionists sought to reject. Once Jewish nationalism became Zionism – as soon as the project of national sovereignty was seen as inseparable from a return to the land of Israel and a reclamation of the Hebrew language – it conceded to the Biblical authority it sought to reject.[67] Accepting these elements meant accepting the basic element of "cultural Zionism:" that Zionism represented a revival of Jewish tradition. As Strauss put it in the 1965 *Preface to Spinoza's Critique* and in a reversal of his earlier view, what the cultural Zionists understood was that "the Jewish state would be an empty shell without a Jewish culture which has its roots in the Jewish heritage."[68]

In keeping with his early reflections on Jewish revelation, however, Strauss insisted that Judaism's "authoritative layer" presented itself from within the tradition as a divine gift. Therefore, he asked, "did not one completely distort the meaning of the heritage to which one claimed to be loyal by interpreting it as a culture like any other high culture?"[69] Political Zionists were wrong to think that Judaism could simply be transformed into a nation like any other, but cultural Zionists were wrong to imagine that Zionism could transform Judaism into a culture like any other. The land and the language were inescapably Biblical, and any politics that relied on both also depended on the Biblical Covenant. Despite their efforts, cultural Zionists depended as much on the radical mystery and transcendence of God as did the rabbinic authorities against whom they thought they rebelled.

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[67] As Strauss put it in the 1952 lecture at the University of Chicago Hillel, "Zionism in practice if not principle accepted "not only the territory hallowed by Jewish tradition but its language as well." JPCM, 92.
[68] Ibid., 143.
[69] Ibid., 143.

At times Strauss seemed to suggest that religious Zionism, as the tradition that understood Zionism as a fulfillment of tradition rather than a rejection of it, might therefore represent the only coherent Judaism available in modernity.[70] But in the 1962 preface that can be considered his most definitive analysis, Strauss made clear that religious Zionism also remained a contradiction in terms. According to religious Zionism, the return to the land is a matter of divine obligation. But "when religious Zionism understands itself," he wrote, "it is in the first place Jewish faith and only secondarily Zionism. It must regard as blasphemous the notion of a human solution to the Jewish problem."[71] Ultimately, religious Zionism justifies the return to the land of Israel not because it is necessary for Jewish survival nor for the sake of Jewish national revival nor as a means by which Jews might exercise the universal right to national self-determination, but as a response to God's command. But religious Zionism cannot but undermine the aims of political Zionism, for it rejects the idea that the future of the Jewish people is a matter for that people to determine for themselves. A religious Zionism properly understood is ultimately impervious to the requirements of political life – as such, it is in the end not Zionism at all.

Zionism, Strauss concluded, cannot escape this path – its political formulation slips into its religious formulation, which negates its political aims. For this reason, Strauss concluded, "the state of Israel is the most profound modification to the *galut* which has occurred, but it is not the end of *galut*."[72] In this, Strauss had come to agree with Rosenzweig. As Rosenzweig wrote in the *Star*, "this people has a land of its own only in that it has a land it yearns for – a holy land. And so even when it

[70] Strauss suggests this in "Why we Remain Jews" – "The only consistent solution, the only clear solution, is that which abandons, or which goes beyond, cultural Zionism and becomes clearly religious Zionism. And this means: return to the Jewish faith, return to the faith of our ancestors." In that lecture, Strauss suggests that the trouble is not that religious Zionism is incoherent but that it is not available to most Jews. "But here we are up against a difficulty…what shall those Jews do who cannot believe as our ancestors believed? So while religious Zionism is the only clear solution, it is not feasible, humanly speaking, for all Jews." JPCM 320. While this rendering admittedly softens the dilemma, I think we can take Strauss's analysis in the "Preface to *Spinoza's Critique"* as authoritative for two reason: he wrote it the year after "Why We Remain Jews?" and he wrote it for publication.
[71] JPCM., 143.
[72] Ibid., 143.

has a home, this people, in contrast to all other peoples on earth, is not allowed full possession of that home. It is only 'a stranger and a sojourner.'"[73] Jews could return to the land of Israel, but they could not escape exile. Nationalism could not excise Jewish election; normalization could not cure exception.

In the annals of 20th century Jewish thought, Strauss's insight into the precarious foundations of Zionism is distinctive and provocative, but not entirely unique. Among 20th-century Jewish thinkers it is most closely mirrored in the reflections of Gershom Scholem, and a brief turn to Scholem's thoughts on Zionism brings Strauss's analysis into sharper focus.[74] Given the distance between their respective reputations, one the scholar of Jewish mysticism the other the conservative philosopher of antiquity, the parallel between their positions is somewhat surprising. But as noted they were both products of the Weimar period (Scholem was three years older than Strauss, and moved to Jerusalem in 1923), and Scholem would name the antagonist of his intellectual labors in terms that could easily be used to describe the target of Strauss's Jewish thought: "The petit bourgeois side of Judaism [that] consists in its ignoring the paradoxes contained in the living realities of Judaism."[75]

They were also friends throughout their long lives. The two met sometime in the early 1920s, likely while Strauss was working at the Academy of Jewish Studies headed by Guttman. In the following decade, Scholem would work unsuccessfully to secure for Strauss an appointment at Hebrew University, and they remained in conversation throughout their long scholarly careers. Yet in their early years, they were on opposite sides of the debate that provided the impetus for Strauss's first articles. Scholem argued that those like Strauss believed that "in order to safeguard Jewish honor in the eyes of the Gentiles, we had to organize ourselves the way that Gentiles did and carry

[73] Franz Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption,* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 300.
[74] See, for example, Steven B. Smith, "Gershom Scholem and Leo Strauss: Notes Toward a German-Jewish Dialogue," *Modern Judaism* 13, no. 3 (1993), 209-29.
[75] Scholem, Jews and Judaism in Crisis, 37.

the war back to them in their style."[76] "This," he recalled "repelled me." Such an effort, it seemed to Scholem, was an imitation of "alien frameworks, singing 400-year-old mercenaries songs."[77] As we've seen, Strauss also thought that such frameworks were "alien" to Judaism. But that was their asset; Zionism as a whole was alien to Judaism, and therefore required "alien frameworks" for support.

For both Scholem and Strauss, however, this verdict provoked the same crisis: how could Judaism survive a Zionism so understood? As Scholem would put in an interview late in life, "I have never been among those who accepted [the slogan 'like all nations'] as a legitimate formulation of the goal of Zionism. I am quite convinced that the realization of this slogan could only mean the transition to the decline or even disappearance of the Jewish people."[78] The following year he would make the point more strongly: If such an aim "should materialized," he said, "it will be the end of the Jewish people." Strauss came at the problem from the other direction, asking how Zionism might untether itself from Judaism. But as Strauss came to uncover a notion of Jewish revelation that was ultimately impervious to political demands, he landed in an analysis of the relationship between Judaism and Zionism surprisingly close to Scholem's.

In the 1975 interview, Scholem noted that he was not worried that Zionism would ever fully swallow Judaism. "I share the traditional view," he noted, "that even if we *wish* to be a nation like all the nations, we will not succeed." The reason, he had written the previous year, was that "the secular character of the Zionist movement always contradicted its inescapable involvement with religious problematics." Therefore, Scholem was "convinced that behind its profane and secular façade," Zionism's potential but still obscured religious content was "much stronger than the actual content

[76] Ibid., 12
[77] Ibid., 13
[78] Ibid., 294.

finding its expression in the 'religious Zionism' of political parties."[79] Strauss, as we've seen, came to a similar conclusion.

While Strauss came to conclude that the crux of the problem revolved around Jewish claims to land, as early as 1926 Scholem – who had moved to Jerusalem three years earlier – worried over the combustible power of the Hebrew language. "Many believe that the language has been secularized," he wrote in a letter to Rosenzweig on the latter's birthday. But this, Scholem held, was "not true at all." The language was a "volcano" upon which the entire project of Zionism sat. Its common use for everyday tasks obscured the power that lurked in each word. "We have no right," he wrote, "to conjure up the old names day by day without calling forward their hidden power." A politics paved by of such names was an "apocalyptic road." "Let us hope," he wrote in the letter's last line and in concession to Rosenzweig's fears, that it does not end "in ruin."[80]

Scholem was more troubled by the potential of that "hidden power" than Strauss ever expressed. But because Scholem was also more sympathetic to those powers, he was more hopeful about the possibilities. Scholem continued to see in Zionism the possibility of a revival of Judaism, a revival that would produce some heretofore unknown and novel iteration of Judaism and Jewish life. As he put it in 1975, Zionism was a "calculated risk."[81] He remained hopeful that the risk would be worth the price and throughout his life remained committed to Zionism and to the Israel in which he lived. Strauss was more skeptical. Despite his concession to cultural Zionism, Strauss never embraced the idea that Zionism might provoke any kind of Jewish spiritual renewal. In nearly every mention of Zionism in his mature he work, he insisted that it did not and could not solve the Jewish question, that it only reframed Jewish difference in altered form, and that it was theoretically

[79] Ibid., 295.
[80] Sholem's letter is included in full in William Cotter, "Ghostly Hebrew, Ghastly Speech: Scholem to Rosenzweig, 1926," *Prooftexts* 10, no. 3 (1990), 416-417.
[81] See Scholem, Jews and Judaism in Crisis, 34.

contradictory and self-defeating. But he nonetheless remained committed to Zionism in spite of this failure and in spite of its dangers. So how to explain the sustained support?

Of those who have pursued the question, Simon Taylor has done most to resolve it. He argues that we can read Strauss's seemingly contradictory statements as reflective of a divide within his own person, between the Jew that recognizes the necessity of certain "myths" required for life, and the philosopher who by vocation unravels those same commitments. In short (although he doesn't put it in these precise terms), Taylor suggests that his support for Zionism reflects an "exoteric" commitment, his criticism "esoteric." Taylor doesn't note what is perhaps the most compelling piece of evidence in support of this reading, Strauss's account of the "noble lie" in his long essay on *The Republic*. There, Strauss suggests that Plato declared a single myth essential for the whole of political life: that a particular area of land belongs solely to a particular people, who are by virtue of their relationship to that land distinguished from all others. In Strauss's view, this is the "noble lie *par excellance*." As the basis for a notion of citizenship necessary for all politics it is "noble," but it is a "lie" because it is plainly opposed to a basic commitment of philosophy, that truth cannot be bound by geography or place.[82] Given Strauss's insistence on the centrality of land to the Zionist endeavor, it would seem we might readily conclude, with Taylor, that for Strauss Zionism was precisely that sort of "noble lie" upon which political life relies.

There are two difficulties, however, with this interpretation. The first is the objection that meets all efforts to view Strauss as the sort of "esoteric" writer he described, namely that he so forthrightly exposes and dismantles the myths he is taken to defend.[83] If Strauss indeed felt that Zionism was a

[82] CAM, in particular 102-103.

[83] Robert Pippin puts this challenge particularly well in a footnote in one of his essays on Strauss, when he writes: "The paradox of Strauss frequently and openly discussing the supposedly secret "highest things" and also, supposedly, encouraging, in numerous books and articles, that people *not* publish so openly about the "highest things" makes for a bewildering and implausible picture of Strauss's intentions." Robert Pippin, "The Modern World of Leo Strauss," *Political Theory* 20 (no. 3) August 1992, 467.

"noble lie" necessary for Jewish life, it is unlikely he would have so relentlessly pointed out its incoherence. Even in the most frequently cited declaration of Strauss's ongoing support for Israel, his 1957 letter to the editor of the *National Review*, Strauss could not refrain from gesturing toward the limitations of Zionism. There, he wrote that "political Zionism was the attempt to restore their inner freedom, that simple dignity, of which only people who remember their heritage and are loyal to their fate are capable." But even in such a full-throated defense, he couldn't help from noting that "political Zionism is problematic for obvious reasons."[84] He didn't state those "obvious reasons" in the letter, but as we've seen he did state them virtually every other place he mentioned Zionism after 1928. In light of his insistence on pointing out the contradictions, it is hard to conclude that fidelity to the Jewish people led him to maintain his commitment to Zionism. If it did, one would have expected Strauss to obscure his own skepticism. He did the opposite.

The second and more fundamental trouble is that this reading conflates Strauss's repeated support for Zionism with his commitment to Judaism. But as we've seen, it was precisely Strauss's insistence that Judaism and Zionism were in such fundamental conflict that led to his analysis of the unstable dialectic inherent to Zionism. In light of his view of Jewish revelation, it is difficult to read Strauss's support for Zionism as a manifestation of a more general commitment to Judaism or the Jewish people. He clearly held that Zionism's appeal to normalization endangered Judaism properly understood, and that this threat needed to be made explicit.

Where Taylor is surely correct, however, is that Strauss's simultaneous criticism of and commitment to Zionism is reflective of an ultimate acceptance and even affirmation of the contradictions and compromises demanded of all political life. As Strauss put it in the "Preface to Spinoza's Critique," immediately following his analysis of the contradictions of Zionism, "finite,

[84] See "Letter to the Editor: The State of Israel," JPCM, 413.

relative problems can be solved; infinite, absolute problems cannot be solved."[85] The Jewish problem was an infinite problem, because the Jews were not a people that could be "normalized" to accommodate liberalism, nationalism, or any other worldly sovereignty. Judaism's commitment to a divinely revealed law resisted any and all political authorities. And yet the Jews still needed worldly politics – and they needed such politics even more than other peoples might.

As we've seen, Strauss considered liberalism to necessarily protect a degree of prejudice and discrimination. Jews would therefore face a choice, as the pressure to conform would push them to deny their background. Strauss insisted such a denial was not ultimately possible, as the legacy and history of Jewish identity would linger in the eyes of non-Jewish society. But to even attempt the denial was obviously dishonorable.[86] But this meant that dishonor was always a temptation for Jews and Jewish life. Strauss was quite clear that even despite this temptation, liberalism and the discrimination and pressures it protected was the best hope for Jews. "There is nothing better than the uneasy solution offered by liberal society" he declared, "which means legal equality plus private 'discrimination.'" Yet as "uneasy" as this solution was, it could be ameliorated by a self-respect that Zionism and the founding of Israel provided. As he put it in his letter to the *National Review* and in terms borrowed from Ahad Ha'am, "political Zionism was an attempt to restore that *inner freedom*, that simple dignity, of which only people who remember their heritage and are loyal to their fate are capable." In this, it was successful – and Strauss declared that he for one could "never forget what it achieved as a moral force in an era of complete dissolution."[87] Despite its internal incoherence, Zionism offered what liberalism eroded, a basic pride in the capacities and achievements of one's people. Strauss remained committed to Zionism not because it offered the possibility of Jewish self-

[85] JPCM, 143.
[86] This is his basic answer to the question posed by the title of the lecture, "Why we Remain Jews." His answer: there is no other choice, and if there were, it would be dishonorable to take it. See JPCM, 320.
[87] JPCM, 414. Italics mine.

determination or Jewish renewal or Jewish normalization, but because it made somewhat less problematic the option to which it stood in opposition: liberalism. Strauss's homage to Ahad Ha'am reveals the degree to which, even as he challenged a Zionism of normalization, he agreed with Berlin that liberalism could not provide the recognition that liberal equality promised but liberalism in practice denied.[88]

The similarity with Berlin's argument is not restricted to this important point. While Strauss was far more explicit on the dynamic than was Berlin, both suggested that Zionism unleashed forces that could undermine its own aims. Both softened the internal contradiction they each suggested sat at the center of Zionism by declaring the tension reflective of problems fundamental to political life as a whole. Once those dilemmas were recognized as universal, Berlin could defend Zionism as having solved the Jewish question while Strauss could defend it because it had not. But both found in the dilemma of the modern Jewish condition the basic contours of political problems endemic to modern life, and both remained committed to Zionism not because it solved those dilemmas but because it exemplified them.

Yet they understood the problem to which the Jewish question referred in very different terms. Towards the end of "Why we Remain Jews," Strauss distinguished his view from the more general position. A social scientist, he noted, "must be concerned with the Jewish problem among innumerable other problems." As one of many, "he reduces the Jewish problem to something unrecognizable: religious minorities, ethnic minorities."[89] To Strauss, this missed that the Jewish

[88] Strauss would refer to Ahad Ha'am's essay several times, always approvingly. In the question and answer period after the 1965 lecture, Strauss encouraged the questioner to read Ahad Ha'am's "Slavery in Freedom," wherein Ahad Ha'am showed, in Strauss's words, that the Jew of the unemancipated shtetel was "externally a man without rights and in this sense a slave…was not a slave in his heart." Given the ferocity with which Strauss had earlier in his life attacked the cultural Zionism of which Ahad Ha'am is considered the founder, it is somewhat surprising to find him turn to him later in order to make his point. But the point that Ahad Ha'am had made that Strauss insisted remained relevant was not his argument on behalf of Zionism, but his critique of liberalism. JPCM, 341.

[89] JCPM, 329.

problem followed not only from limitations of liberalism, nationalism, or the nation-state, but dynamics distinctive and unique to Judaism. Judaism demanded allegiance to a law that stood in radical opposition to the political requirements of the world.

But this suggests a new dilemma. In the 1965 preface, Strauss wrote that the insolubility of the Jewish question reflected the truth that "human beings will never create a society that is free from contradictions." For this reason, "from every point of view, it looks as if the Jewish people were the chosen people, at least in the sense that the Jewish problem is the most manifest symbol of the human problem insofar as it is a social or political problem."[90] The remark calls to mind Berlin's aside that "the Jews are like all people, only more so." But as we've seen, they understood that universal dilemma in very different terms. To Strauss, Zionism could not solve the Jewish question because *Judaism* resisted all efforts at normalization. But if the Jewish question was distinct and particular to Judaism, then in what respect did the dilemma of Zionism represent contradictions endemic to political life as a whole? This question motivates Chapter Six of this dissertation. In conclusion of this one, I want to ask what relevance Strauss's analysis of Zionism might have for thinking about Jewish politics today.

Conclusion: Considering Strauss's Analysis Today

So how might we evaluate Strauss's claims, over a half century after his lectures at the Hillel House of the University of Chicago and his reflections of 1965? *Does* Zionism devour itself? Has it? From one perspective, it seems that Strauss was wrong about pretty much all of it. In Israel, a Hebrew culture that is both Jewish and aggressively anti-religious thrives alongside a religious movement that has gained tremendous influence by synthesizing Jewish religion with valorization of state power. It would seem that Strauss miscalculated both the degree to which Jewish national

[90] JPCM, 143.

culture could sever itself from religious revelation and the extent to which the religiously observant could accommodate themselves to the demands of political power. Moreover, the challenge that most obviously presses upon the Zionist project, both in Strauss's time and ours, is the one upon which Strauss was conspicuously silent – the fact that the land claimed for Jews by Zionism remains inhabited by another people who call that land their own, many hundreds of thousands of which were dispossessed by the establishment of Israel, and many hundreds of thousands of which live without citizenship under Israeli military rule. Strauss's silence on the reality of the Palestinian population is not unique among Jewish writers of the period (see, for one among many, Isaiah Berlin) but their invisibility in his reflections casts a troubling shadow over all his writing on the subject.[91]

Moreover, Strauss's justification for Zionism might seem to many rather dated. In the question and answer period after his 1965 lecture, several members of the audience challenged his insistence that anti-Jewish discrimination was a permanent factor of liberalism in general and American life specifically. "Can we not hope, at least" asked one questioner, for "an end to 'discrimination'"?[92] Given the widespread acceptance of Jews into American life, it would seem on this point Strauss was overly pessimistic. Interestingly, however, Strauss suggested in his answer to the questioner the cost of ending that "discrimination."[93] He conceded that discrimination against Jews could one day end, but that this did not mean liberalism would stop protecting prejudice. And while antisemitism at least as a force of social discrimination is almost entirely absent American life (to the extent it remains a political and cultural factor is another question), as a great many have argued that absence

[91] Berlin, it ought to be noted, was much more critical of the direction of Israeli politics than Strauss ever was and did declare his support for Palestinian statehood in the days before his death. See Avishai Margalit, "The Crooked Timber of Nationalism," in *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*, ed. Ronald Dworkin Mark Lilla, and Robert B. Silvers (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001).
[92] JPCM, 330.
[93] A term Strauss noted that he would "not use by his free will" and only offered with quotation marks. He did not elaborate but which we might venture were related to the insufficiency of the term to name the phenomenon he was describing – which was a theoretical point more than a sociological one. JPCM, 315.

is inseparable from the degree to which American Jews have been able to access the privileges of Whiteness.[94] In other words, they have been able to assimilate into the framework of racial supremacy that defines American social, economic, and political life. Insofar as Jewish inclusion in American life has been predicated upon inclusion into White Supremacy, Strauss's criticism of liberalism remains potent. But the point obviously calls into question Strauss's defense of Zionism. Even if this inclusion is, as some argue, conditional and antisemitism were to reappear as a powerful political force in American life, it's hard to see how the State of Israel could be justified on the grounds that it is necessary for Jewish self-respect.

Yet, despite all this, Strauss's insight into the dialectic at the core of Zionism has proven among the more prescient offered in the 20th century. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, much recent writing on Israel and Zionism has been concerned with the matter of how, and why, a movement that began as a revolt against Jewish religion has come to be so captured by religious forces. One common view applauds the secular wisdom of the early Zionists and laments the subsequent counter-revolution as representing a clear rejection of that earlier vision.[95] Strauss suggests that this interpretation misreads Zionism by underestimating the tangle between Jewish nationalism and religious Zionism present from the very beginning of the movement. The Zionist revolt against religion only masked its dependence on positions that cannot be coherently separated from divine mandate. It is tempting to dismiss this claim, for it seems to rely on a dubious view of

[94] See Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998) and Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[95] As one characteristic example of this view, in the preface to his *History of Zionism*, Walter Lacquer writes "to the extent that there have been new orientations in Israeli ideology during the last decade or two these have little in common with the liberal or even nationalist ingredients of classical Zionism. They are rooted in national myths and in religious fundamentalism: they are based on divine promise, and on the belief that Judaism (as its believers interpret it) is a civilization separate from and in many respects opposed to current Western Civilization and its values." Walter Lacquer, *A History of Zionism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989) xvi-xv.

Judaism easily contested.[96]

Whether or not one agrees with Strauss's definition of Judaism however, it remains difficult to dismiss his analysis. This is most obvious when it comes to his claim that religious Zionism undermines political Zionism. Insofar as today religious Zionism rests on a perceived mandate to settle the land of "Judea and Samaria" and political Zionism relies on Jewish majority rule, religious Zionism cannot but undermine political Zionism. For this reason, many argue that religious Zionist settlers present the primary obstacle to Israeli democracy. According to this framing, the claims of religious Zionism are mutually exclusive to those of political Zionism.[97] Whatever one makes of this familiar argument, it tracks quite closely with the trajectory charted by Strauss's analysis.

Strauss's argument, however, is a good deal more provocative than this position. His claim is that political Zionism *necessarily* slides into religious Zionism. This argument casts secular Zionists as unwitting supporters of the religious Zionists they claim to oppose. This, to be sure, flies against what secular political Zionists have long held. Yet many of those same "secular Zionists" have been among the most enthusiastic supporters of the settlement project – even as that project has come to undermine the basic tenants of political Zionism.[98] It is this seemingly bewildering history that Strauss helps to illuminate as theoretically coherent and consistent. As Chaim Gans has argued in his recent work, the dominant political ideology in Israel today is what he calls "Proprietary Zionism" – a Zionism that justifies Jewish self-rule in the land of Israel on the fact that the land of Israel belongs to the people of Israel.[99] Strauss suggests that this position is only a barely secularized version of the belief in a particular people's particular covenant with a particular God.

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[96] For a particularly sharp rejection of Strauss on these grounds, see Zachary Braitermen, "Against Leo Strauss," *The Journal of Textual Reasoning*, online at http://jtr.shanti.virginia.edu/volume-3-number-1/against-leo-strauss/

[97] For one particularly influential version of this argument, see Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism*, (New York: Picador, 2013). See also Gaudi Taub, *The Settlers: And the Struggle over the Meaning of Zionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

[98] For a thorough history of this story, see Gershom Gorenberg, *The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements 1967-1977* (NY, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2006).

[99] Chaim Gans, *A Political Theory for the Jewish People* (New York: Oxford University Press), 60-72.

This point calls into question both Michael Walzer's argument in *The Paradox of Liberation* noted in the introduction and some who have challenged Wazler's position. According to Walzer, the failure of political Zionism is a consequence of its inability to provide a Jewish content for the project of Jewish nationalism. Therefore, the work of those troubled by the direction Zionism has traveled is to build a Jewish culture that might offer a compelling alternative.[100] While such a culture must be militant in its opposition of religious fundamentalism, Walzer insists, the victory will only be won through a deep engagement of the Jewish tradition.[101]

In their penetrating criticism of Walzer's project, Israeli political theorists Asaf Sharon and Avishai Margalit argue that Walzer gravely misunderstands the Zionism he seeks to rescue. The problem, they suggest, was never that Zionists did not attempt to engage the tradition. There were few Zionist thinkers, they note, that didn't argue that Zionism represented a political movement internal to Judaism rather than an assault upon it. Walzer misreads this history, they object, and therefore mistakes its lesson. The issue was that such an engagement was never compelling to those committed to the religious reaction. What is needed is therefore not a new Jewish culture shaped by Jewish texts. Such a project only affirms the weakness of the culture onstensibly defended. "The call for critical engagement unwittingly affirms the accusation that something is missing in secular Judaism," they write, "that the cart of modern Hebrew culture is empty relative to the cart of Rabbinic Judaism, as the ultra-Orthodox leader Yeshaya Karelitz famously said to Ben-Gurion."[102]

What is needed, therefore, is not engagement but assault. "There is a deep cleavage between orthodoxy and modernity, between traditionalism and liberalism," they write, echoing the young

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[100] "Traditionalist worldviews can't be negated, abolished, or banned," Walzer writes, "they have to be engaged." Walzer, *Paradox of Liberation*, 122.

[101] For much of the last two decades, Walzer has set out to produce just this sort of engagement, critically exploring the Jewish tradition for resources that might be adequate and appropriate to the challenges of contemporary Jewish politics, and most especially contemporary Zionism. Walzer's most significant contribution to this project has been his work in editing the monumental *The Jewish Political Tradition*, previously cited in the introduction.

[102] Ibid.

Strauss's arguments from the early 1920s. "Engaging the tradition with the aim of recruiting the traditionalist masses inevitably leads to the denial of this cleavage." A successful Zionism, they insist, is one that recognizes the force of this break and defends it. "In order for the tradition to be constructively engaged," they write, "the religious counterrevolution has to be defeated."[103]

While these arguments echo those Strauss made as a young man, we've seen that Strauss ultimately rejected his earlier position. But his mature analysis underscores the basic assumption shared by Walzer, Margalit and Sharon. The disagreement between them rests on what a robust secular Zionism ought to entail. To Walzer, it must be a secularism fluent in the tradition, able to offer a Judaism as rich and thick and deep as any learned in yeshiva. To Sharon and Margalit, it must be a secularism ready and able to fight the forces of religious dogma. Strauss suggests that the problem is more fundamental, that political Zionism tilts into religious Zionism because the basic claim upon which the Zionism of all three rests – that Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people – is only coherent with appeal to Jewish revelation.

But if so, is the rise of the religious right in Israel therefore inevitable? Are both Sharon and Margalit's attempts to claim the mantle of liberal secularism and Walzer's appeal for a deeper engagement with the tradition fated to failure? To be sure, Strauss's analysis contains a strong whiff of historical inevitability. Political Zionism needn't have taken the form it did, both in statehood and, of course, in territory.[104] The tensions that troubled Strauss from his earliest days in Germany in the 1920s need not have turned out quite as inexorable, nor come to manifest themselves so violently. Nonetheless, Strauss suggests that the distinction between political Zionism and religious Zionism that continues to frame much Jewish liberal discourse obscures the fundamental

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[103] Ibid.

[104] For an analysis of stands with Zionism that suggested alternative directions, see Dmitry Shumsky, Beyond *The Nation-State: The Zionist Political Imagination from Pinsker to Ben-Gurion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) and Noam Pinako, *Zionism and the Roads not Taken: Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Kohn* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

commitments both share. Inseparable from both is the idea that the land of Israel belongs to the Jews. Insofar as this position remains the dominant ideology of Jewish politics, the dialectic of Zionism will continue to unfold, likely in ways more brutal and more violent. The difficult question is whether Jewish political life can be untangled from this commitment, and what it might take to do so.

I'll return to this question in the conclusion to this dissertation. But for now, suffice it to note that while Strauss illuminates challenges and dilemmas internal to Zionism that have only grown more pressing and urgent, from the perspective of how to face those dilemmas as they unfold in concrete and practical politics, we might ask whether Strauss's diagnosis undermines its own power. After all, if the self-destruction of Zionism is not only inevitable but endemic to all political life, then on what grounds can we challenge the injustices that such inevitable contradictions provoke? We might, of course, ask the same question of Isaiah Berlin. It is to this question that we'll turn in the third and final part of this dissertation.

Part Three: Tragedy and Exception

To develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce.

- William James, *Pragmatism*

Chapter 5

The Tragedy of the Tragic: Isaiah Berlin and a Liberalism of Loss

In March of 1958, the British writer Phillip Toynbee asked Isaiah Berlin to join a number of his Oxford colleagues in signing onto a statement in support of unilateral nuclear disarmament. Berlin refused. He explained his opposition with what his biographer Michael Ignatieff described as "uncharacteristic bravado:" "Unless there is some point at which you are prepared to fight against whatever odds and whatever the threat may be, not merely to yourself, but to anybody," he declared, "all principles become flexible, all codes melt, and all ends in themselves for which we live disappear."[1]

To Ignatieff, such declarations were of a piece with Berlin's Cold War effort to "widen the divide" between liberalism and socialism. But the letter does more than that. As Christopher Hitchens noted in a scathing appraisal of Berlin occasioned by Ignatieff's book, "the whole case against nuclear weapons is that *they* threaten to melt everything and make everything disappear, and thus that their use in geopolitical contests is or would be unpardonable."[2] The point helps illuminate not only what is so troubling about Berlin's response but just what an odd way it was for the famous pluralist to put the point. What of the warnings in "Two Concepts" against the "slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals?"[3] What about Berlin's affirmation of Herzen's

[1] Michael Ignatieff tells this story in his *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 234. Christopher Hitchens also quotes it in his blistering review of Ignatieff's book, Christopher Hitchens, "Moderation or Death," *London Review of Books*, Vol. 20 No. 23, November 1998, p. 12.
[2] "Moderation or Death," 19.
[3] PSM, 237.

challenge to those "fanatical doctrinaires" that demand total sacrifice and wanton killing "for the sake of some absolute ideal?"[4]

It is tempting to dismiss the issue as an unfortunate but not uncommon case of a thinker who failed to learn from their own teaching. But the final lines of Berlin's most cited lecture suggest that the trouble goes deeper. Berlin closed "Two Concepts," by declaring that "[t]o realize the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian.'"[5] Leo Strauss took this line as a concise expression of the inability of modern liberalism to defend its own position.[6] But what about the reverse of Strauss's point? If one stands by principles "unflinchingly," then what is the practical upshot of recognizing them as only "relatively valid"? Isn't the whole point to flinch, and therefore to hesitate before building an endless supply of weapons in the name of one's "principles" or "codes?"

It is somewhat surprising that this question has generated so little discussion in the literature on Berlin and his pluralism. As we've seen, in the field of liberal political theory, Berlin's pluralism has provoked a great deal of discussion over the relationship between pluralism and liberalism.[7] In analytical philosophy, it has provided the touchstone for a related set of questions around the relationship between pluralism, practical reason, and morality.[8] Both discussions are driven by an anxiety among liberal theorists as to whether and how liberalism's own authority can be justified (an anxiety shaped in part by charges by those like Leo Strauss). A quarter of the way into the 21st

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[4] RT, 101. See my discussion of Berlin and Herzen in Chapter 2.
[5] PSM, 242. Berlin was approvingly quoting Joseph A. Schumpeter.
[6] Strauss's response to this precise line is memorable; one reason, he noted, that he doubted Berlin's conclusion was sound was that "if he were right, every resolute liberal hack or thug would be a civilized man, while Plato and Kant would be barbarians." "Relativism," 139-140.
[7] For an overview of this discussion, see Chapter 2 of this Dissertation.
[8] For particularly influential reflections on these questions, see Thomas Nagel, "The Fragmentation of Value," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University press, 1987), Chapter 6; and Bernard Williams, "Conflicts of Values," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981). For responses that deal with questions raised in those essays, among others, see the essays in Ruth Chang, ed. *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

century, however, the question of whether or not liberalism can muster the courage of its own convictions appears rather quaint.

Today, it is taken as a matter of course that the liberalism with which Berlin is associated is in crisis, but it's hard to see how liberalism's self-confidence is among the causes.[9] Chief among those causes are surely a half century of neoliberal economic policies that have ensured that the profits produced by global capitalism benefit only the wealthiest one percent of the globe's population and a legacy and history of white supremacy and colonialism inseparable from liberalism's development and spread. But a contributing cause is that liberals so consistently excuse violations of principles those same liberals insist are constitutive of their liberalism.[10] Over the last quarter century of American politics, the most obvious evidence of this tendency has been liberal support for the "war on terror," which a number of scholars have noted easily embraced and adopted the language, rhetoric, and intellectual frameworks of Cold War politics.[11] While not always recognized as central in explanations of the contemporary crisis of liberalism, the argument so crucial to that "war" – that liberal norms must be compromised in order to protect liberalism – is one that cannot but breed cynicism.

The argument that at times liberal norms must be suspended in order to protect liberal norms is almost always justified in the name of supreme emergency.[12] The force of the argument, as some have noted, appeals to the inevitability of tragic dilemmas.[13] Like Creon in *The Antigone*, we are

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[9] For one of many recent books on the alleged crisis of liberalism, see Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).
[10] For just one of many examples, see President Obama's policy of drone strikes as discussed in Jeffrey S. Bachman, "Lethal Sterility: Innovative Dehumanizatiion in Legal Justifications of Obama's Drone Policy," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 23, no. 6 (2019).
[11] For an early entry in this discussion, see Barry Buzman, "Will the 'Global War on Terror' be the New Cold War?," *International Affairs* 82, no. 6 (2006).
[12] For a helpful summary of the more influential versions of this claim and objections to it, see William R. Lund, "Reconsidering 'Supreme Emergencies"' Michael Walzer and His Critics," *Social Theory and Practice* 37, no. 4 (2011).
[13] Brian Orend, "Is There a Supreme Emergency Exception?," in *Just War Theory: A Reappraisal*, ed. Mark Evans (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

forced to destroy something we know to be precious in order to save our city. As we've seen, Isaiah Berlin along with other postwar political theorists argued the dilemma captured so memorably by Aeschylus was a definitive and inescapable feature of political life.

Berlin's response to Toynbee raises the question, however, of whether such a liberalism can draw a distinction between emergency and peace, exception and norm. The worry is exacerbated by the degree to which Berlin's liberalism, as already noted in Chapter Three, follows upon the political framework offered by Max Weber. According to Weber, politics always requires a sacrifice of moral principles that outside of politics ought never be compromised. Does a tragic liberalism like Berlin's suggest as well that politics is, at least in the Weberian sense, necessarily beset by moral loss? And if so, how does such a liberalism not invite suspensions of the norms considered constitutive of that liberalism? In this chapter, I explore the implications of Berlin's tragic liberalism by asking whether it can escape or instead affirms some the most troubling elements of Weber's political ethics – not only an acceptance of tragedy but a valorization of it as characteristic of a mature political ethics.

Max Weber and The Politics of Tragedy

Despite Isaiah Berlin's and Max Weber's status as the two most significant "value pluralists" of the 20th century (and, as noted in Chapter Three, Berlin's own admission that Weber articulated the "classic and still best" version of the position), few scholars have found the relationship between them worth pursuing in any great depth. The formal similarities in their thought seem marginal next to the great distance between their philosophical dispositions. As Perry Anderson summarizes that difference, "the Nietzschean note" that so shapes Weber's emphasis on dedication to a cause in the face of moral abyss "is wholly missing in Berlin."[14] Similarly, Seyla Benhabib distinguishes what she

[14] Perry Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement* (New York: Verso, 1992), 243.

describes as Weber's "existential pluralism" from Berlin's "liberal pluralism."[15] The former, she suggests, is characterized by Weber's insistence on definitive decision absent any rational guidance, while Berlin encouraged the possibility and need for toleration and compromise. Yet as Peter Lassman has suggested, despite the differences in tone, Berlin's pluralism does not entirely escape the darker hues cast by Weber's pluralism.[16]

Given the genesis of Berlin's thought, this should not surprise us. As we saw early in this dissertation, Isaiah Berlin turned to pluralism in part as a response to the stultifying, homogenizing and ultimately inhumane effects of dominant Enlightenment conceptions of reason. And as discussed in Chapter Three, few gave such a memorable description of the consequences of this conception of reason as did Max Weber, who famously described modern capitalist society as an "iron cage" or "steel shell" (*stahlhartes Gehäuse)*-- "that mighty cosmos of the modern economic order which is bound to the technical conditions of mechanical and machine production."[17] To Weber, the only fitting response to this dehumanizing world was to recognize the "disenchanted" world as both threat and opportunity. The world vacated by divine authority could be filled either by the technical distribution of resources or by dedicating oneself to values that were recognized as in perpetual conflict with other equally valid values. That plurality could, if seized, offer the opportunity for dedication, courage, and sacrifice that the bureaucratized administration of technical administration foreclosed.

In his most famous lectures, the 1918 "Science as a Vocation" and the 1919 "Politics as a Vocation," Weber called his audience to rise to this challenge.[18] Weber asked how, in a world in

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[15] Seyla Benhabib, *Exile, Statelessness, and Migration: Playing Chess with History from Hannah Arendt to Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 171-177.
[16] Peter Lassman, "Political Theory in an Age of Disenchantment: The Problem of Value Pluralism: Weber, Berlin, Rawls," *Max Weber Studies* 4, no. 2 (2004) and Chapter 2, "Pluralism and Pessimism" in Peter Lassman, *Pluralism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011).
[17] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2002), 120-121.
[18] Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 2004).

which universal and objectively true values could no longer prove authoritative, ought we to consider the work of the scholar and the task of the political leader? Both vocations were defined by the fact that, as he declared, "the different value systems of the world are caught up in an insoluble struggle with one another."[19] In his telling metaphor, these different value systems were rival gods, stripped of their prior form yet retaining their power. "The numerous gods of yore," he wrote, "divested of their magic and hence assuming the shape of impersonal forces, arise from their graves, strive for power over our lives, and resume their eternal struggle among themselves."[20]

As Weber described it, the work of the professor is to pry open the eyes of her students to this reality. Teachers cannot declare for students which god they should obey, but they can and must convey the necessity of choosing their own god and accepting the hard fact that "by serving this particular god you will give offense to every other god." In terms that echo much of what Berlin would write forty years later, Weber insists that "the conflict between these gods is never-ending. Or, in nonfigurative language, life is about the incompatibility of ultimate possible attitudes and hence the inability ever to resolve the conflicts between them." The fact of this perpetual conflict meant that choice among the values was not a matter that could be determined by rational procedure. What is necessary is an act of the will: "Hence the necessity of *deciding* between them."[21]

Although Weber referred to a multiplicity of gods throughout the first lecture, as we've seen from Strauss's discussion he distilled them in the second to two: a worldly god of political power, and a heavenly god of peace and love. In "Politics as a Vocation," these two gods occupy the whole of the earthly stage. The former demands an ethics in which one acts according to consequences, the latter according to principles of right irrespective of their utility. While these ethics are often taken to be synonymous with moral theories of consequentialism and deontology, Weber's point in the

[19] Ibid., 22.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 27.

context of the lecture is specifically related to the nature of *political* life. And when one involves oneself in politics, one dedicates themselves to a particular cause – it is as a servant that the courage and sacrifice of politics come into view.[22] As such, one must subject oneself to the demands and requirements of political life, among them the need to constantly consider how to maintain the support of those who share one's cause.[23] Moreover, one must accept that the political realm is a realm governed by violence; the modern state is, according to his famous definition, the social entity that holds a monopoly on legitimate violence.[24] Political ethics is therefore the ethics of violence on behalf of a cause to which one is wholly committed.

Weber insisted, however, that from the perspective of private morality there can be no such thing as "ethical violence." The use of violence is by definition wrong, always. As Strauss pointed out, this is a view that for Weber is indebted to a particular reading of the Gospels. But it is a particular and extreme version of a familiar Christian position, and in presenting it as in fundamental and irreconcilable conflict with political life as such Weber departs from dominant traditions of Christian political thought as established by Augustine and Aquinas. In that tradition – most fully elaborated in discussion on the ethics of war – intention and consequence is of crucial importance, even as certain forms of injustice are prohibited absolutely.[25] Weber, however, insisted that the choice between the two ethics was both mutually exclusive and exhaustive: one must choose one or the other, and the too brook no compromise. "All ethically oriented action," he declared, "can be guided by either of two fundamentally different, irredeemably incompatible maxims."[26] The two ethics are "incommensurate:" any action according to one can never be justified on grounds the

[22] On this point see Dana Villa's helpful discussion in *Socratic Citizenship*, 213-216
[23] Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, 62-63.
[24] Ibid., 33, 38.
[25] There is an enormous literature on these matters, of course. For an overview, see Daniel R. Brunstter and Cian O'Driscoll, ed. *Just War Thinkers: From Cicero to the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2017). For a helpful collection of modern interpretations, see Jean Bethke Elshtain, ed. *Just War Theory* (New York: NYU Press, 1991).
[26] Weber, The Vocation Lectures, 83.

other might accept. For this reason, the first and primary decision for one against the other is not and cannot be a matter of rational deliberation. If it were, then the two values would not to be in the perpetual conflict that they are. With this framework, Weber embraced a conception of tragedy indebted to Hegel. As Molly Farneth helpfully explains, "tragedy, on Hegel's view, is a form of ethical conflict in which two goods or rights stand in opposition to one another, such that the pursuit of one entails the relinquishment or violation of the other. Tragedy, moreover, is characterized by its inevitability, a sense in which the situation could neither have been avoided nor otherwise resolved."[27] Weber works both of these requirements into his account. The rival gods demand not only devotion but complete devotion; as soon as one enters political life and its attendant violence, the god of conviction is betrayed, its ethics violated. The tragedy is total and unavoidable.

Yet despite Weber's insistence on incommensurability, in his account the two ethics are not normatively equivalent. From the perspective of conviction, political life cannot but seem inferior and base; a life of violence as against peace. On the other hand, the political vocation requires not only a decision on behalf of the ethics of responsibility, but an ever-present awareness of the ethical obligation left unchosen. For without the whispers of conviction, political life would have no restraint. In politics, wrote Weber, one has to have "the trained ability to scrutinize the realities of life ruthlessly, to withstand them and to measure up to them inwardly."[28] But one must also know the price that one will *not* pay, the limits of one's own allegiance. "I find it immeasurably moving," he declared, "when a *mature* human being who feels the responsibility he bears for the consequences of his own actions with his entire soul and who acts in harmony with an ethics of responsibility reaches the point where he says, 'here I stand, I can do no other.'"[29] Those who enter politics must

[27] Molly Farneth, *Hegel's Social Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 132.
[28] Weber, 91.
[29] Ibid., 92. Italics in the original.

reject the god of conviction, but they are ever aware of its power. And at extreme moments, they heed the call to return to its embrace.

Weber's homage to Luther here is critical and telling. First, he suggests that no matter the force of one's commitment to a political cause, one must only be so reconciled to the ways of the political world. Second, and more crucially, Weber accepts Luther's views that sin taints all that we do. But as we saw earlier in Strauss's reading of Weber, sin is only ever-present in a disenchanted world if the conflict between conviction and responsibility is recognized as the permanent and inevitable conflict that it is. Only if politics is recognized as a betrayal of the ethic of conviction can those who practice politics accept the sin inherent to political life and the constraints that politics on its own cannot provide. Those who embrace the ethics of conviction, on the other hand, are confident in in their own virtue; from their perspective, they know political life to be base. But the ethic of responsibility is aware of its own sin; it lives in a state of regret.

That regret follows from its recognition of the weight of the value that goes unchosen. As a consequence of that recognition, the ethics of responsibility is not only aware of its guilt but aware of the plurality of values that the ethics of conviction denies. The ethics of responsibility, therefore, demands a moral maturity and moral courage that the ethic of conviction can never know. As such, it is superior by reason, in that between the two it is the ethic that requires a recognition of the plurality of values. Ironically, while it is the ethics of conviction that outwardly reflect an extreme Christian pacificism, it is only the ethics of responsibility that recognizes the Christian truth that life is permeated by sin.[30]

[30] This is why Weber concludes that "an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility are not absolute antithesis but are mutually complementary, and only when taken together do they constitute the authentic human being who is *capable* of having a 'vocation for politics." But this is only the case for the "authentic human being" capable of politics; for those who do not, the vocations are strictly incommensurate. Ibid.

While Weber's Vocation Lectures are famous and influential, his tragic conception of politics runs into at least three profound troubles. First, by describing politics as a realm of violence and non-political life as a realm of peace, Weber draws an untenable line between political and non-political life that romanticizes and de-politicizes all life outside of government office. The "political" is walled off from the "private" as if citizens or subjects of government live on one planet while those who do politics on their behalf live on another. In modern society, "private" citizens are implicated in state violence in all sorts of ways that disappear in Weber's account – as does any violence that might permeate "private" relationships. According to Weber's framework, all the "politics" of social or economic life disappears while all the relations and structures of the social world are considered "private" and disappear from political life. Among the consequences is that all the various factors that shape social life – economics, gender, race, power itself – disappear from view, as the decider considers the relative demands of Gods whose power transcends all such mundane conditions.

Closely related, as Dana Villa has argued, Weber distills the whole of political ethics to the judgements of a particular leader who is considered and considers themselves strong enough to weather the moral storms with which they will be battered.[31] Those storms are provoked not only by the machinery of violence upon which the state depends but on the requirements of leading a mass that is driven by base and degrading interests.[32] This picture of leadership is indebted to Nietzsche both in its rejection of the possibility of any authoritative norms for political life outside of the individual and in its despair over the possibilities of collective culture in an age of bureaucratization and routine. Only heroic individuals who both understand the demands of the political vocation and have the strength to simultaneously embrace and withstand its power are fit for leadership. While

[31] Villa, Socratic Citizenship, 230.
[32] Weber, 89-90.

Weber considered parliamentary debate and conflict as a potential ground for the cultivation of political leadership, such a portrait of leadership necessarily takes any structure of accountability as a misguided limit on the tortured judgement of the courageous leader.[33]

Lastly, while Weber does not render the judgements of political life as strictly instrumental, his strong accent on the presence of guilt as the defining characteristic of political ethics raises its own trouble. The problem is that once guilt is taken as *the* feature of political virtue, then it is hard to see how the degree of that virtue is not proportionate to the severity of that guilt. Weber certainly hopes that the injustices committed by the guilt-ridden political leader will be less grave than the moralizing leader that sees their actions as ethically pure. If the political actor takes the mark of political maturity to be an acceptance of moral cost, however, wouldn't that actor want to pay that cost – over and over, and at potentially higher and higher amounts? If guilt is celebrated as an inevitable feature of political life, then the political actor who accepts their vocation has little reason to heed the call of the abandoned god and every reason to consider that god's voice, however loud, is not quite loud enough to override the demands of responsibility. At the moment a political actor decides that their vocation demands a choice that they cannot in good conscience commit, at that moment they are no longer guilty – and once freed of guilt, they are no longer living the conflict of values.

Versions of these worries have led intellectual historians to debate the legacy of Weber's political thought, some arguing that he helped inspire the liberalism of the Weimar Republic and others declaring that his ideas helped justify acceptance of fascist leadership.[34] The details of those debates need not concern us here, but their existence points to the fact that pluralism as such need not necessarily point toward the liberalism with which Isaiah Berlin is so closely associated. But given

[33] For Weber's analysis of parliamentary democracy, see Villa's helpful discussion in *Socratic Citizenship*, 191-199.
[34] See Dana Villa, "The Legacy of Max Weber in Weimar Political and Social Theory."

the shared contours of their philosophy, can Berlin escape the troubles so manifest in Weber's tragic politics?

The Politics of Compromise

Despite the formal and rhetorical similarities with which Isaiah Berlin and Max Weber described value pluralism, to the extent that Berlin's pluralism points to a distinctive political ethic, it seems in pretty dramatic contrast to that offered by Weber. As Joshua Cherniss has shown, Berlin developed his pluralism not only against a technocratic utopianism indebted to Weber but also against a crude "realism" often associated with him.[35] To Berlin, such a "realism" was just another species of monist thinking. As against the view often attributed to Weber that in political life the consequence justifies the means, Berlin insisted that "evil means destroy good ends."[36] This resistance to political realism was closely connected to Berlin's assault on utilitarianism, and his broader rejection of the notion that a morality or ethical view could ever reduce human judgement to a single scale of measure or evaluation. Both eradicated from the political sphere values that were among those that ought to be recognized as worthy of preservation. Crude realism ran rough-shod over what we've seen as the moral claim at the center of Berlin's thought: that human beings are creatures of choice, and therefore ought never be sacrificed in the name of any particular value.[37]

This point, as we've seen, was central to Berlin's famous defense of negative liberty. It also marks the most obvious distinction between his political thought and Weber's. If Weber's distinctive

[35] For an extension discussion of Berlin's opposition to realism see Joshua Cherniss, Joshua Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 111-121.
[36] Berlin, "Fathers and Children," 299; cited in Joshua Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time.*
[37] This form – that human beings ought never be used as means – is of course indebted to Kant. As Berlin put it in a letter to a friend late in life, he was "deeply pro-Kantian on certain issues," including his "doctrine of the freedom of the will, his concept of the moral autonomy of the individual, his doctrine of human beings as ends in themselves, and of moral values as constituted by human commitment to them." Yet in insisting that to be free was necessarily to act according to reason, Kant was also perhaps the paradigmatic figure of the "rationalism" against which Berlin rebelled. For a discussion of Kant's influence on Berlin, see Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, especially Chapter 6.

ethic, as Dana Villa has helpfully summarized it, was: be committed to *an* ideal; Berlin's could be summarized as something close to the opposite: *don't* be too committed to any one ideal.[38] In a lecture given late in his life and career Berlin gave succinct expression to this ethos. Given the plurality of values, he asked, "how do we choose between possibilities? What and how much must we sacrifice to what?" He answered:

> There is, it seems to me, no clear reply. But the collisions, even if they cannot be avoided, can be softened. Claims can be balanced, compromises can be reached: in concrete situations not every claim is of equal force – so much liberty and so much equality: so much for sharp moral condemnation, and so much for understanding a given human situation; so much for the full force of the law, and so much for the prerogative of mercy; for feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, sheltering the homeless. Priorities, never final and absolute, must be established.[39]

Here, the quintessential political virtue is moderation. In different circumstances, Berlin insisted, different values could be brought together in ways that preserve a measure of each and allow for constant and perpetual renegotiation. To borrow Weber's metaphor, according to Berlin one could worship rival gods. So long as one offers some measure of prayer however meager to each, then various gods can be honored.

This emphasis on the possibility of compromise, on not being too beholden to any one aim or ideology, was closely related to Berlin's insistence that political judgement could not be reduced to formulas or pre-determined principles. Through nearly all of Berlin's most extended reflections on political judgement, he reiterates that what defines such judgement is an aversion to general rules that might guide action in all cases. In a lecture at Smith College in 1953, he declared that "what is called wisdom in statesmen is understanding rather than knowledge – some kind of acquaintance with relevant facts of such a kind that it enables those who have it to tell what fits with what: what can be done in given circumstances and what cannot, what means will work in what situations and

[38] Villa, Socratic Citizenship, 219.
[39] PSM, 14.

how far, without necessarily being able to explain how they know this or even what they know."[40] In his talk "Political Judgement" delivered for the BBC in June of 1957, he argued that we know the political genius for their ability to recognize the specific demands of specific circumstance. Such leaders "understand the character of a particular movement, of a particular individual, of a unique state of affairs, of a unique atmosphere, of some particular combination of economic, political, personal factors." Throughout these reflections, political judgement reflects a feel for things, a capacity that can never "be literally taught."[41] The reason is that "the concrete situation is almost everything."[42]

While Berlin's reflections on political judgement precede his mature accounts of pluralism, in an obvious respect these reflections point towards that later account. There is a clear connection between the claim that there is no *a priori* method by which the conflicts of politics might be resolved and the insistence that there is no scale on which all values might be ranked and no supreme value to which all others might point. And just as Weber's ethics pointed toward the normative and ethical superiority of "responsibility" over "conviction," a similar normative thrust can be noted in Berlin's framework. Only in his version, it is compromise that takes on the normative role. The political leader who compromises among values is the leader who recognizes the "truth" of value pluralism. Throughout his essays on political judgement and those exemplary figures who most exhibited it, Berlin emphasizes this point. To take one telling example of this approach, here is how Berlin summarizes Franklin Roosevelt's great contributions:

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[40] Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 32.
[41] Ibid., 45.
[42] Ibid., 15 As some readers of Berlin have noted, this seems quite close to the classical account of political judgement offered by Aristotle. See Cherniss, "'The Sense of Reality': Berlin on Political Judgement, Political Ethics and Leadership," in *Cherness Joshua L and Steven B. Smith, eds. The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)*. While Berlin rejected the entire philosophical framework provided by Aristotle and was only hostile to any talk of virtue, Cherniss is right that there is nonetheless a strong echo of Aristotle's view of political judgement running throughout Berlin's writing on the theme.

> Roosevelt's example strengthened democracy everywhere, that is to say the view that the promotion of social justice and individual liberty does not necessarily mean the end of all efficient government; that power and order are not identical with a straight-jacket of doctrine, whether economic or political; that it is possible to reconcile individual liberty – a loose texture of society – with the indispensable minimum of organizing and authority; and in this belief lies what Roosevelt's greatest predecessor once described as 'the last best hope of earth.'[43]

The implied view of liberal democracy here is a politics that that allows for values to be combined in ways that ensure a substantial measure of each.

According to this account, political ethics entails pursuing and embracing compromises among values considered plural in order to ensure a measure of each is preserved. The "first obligation" that guided such compromise was "to avoid extremes of suffering." While there were no hard or fast rules, "the best that can be done is to prevent the occurrence of desperate situations, of intolerable choices – that is the first requirement of a decent society."[44] The framework that produces the inevitability of tragedy in Weber's account – the fact that any compromise to one ethic is considered a violation of the other – seems precisely what Berlin wants to avoid.

Given this position, some have concluded that for all Berlin's insistence on the tragic nature of political life, he forecloses the possibility of tragedy altogether. The Polish philosopher Ryszard Legutko, for example, challenged Berlin's view that value pluralism demonstrates the tragic character of human life. The value pluralist, as Legutko put it, cannot but see Antigone and Creon as "at best impractical doctrinaires, and at worse stubborn blockheads, unable to see that the only sensible solution for them was a compromise which, unaccountably, they refused to make."[45] They were each trapped by monism, unable to recognize that the goods each represented were one among many and could therefore be compromised while retaining a measure of each.

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[43] PSM, 637.
[44] PSM, 14-15.
[45] Ryszard Legutko, "On Postmodern Liberal Conservativism," as cited in Isaiah Berlin and Beata Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006), 270.

In a response to Legutko, Berlin agreed with the criticism and conceded its implications. The difficulty, Berlin insisted, is that there are times when competing claims cannot be jointly accommodated – and this is what accounts for tragedy.

> The agony comes in, and with it the tragedy (for this is what tragedy is about), when both values pull strongly at you; you are deeply committed to both, you want to realize them both, they are both values under which your life is lived; and when they clash you have to *sacrifice* one to the other, unless you can find a compromise which is not a complete satisfaction of your desires, but prevents acute pain, in short, prevents tragedy. This is the value of compromise.[46]

It is telling that Berlin here poses the possibility of tragedy in implicitly private terms. In private life we are often faced with choices that do not avail themselves of compromise: one cannot be both a parent and not be a parent. But Berlin generally framed political values in terms that avoid this sort of stark choice: mercy, equality, liberty, community are the sorts of things that one might reasonably imagine a political community could retain in some combination. If tragic conflict is produced by decisions that require sacrificing one value for another, we might summarize Berlin's political ethics as encouraging a pursuit of compromise in order to avoid the always present possibility of tragedy.

The trouble is that this way of putting the position seems in tension with the claim of incommensurability at the center of Berlin's pluralism. This is not just a matter of the familiar problem by which the pluralist is caught in a paradox, claiming the value of pluralism that pluralism then undermines (although the normative appeal to compromise does plainly fall into this trouble). More fundamentally, compromise implies that the various values to be compromised can in some significant measure be compared. If they could not be compared and weighed against each other, then how could compromise be possible? But the comparison that compromise requires fits uneasily with the notion of incommensurability upon which Berlin's pluralism rests.

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[46] Ibid.

The issue hangs on how to make sense of the claim that values are "incommensurate." The idea has generated an enormous amount of debate in analytical philosophy.[47] On one hand, the notion that values or goods cannot be ranked on a universal scale seems to speak to a basic fact of emotional experience. On the other, if values are incommensurate in the sense that they cannot be compared rationally it would seem to render all decision between values or goods as arbitrary. This doesn't seem right either. While some have held that incommensurability entails an impossibility of any comparison at all, others have noted that Berlin's claim that there is no single scale by which all conflicts might be resolved does not mean that conflicts among goods cannot be compared at all or compared rationally, according to various reasons in any given circumstances.[48]

Predictably, Berlin himself didn't offer much guidance on these questions of definition. Sometimes he suggested an extreme version of incommensurability in which ultimate values could not be compared at all.[49] More often, he described incommensurability as following from the unavailability of any single method of resolving conflicts among goods that everyone must be rationally obliged to accept.[50]As Steven Lukes has noted, the two different iterations lean upon two different sets of metaphors that run through Berlin's account and the debate more generally.[51] One

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[47] Ruth Chang, ed. *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[48] For one particularly influential claim that incommensurability entails incomparability, see Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), 335-345. For the counterargument that incommensurability need not require incomparability, see especially Elizabeth Anderson, "Practical Reason and Incommensurable Goods" and Ruth Chang, "Introduction," in Ruth Chang, ed. *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[49] For example, in his essay on Machiavelli, Berlin suggested the extreme version of incomparability when he wrote that "[t]he ideals of Christianity are charity, mercy, sacrifice, love of God, forgiveness of enemies, contempt for the goods of this world, faith in the life hereafter, belief in the salvation of the individual soul as being of incomparable value – higher than, indeed wholly incommensurable with, any social or political or other terrestrial goal, any economic or military or aesthetic consideration." PSM, 289.

[50] I owe Jeffery Stout the language for this description of Berlin's position, which is not Berlin's own but captures the meaning of his more moderate position as he described it on many occasions, including the essay on Machiavelli in which he offered the extreme view just cited. There, he wrote that incommensurability implied that "men…were compelled to make a choice between two incommensurable systems…without the aid of an infallible measuring-rod which certified one form of life as being superior to all others and could be used to demonstrate this to the satisfaction of all rational men[.]" PSM, 315.

[51] Steven Lukes, "On Comparing the Incomparable," *Liberals and Cannibals: The Implications of Diversity* (New York: Verso, 2003), 67.

is economic, according to which we think of plural values as things that can be traded and exchanged in order to maximize value or prevent loss. The other is religious, wherein certain goods are termed "sacred" and therefore resist comparison and exchange.[52] Throughout his work, Berlin leaned on both sets of metaphor. When Berlin used the language of sacrifice, he implied a religious framework that resists comparison.[53] When he used the language of trade-offs, he suggested an economic framework that allows and even encourages exchange.[54]

As Lukes points out, however, "incommensurability" as a concept implies that at the very least certain goods or values resist any easy exchange for others. For this reason, Lukes suggests that "incommensurability" is simply a secularized term for goods or values we call sacred.[55] Within the traditions that treat them as holy, destruction of an object like a Torah Scroll or a Quran are considered horrendous because such objects are not strictly instrumental. They are in this respect incommensurate with other books or texts – they are holy, which means in practice they cannot be compared. In view of Lukes' astute point, Weber's allusion to the warring gods is not mere metaphor. For Weber, any compromise to either represents a profound violation.

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[52] Avishai Margalit echoes this same distinction in *On Compromise and Rotten Compromise*, a work he begins by declaring that "it was Isaiah Berlin who uninitiated me into the topic" of compromise. In Margalit's formulation, compromise relies on an economic picture in which some measure of value is always better than less. Margalit distinguishes this view from what he calls a "religious" framework in which various goods are considered incomparable with others, and therefore any compromise to them must be prohibited. See Avishai Margalit *On Compromise and Rotten Compromise* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 24-26.

[53] For example, from "Two Concepts:" "Yet it remains true that the freedom of some must at times be curtailed to secure the freedom of others. Upon what principle should this be done? If freedom is a sacred, untouchable value, there can be no such principle. One or other of these conflicting rules or principles must, at any rate in practice, yield: not always for reasons which can be clearly stated, let alone generalized into rules or universal maxims. Still, a practical compromise has to be found." PSM, 198.

[54] For just one example; from "The Pursuit of the Ideal:" "history teaches us that their consequences are seldom what is anticipated; there is no guarantee, not even, at times, a high enough probability, that such acts will lead to improvement. We may take the risk of drastic action, in personal life or in public policy, but we must always be aware, never forget, that we may be mistaken, that certainty about the effect of such measures invariably leads to avoidable suffering of the innocent. So we must engage in what are called trade-offs – rules, values, principles must yield to each other in varying degrees in specific situations." PSM, 14-15.

[55] Steven Lukes, "On Comparing the Incomparable," 67.

Berlin often evoked the term "sacred' to describe those values he considered incommensurate, but almost always as a synonym for terms like "absolute" and "ultimate." Although he didn't define any of these with much precision, he used them to imply that a given good was valuable in and of itself, that it couldn't be ranked on any scale, and that it was not easily compared or exchanged with other values or goods (i.e. it was incommensurate with other values or goods).[56] Yet while Berlin held that various values were absolute, ultimate, or sacred, he never suggested that such values could not be compromised or traded-off.

But what is the practical consequence of considering our ultimate values as ones that are both sacred but still at least potentially available for compromise? We generally equate the sacred with the inviolable: if a given good is sacred, then we prohibit violations to it, absolutely.[57] In "Two Concepts" Berlin twice declared the frontiers of negative liberty as inviolable in this sense, suggesting that such a value was one that ought never be violated.[58] But in the introduction to the volume in which "Two Concepts" appeared he clarified and corrected himself on this point.

> Nothing that I assert in the essay on two concepts of liberty about the frontiers of individual liberty…should be taken to mean that freedom in any of its meanings is either inviolable, or sufficient, in some absolute sense. It is not inviolable, because abnormal conditions may

[56] For example, also from "Historical Inevitability:" "if we understand how conflicts between ends equally ultimate and sacred, but irreconcilable within the breast of even a single human being, or between different men or groups, can lead to tragic and unavoidable collisions, we shall not distort the moral facts by artificially ordering them in terms of some one absolute criterion; recognizing that (*pace* the moralists of the eighteenth century) not all good things are necessarily compatible with one another; and shall seek to comprehend the changing ideas of cultures, peoples, classes and individual human beings, without asking which are right, which wrong, at any rate not in terms of some simple home-made dogma." PSM, 176. One can see in this passage the conflation of "ultimate" and "sacred" and "irreconcilable," and the implication that such features made comparison by "one absolute criterion" impossible.

[57] As with a great deal of this chapter, I owe this crucial insight into Berlin's crucial distinction between the sacred and the inviolable to Jeffrey Stout.

[58] Those two occurrences appear in close succession: "Genuine belief in the inviolability of a minimum extent of individual liberty entails some such absolute stand. For it is clear that it has little to hope for from the rule of majorities; democracy as such is logically uncommitted to it, and historically has at times failed to protect it, while remaining faithful to its own principles. Few governments, it has been observed, have found much difficulty in causing their subjects to generate any will that the government wanted….no society is free unless it is governed by at any rate two interrelated principles: first, that no power, but only rights, can be regarded as absolute, so that all men, whatever power governs them, have an absolute right to refuse to behave inhumanly; and, second, that there are frontiers, not artificially drawn, within which men should be inviolable, these frontiers being defined in terms of rules so long and widely accepted that their observance has entered into the very conception of what it is to be a normal human being, and, therefore, also of what it is to act inhumanly or insanely; rules of which it would be absurd to say, for example, that they could be abrogated by some formal procedure on the part of some court or sovereign body." PSM, 236.

> occur, in which even the sacred frontiers of which Constant speaks, e.g. those violated by retrospective laws, punishment of the innocent, judicial murder, information laid against parents by children, the bearing of false witness, may have to be disregarded if some sufficiently terrible alternative is to be averted.[59]

The correction attests to what makes Berlin so maddeningly imprecise, but it suggests that he himself was aware that the only way in which tragedy in his account remained feasible was if he drew a distinction between sacred and inviolable. In most conditions, compromise can be pursued. But tragic conflicts are possible, and in those circumstances sacrifice of sacred value will be necessary. And if this is the case, sacred goods should not be considered inviolable.

The trouble is that Berlin used the language of tragedy both as a description of exceptional circumstance and as a name for a permanent and inevitable feature of both private and political life, the consequence of *any* conflict among plural and incommensurate values. To take but one particularly explicit expression of the latter position, he wrote approvingly of "Machiavelli's cardinal achievement," which he summarized as "his uncovering of an insoluble dilemma."

> It stems from his de facto recognition that ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other, that entire systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration, and that this happens *not merely in exceptional circumstances*, as a result of abnormality or accident or error – the clash of Antigone and Creon or in the story of Tristan – but (this was surely new) as *part of the normal human situation*.[60]

It is tempting to simply chalk this up to the lack of analytical precision with which we are now familiar, or to suggest that Berlin used the term "tragic" simply to describe two different phenomena – on one hand the necessary loss to values considered important that any compromise always entails and on the other the particular and extreme circumstance in which a sacred value must be violated. But his multivalent use of the term suggests that his pluralism has a difficult time sustaining the distinction. If we frame "normal" politics as demanding losses to ultimate value, might that make it in fact easier rather than more difficult to accept sacrifice and violation of goods considered sacred?

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[59] FE, lx.
[60] PSM, 320. Emphasis mine.

The question is whether and how to distinguish compromise from sacrifice. Berlin's famous account of liberty suggests that the distinction between the two might not be terribly sturdy. His view of negative liberty as the freedom to act outside of interference or obstacle is of course among the more famous in 20th century political thought. But this familiar framing obscures what is so distinctive about Berlin's position, which is that according to his definition *any* restriction on action must be considered an infringement on liberty.[61] As a consequence, as he readily admitted, something like the prohibition of slavery had to be considered a restriction on freedom.[62] Berlin of course did not condone slavery. But he argued that its prohibition must be recognized as reflecting a value (in this case equality) that was also "ultimate" and that therefore must be similarly limited in the name of liberty.[63]

This framework swings in two obviously worrisome directions. On the one hand, if every constraint on action is taken as a loss of liberty, then everything from marriage to traffic lights to taxes must be described as restrictions of freedom. It isn't hard to see how this position can easily be

[61] Berlin made this point explicitly in, among other places, "Historical Inevitability:" "To avoid glaring inequality or widespread misery I am ready to sacrifice some, or all, of my freedom: I may do so willingly and freely; but it is freedom that I am giving up for the sake of justice or equality or the love of my fellow men. I should be guilt-stricken, and rightly so, if I were not, in some circumstances, ready to make this sacrifice. But a sacrifice is not an increase in what is being sacrificed, namely freedom, however great the moral need or the compensation for it. Everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience. If the liberty of myself or my class or nation depends on the misery of a number of other human beings, the system which promotes this is unjust and immoral. But if I curtail or lose my freedom in order to lessen the shame of such inequality, and do not thereby materially increase the individual liberty of others, an absolute loss of liberty occurs." PSM, 197. Cf. J. S. Mill's famous harm principle.

[62] Berlin sometimes noted that "liberty for the wolves is death for the lambs" as when he noted in "The Pursuit of the Ideal" that "[b]oth liberty and equality are among the primary goals pursued by human beings through many centuries; but total liberty for wolves is death to the lambs, total liberty of the powerful, the gifted, is not compatible with the rights to a decent existence of the weak and the less gifted." The important point here is that, contra Mill, the restrictions on liberty required for liberty to be protected are considered opposed to liberty. PSM, 10. Similarly, in the "Introduction" to *Four Essays,* "Legal liberties are compatible with extremes of exploitation, brutality, and injustice." FE, xlvi.

[63] Here is how he put this point in the Introduction to *Four Essays*: "The fact that given examples of negative freedom…-- say the freedom of parents or schoolmasters to determine the education of children, of employers to exploit or dismiss their workers, of slave-owners to dispose of their slaves, of the torturer to inflict pain on his victims – may, in many cases, be wholly undesirable, and should in any sane or decent society be curtailed or suppressed, does not render them genuine freedoms any the less." FE, lvii.

harnessed in support of an assault on government or the state as such.[64] But it is also easy to see how if the most basic conditions of social life are considered a compromise to liberty, the state can justify more and more egregious restrictions as just another necessary loss to freedom demanded by other values considered "ultimate." On both horns of the dilemma, the borders around justified loss, necessary loss, and horrendous loss seem porous at best.

The first of these difficulties has been prodigiously examined in liberal theory.[65] The latter less so, and hardly at all when it comes to the implications of Berlin's particular brand of liberalism. One reason for this is that Berlin consistently described pluralism at such an exceedingly high degree of abstraction that any claim as to its concrete implications is bound to be partial at best. While he often named those values he considered "ultimate" or "sacred" (liberty, fraternity, equality, loyalty, and national belonging being the most frequent) he didn't do so with specificity or consistency. In his reflections on political judgement he hardly offered any concrete example as to what compromise among values might look like in specific circumstances. And in his few portraits of political leaders of exemplary political judgement – Chaim Weizmann, Roosevelt, and Churchill, most especially – he offered entertaining descriptions of personality and disposition but few if any accounts of actual deliberation or concrete acts of judgement in moments of decision.[66]

The lacuna is not incidental, and not only a matter of style. Despite Berlin's insistence on the need in political life to "understand the character of a particular movement, of a particular individual, of a unique state of affairs, of a unique atmosphere, of some particular combination of economic, political, personal factors" his pluralism encourages the view that values exist in a

[64] For perhaps the two most influential iterations of this idea in 20th century liberalism, see Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962) and Frederick Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London, UK: Routledge, 1944).
[65] Addressing this problem is one of the major interventions by John Rawls in *Theory of Justice*, most especially his "Difference Principle."
[66] See "Winston Churchill in 1940" and "President Franklin Delano Roosevelt," both in PSM and "Chaim Weizmann's Leadership" in POI.

perpetual conflict abstracted from all of these particulars.[67] It is therefore no surprise that in his reflections on political judgement all of these particulars get ushered so far into the background. In his essays on Weizmann, for example, he gives no mention of how Weizmann viewed the growing violence among Arabs and Jews in mandate Palestine. Instead, we're told that he was "someone who understood the texture of public life, distinguished the trivial from the important," and "loved the English" because of their "capacity for not sacrificing live human beings on the altar of abstraction and ideals."[68]

It's almost too easy to take shots at this sort of thing – to note that Berlin's depiction of the English here rather conveniently omits such minor matters as the East India Company's enthusiastic willingness to sacrifice human beings for economic gain. (Perhaps the trouble is not so much the sacrifice of live human beings, but with their immolation in the name of abstraction instead of the rather more concrete altar of profit?) While the broadside is perhaps unfair, the example points to the political trouble that follows from Berlin's remarkably thin way of describing the situations and choices of the leaders he has in mind. While relentlessly insisting on the necessity that political judgement avoid "abstraction" and attend to the "texture of public life," he described the values of politics at such a high level of abstraction that the "texture" of that public life – histories, circumstance, power relationships, economic inequalities – all disappear.

The obvious objection to this criticism would be that Berlin's reflections on political judgement focus on a different set of specifics, namely the particular dispositions of the political leader who decides in the thick of chaotic political life among various competing values. But this is only the obvious consequence of a framework in which the values or goods themselves are described as abstracted from social context. What remains is only a lone decider, weighing the relative force of

[67] *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, 32.
[68] POI, 236.

different values and making the difficult choice between them. All other particulars fade, as the political leader deliberates, decides, and suffers the losses of decision.

This emphasis on the sole political leader with the courage to weather the losses of politics and the closely related picture of values abstracted for social context and power relations are both, as we've seen, central features of Weber's political ethics. Above, however, I suggested that the most worrisome aspect of Weber's thought follows from his normative emphasis on tragedy and moral loss as representative and reflective of the conflict between his two ethics. As a consequence, circumstances in which profound moral loss is most evident and most severe are taken not as exceptional cases to be avoided at all costs but as exemplary and reflective of political life as such. The political leader who works to avoid such circumstance is the leader who lacks the courage to pay the moral price politics demands, while the leader who embraces such circumstance recognizes the truth of value pluralism in general and political life especially. It isn't hard to see how such a framework not only cannot sustain a clear distinction between circumstances of emergency and norm but might encourage ever enlarging the horizon of the former. After all, it is in the emergency that the conflict is most evident and obvious, when the decision is most agonized, when tragedy is most inescapable. While Berlin suggested that tragedy could be avoided if compromise was pursued, can his pluralism avoid the embrace of sacrifice so central to Weber's?

The Return of the Tragic

Given the degree of abstraction by which Berlin described judgement and pluralism in his own writing, some have turned to Berlin's biography for examples of how his pluralism might work in practice.[69] Berlin was among a handful of Cold War intellectuals actively engaged in politics

[69] For example, Christopher Hitchens "Moderation or Death" which concentrates on Berlin's Cold War politics and Seyla Benhabib, "Isaiah Berlin: A Judaism Between Decisionism and Pluralism," which addresses more particularly his involvement in Zionist politics.

throughout his adult life, and his biography offers ample resource especially for those looking to indict his liberalism. Berlin's notorious attack on Isaac Deutscher doomed the legendary scholar's appointment at Sussex.[70] Berlin was troublingly silent on the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima and said nothing on the expulsions of the Palestinian people in 1948 and their occupation both within Israel proper until 1966 and in the territories conquered in war of 1967.[71] He offered ambivalent but still practical support for the war in Vietnam. All of this might lead one to suspect at least that Berlin was all too ready to accept certain violations provided certain sorts of people were on the wrong end of them, or that certain values some of us might cherish did not rise in his mind to the level of "ultimate."[72]

But are these personal positions reflective of Berlin's pluralism? On one hand, it seems straightforwardly the case that in matters as mundane as blocking the appointment of an esteemed scholar or as grievous as the fire-bombing of Vietnamese villages, support for either is obviously antithetical to any meaningful account of pluralism. If so, we would have to conclude that Berlin was simply at best a man of contradictions, at worst a hypocrite. On the other hand, in each of these cases one could make an argument that there are plural values to be weighed, and difficult decisions to be rendered. We might disagree profoundly with the judgement while at least conceding that in the relevant cases there are multiple values that must at least be considered.

The difficulty calls to mind Leo Strauss's indictment of pluralism as a form of "fanatical obscurantism" – Strauss's awkward term for positions that intentionally obscure the fundamental

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[70] For a full-length book on the sad ordeal, see David Caute, *Isaac and Isaiah: The Covert Punishment of a Cold War Heretic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

[71] Edward Said gave a particularly fierce condemnation of Berlin on the matter of his silence on the Palestinians. See "Isaiah Berlin: An Afterthought" in Edward Said, *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (New York: Vintage, 2001).

[72] Hitchens describes these various circumstances in "Moderation of Death." On Berlin's support for the war in Vietnam, Hitchens argues that it was a good deal less ambivalent that Ignatieff describes in his biography. As Hitchens points out, it must also be added that these were judgements of no small significance. What Berlin said mattered, and not just to personal friends and his many students and colleagues but to the officials who designed and implemented policy Hitchens provides letters between McGeorge and William Bundy describing Berlin's full-throated support for American policy (and, amazingly, lamenting that they did not share his confidence). See Hitchens, "Moderation or Death," 18.

questions or issues under consideration.[73] Berlin' specific positions also suggest the force of Strauss's parallel claim that pluralism ultimately amounted in practice to an embrace of conformity and by extension an accommodation to power. While Strauss did not draw out why this was the case, the above analysis helps suggest the reason. By describing values as abstract entities in permanent and perpetual conflict, Berlin makes the social structures and power relationships in which those values are given expression disappear. When power structures and relationships and interests are explicitly erased, they are implicitly accepted. Once values are taken as independent of the social context in which losses or gains are suffered or won, it is not terribly surprising that the losses embraced as necessary are, in practice, suffered by people implicitly regarded as less valuable.[74]

Berlin's most explicit public statement on an issue of contemporary urgency, the war in Vietnam, confirms the worries. In his short contribution to the 1967 *Authors Take Sides on Vietnam*, Berlin agonized over what he described as the "unsatisfactory position" of having to qualify his answer to the questions posed by the book's editors – whether he was for or against the intervention and how the conflict could be resolved. He responded that while "it was a terrible mistake to have sent troops there in the first place," it is "more dreadful to abandon people to massacre by their enemies." He concluded that he was for "whatever solution is likely to cause least destruction and oppression," and wanted to caution against any "arrogant or simple-minded insistence on importing our own methods or institutions which have their own, perhaps quite different, institutions and aspirations."[75] All of this sounds difficult to disagree with on principle. Who could be against "whatever solution is likely to cause least destruction and oppression?" But the implication of the

[73] NRH, 6.
[74] Danielle Allen elaborates this point more generally in respective to democratic life as a whole and American democracy especially in Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
[75] "Taking Sides on Vietnam," in Isaiah Berlin, *Building: Letters 1960-1975* (London, UK: Random House, 2013).

position is in practice support for a war declared wrong. This ought to give us some pause. How can such an obviously questionable conclusion follow from such seemingly reasonable principles?

Berlin cast the dilemma as a conflict between two values or, more precisely, between two wrongs: the wrong of aggression and the wrong of abandoning people to massacre. Most would agree both are inexcusable and horrible. Thus, the conflict is a tragic one. But framing the dilemma in these terms obscures so much of relevance it's hard to know where to begin. With the fact that the vast majority of the Vietnamese were fighting for what they considered independence and as a consequence leaving Vietnam did *not* entail abandoning the Vietnamese to massacre? Or with the decades of American and European imperial power in the region, which might be of some relevance to the question of whether the war should be prolonged? Or with the forces and history that produced conditions whereby it was an American administration that considered itself authorized to make such "agonized" decisions? By describing the issue as a tragic dilemma, an evolving war of tremendous violence among actual human beings caught up in concrete power relationships and histories is instead described as if it were a conflict among abstract values. When described as such, the seemingly tragic dilemma in fact produces an obvious resolution: "whatever solution is likely to cause least destruction." In short, we must accept a measure of brutality in order to prevent greater loss. We're left with consequentialism with a guilty conscience – in short, precisely the position given such memorable expression by Max Weber.

A half-century after Berlin's short contribution to the volume on Vietnam, the terms of his argument are frighteningly and depressingly familiar. To take just the most obvious example, as of this writing, the United States remains "entangled" (to adopt a term whose frequency is revealing) in a war in Afghanistan that is soon to reach its 20th anniversary.[76] Given the familiarity of the pained

[76] For just one example of the use of the term, see Greg Myer, "Pledging to End Two Wars, Obama Finds Himself Entangled in Three," National Public Radio, October 15, 2015.

arguments against withdrawal, it is not surprising to find that among those self-described liberals who helped offer intellectual justification for the war on terror, several quite explicitly draw upon Berlin's pluralism. And while Berlin offers only scant example of how his pluralism might work in practice, more recent reflection illustrates the troubling dynamics explicitly.

Michael Ignatieff has offered perhaps the most explicit and expansive attempt to bring Berlin's framework to bear on contemporary challenges in his 2003 Gifford lectures, published as *The Lesser Evil*.[77] Throughout his many works, Ignatieff has described Berlin as a personal mentor and intellectual hero (an affection most evident in his 1998 authorized biography) and he explicitly framed the lectures as an attempt to work through the implications of Berlin's value pluralism for the war on terror. [78] At the center of Ignatieff's argument is a moral claim that follows from the pluralism described above: if we recognize that a wrong committed for the prevention of greater violence must still be considered a wrong, we will be less likely to justify it. With this position, Ignatieff distinguishes his view against two familiar alternatives. The first takes the primary purpose of government to be ensuring the security of citizens. Given that rights are intended to protect security, if security requires suspension of certain rights then it only makes sense that those rights be suspended when necessary for the sake of security. Ignatieff contrasts this with the view that democratic government is intended to preserve rights which inhere in the human person. Any infringement of rights is therefore a threat to democratic government. The two positions neatly map onto what we saw way back in the introduction as the tension at the center of the modern nation state, between the authority of a sovereignty that resides in the individual person and that which rests with the nation. Against these positions, Ignatieff argues that "the best way to minimize harms

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https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/10/15/448925947/pledging-to-end-two-wars-obama-finds-himself-entangled-in-three. Accessed August 10, 2020.

[77] Michael Ignatieff, *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[78] For Berlin's influence on Ignatieff, see Michael Cotey Morgan, "Michael Ignatieff: Idealism and the Challenge of the 'Lesser Evil,'" *International Journal* 61, No. 4, (Autumn 2006), 977.

is to maintain a clear distinction in our minds between what necessity can justify and what the morality of dignity can justify, and never to allow the justifications of necessity — risk, threat, imminent danger — to dissolve the morally problematic character of necessary measures."[79]

We can see here Berlin's framework in the background, as Ignatieff distinguishes his position by describing it as one that recognizes that two values – necessity (i.e. security) and morality – are in conflict. Even in this initial description of his position, however, Ignatieff's semantics betray a telling elision. The *never* that is emphatically insisted on is not certain actions. Instead, what must never be "dissolved" is the "morally problematic character" of the necessary measures. But what exactly is gained by ensuring that "morally problematic actions" remain "morally problematic?" Ignatieff wants to hold that such a perspective will encourage us to limit what we do in the name of security. But if recognition of the "morally problematic" nature of an action is considered emblematic of its morality, then might one in fact welcome "morally problematic" action as reflective of moral action? The language suggests that we are quickly drifting into the dilemma noted above in respect to Weber, where an insistence on tragic dilemmas can easily lead to an embrace of those dilemmas considered most tragic.

Given this framing, it is not surprising that Ignatieff has a difficult time justifying prohibitions he wants to insist ought to be considered absolute. He attempts to mark off those prohibitions through a familiar distinction, arguing that suspension of norms that damage what he calls "institutional inheritance" must never be committed while holding that exceptions to law that do not damage such inheritance may in emergency conditions be necessary. In short, liberal democracies should not suspend those practices and principles that are necessary for their survival as liberal democracies. But such a definition imagines that "liberal democracy" is a static and unified entity, composed of certain agreed-upon practices without which it no longer can be described as "liberal

[79] Ignatieff, 8.

democracy." But what if "liberal democracy" is that form of government that recognizes that politics requires constant and perpetual compromise among equally "ultimate" and plural values? What if liberal democracy is the name for a politics that recognizes that loss to "ultimate values" is inevitable?

I am putting my thumb on the scale here, but with reason. The degree to which Ignatieff embraces Berlin's framework is most evident in a claim seemingly distant from his main argument that "coercion may be necessary to maintain social order, but in a democratic theory of government it is an evil, and it must be kept to a strict minimum."[80] We see here the distinctive force of Berlin's account of negative liberty, in which any restraint on action is named "an evil." For this reason, Ignatieff muses, punishments in liberal democracies "raise the specter of evil," and therefore liberal democracies "have a guilty conscience about punishment." He continues, "only in liberal societies have people believed that the pain and suffering involved in depriving people of their liberty must make us think twice about imposing this constraint even on those who justly deserve it"[81] Given that the United States is both the world's longest standing liberal democracy and also incarcerates more of its population than any political society known to history, it would seem that either Ignatieff is wrong on this point or that our thinking twice about such matters is irrelevant to our practices. The example, it turns out, is not peripheral to Ignatieff's claim, for it suggests that thinking that a given restriction on liberty is "evil" might be at best meaningless in ensuring its prevention and might even encourage its perpetuation. But how could this be?

[80] Ibid., 22. Ignatieff refers to John Stuart Mill as his precedent for this claim, citing his famous "harm principle." But according to that view, government coercion is legitimate and therefore *not* an evil so long as it only ensures that the exercise of one person's freedom does not threaten the ability of another to exercise theirs. The view that *any* infringement on free action, regardless of the consequence or intent of that action, entails a sacrifice of liberty and therefore of freedom is not one that can be attributed to Mill. As we saw above, however, it is thposition defended by Isaiah Berlin.

[81] Ibid., 17.

Ignatieff's analysis suggests that there are several dynamics at work. First, Ignatieff goes from describing evil as a rare feature of political life reserved for emergency to describing evil as constitutive of political life. The picture of politics that emerges is one so thoroughly contaminated by evil that distinctions between "greater and lesser" take on *less* weight, rather than more. Second, by insisting that the mature political actor recognize the "morally problematic" nature of certain measures demanded by "necessity," that actor is encouraged to embrace those actions deemed "morally problematic" – precisely in order to exhibit their "morality." And third, by describing the paradigmatic political act as a decision among conflicting ultimate values that exist in some abstract realm, the particular histories and experiences and power relations of those who decide and those subject to decision disappear. The matter of criminal justice is of course not Ignatieff's primary concern, but it is not coincidental, to put it mildly, that those actual human beings that Ignatieff refrains from mentioning just happen to be from certain backgrounds, with certain skin color, with certain economic conditions and certain amounts of political power.

These dynamics come into sharpest focus in Ignatieff's reflections on the internment of the Japanese Americans during World War II – a case he presents in order to demonstrate how in cases of emergency, his framework can ensure prohibitions on certain actions. For Ignatieff, the case provides an example of a tragic choice in which a terrible circumstance demands one of two choices: intern Japanese citizens without due process, or risk extending a war of immense brutality? Ignatieff argues that "a lesser evil approach would reason as follows:" while "shortening a war is a morally significant goal," it cannot outweigh "the loss of freedom that internment will entail," particularly given that the relationship between internment and the length of the war is "so uncertain." Therefore, the internment should have been prohibited.

In light of his preceding argument, this is a strange way to present the "dilemma." Absent is the matter of "institutional inheritance" so central to his distinction between the norms that can be

suspended and those that must never be permitted. According to that argument, the question would be whether the mass imprisonment of an entire population based on their national heritage might amount to a significant damage to the political fabric and heritage of the country. Which it either was, in which case it should have been prohibited according to Ignatieff's conditions, or it wasn't, in which case we might question the power of such a condition. But such reasoning requires reflection on how a rule might be applied in a given circumstance, and this his tragic framework cannot allow. Instead, the potential loss of American lives in war on one side is weighed against the actual loss of freedom for Japanese residents and American citizens of Japanese descent. But when so described, is there any reason to think that a sufficiently fraught mind would come to the conclusion Ignatieff wants to recommend? "Shortening the war" is perhaps an insufficient goal to warrant the internment, but what about "preventing the defeat of the United States?" This may in retrospect seem preposterous, but Roosevelt's order was justified precisely on grounds of "military necessity."[82] And when the matter is framed as one of military necessity on one side and the loss of property of some on the other, it is far from obvious that Ignatieff's "lesser evil" approach necessarily concludes with a rejection of internment. Wouldn't it be at least plausible that consideration of the losses so described — national survival on one side against the property of Japanese Americans on the other — would lead us to conclude that "lesser evil" of internment is far preferable?

[82] The opening lines to Executive Order 9066, signed by Roosevelt in February of 1942 and establishing the legal grounds for internment, read as follows: "Whereas the successful prosecution of the war requires every possible protection against espionage and against sabotage to national-defense material, national-defense premises, and national-defense utilities… by virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States, and Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy, I hereby authorize and direct the Secretary of War, and the Military Commanders whom he may from time to time designate, whenever he or any designated Commander deems such action necessary or desirable, to prescribe military areas in such places and of such extent as he or the appropriate Military Commander may determine, from which any or all persons may be excluded, and with respect to which, the right of any person to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War or the appropriate Military Commander may impose in his discretion." The order grants to the military the power to establish zones in which the legal protections offered citizens are suspended. It does soon on the grounds that such suspense is required for national defense.

When framed as a tragic choice between two losses the decision of whether to intern an entire population based on their ethnicity looms as a tragic dilemma. But is such a decision really "tragic"? Is it helpfully described as such? Setting up the dilemma in these terms creates a moral cost out of *not* imprisoning people. Moreover, as soon as the conflict is framed as one between security and liberal norms, so long as those who are denied legal protections are taken to be those who threaten security, the dilemma turns out to be not so tragic at all. The "responsible" political leader has only one obvious choice: they must choose security and lament the loss.

The point illustrates the degree to which the framework relies on an abstraction from social context. It was of some relevance that those being interned were Japanese Americans and that those deciding were not. But this is not a factor that Ignatieff considers significant. And how could it be? When political judgement is taken as a matter of an individual decider weighing the relative force of the value of security and the value of liberal norms, such considerations are trivial, a distraction in the face of recognizing the full force of the tragic dilemma.

Ignatieff's reflections reveal the ease with which value pluralism can so easily be harnessed to justify suspension of liberal norms in the name of protecting liberal norms. The pluralist liberal recognizes that national security and individual rights are plural goods that must be compromised one for the other. What it means to be a "responsible" leader is to work to balance one and the other, and to try and avoid situations when one must be sacrificed for the other. But it is only in the most difficult cases that the force of the conflict and therefore the weight of each plural good is fully felt. It will therefore always be tempting to the value pluralist to describe a given situation as tragic, for only in such situations is one forced to recognize the "truth" that values are plural and incommensurate. And it is in emergency when the most elemental values of the liberal nation state are revealed as in tension and conflict, as the values of national sovereignty are shown to be pitted

against those of individual sovereignty. It is in the exception that the rule – the inescapability of pluralism, the uneasy compromises and losses which define political life – is most clearly illuminated.

The paradoxical consequence of such a tragic liberalism is that suspension of liberal norms becomes the paradigmatic expression of liberalism. It is therefore not surprising to find Berlin and Ignatieff describe the war in Vietnam and the war on terror in such similar terms, as agonizing decisions that require an embrace of awful cost. Both perspectives follow from a liberalism that takes tragic dilemma as the most manifest expression of its own principles and takes the "moral" politician as one who accepts the less wrong, makes the difficult choice, bears its burden, and lives with the consequence. Wars of at least questionable purpose and obvious brutality are renamed as "necessary." Those who oppose them are declared naïve, and those who accept them are declared morally mature. We're left with a political ethics quite close to Weber's, only with a conscience somewhat less plagued.

Conclusion

Through the course of this chapter, it might seem that the question of Berlin's reflections on the Jewish question has receded entirely from view. But as we've moved from consideration of the consequence of value pluralism in general to the question of the emergency specifically, I want to suggest that it has reappeared, albeit in the background. As suggested in the discussion of Ignatieff's reflections, the dilemma of the emergency appears as a tragic dilemma for the liberal as a consequence of the tension between two sources of political authority and two notions of political sovereignty: the individual and the nation. Just as Weber's value pluralism distills from a polytheism of rival gods a dualism of two gods in particular, when enacted in political practice Berlin's value pluralism most readily reduces to the dilemma between these two sources of authority.

As I argued in Chapter Three, it was this tension specifically that was at the center of Berlin's pluralism. There, I suggested that Berlin normalized the modern Jewish condition by remapping the political home for that condition. That remapping renamed and redirected the purpose of political thought, away from efforts to solve fundamental dilemmas towards recognition of their intractability – most especially the inherent dilemma between liberty as individual rights and national belonging. Once that dilemma was declared insoluble, the fact that Jews and Judaism could be only uncomfortably fit into the framework of the modern nation state is reflective of modern political life rather than exceptional to it. In this chapter, I have suggested that Berlin not only normalized the exceptional condition of the Jews. He normalized the exception.

It is not surprising therefore to find that as Jewish political life has come to be defined by the emergency condition, so many Jewish political thinkers have embraced Berlin's pluralism as a framework for explanation. As a result, a great deal of contemporary Jewish political debate reveals the particular power, temptation, and dangers of his pluralism in stark relief. I'll turn to that debate in the conclusion to this dissertation. In the next and final chapter, however, I want first to turn to Leo Strauss's reflections on the question of whether and how liberalism might secure liberal norms against the temptations of emergency. It might seem curious to suggest that Strauss considered this question at all. Many assume that Strauss was explicit in his view that politics often necessitates and requires those who exercise rule to bypass legal constraints. Yet as we'll see, Strauss considered much modern political thought to be plagued by an inability to distinguish between emergency and norm. Yet while he was aware of the problem, like Isaiah Berlin he insisted it was not one that could be solved. And he agreed on that point, as we'll see, for similar reasons.

Chapter 6

The Jewish Problem as the Human Problem: The Chosen People and the State of Exception

In the last chapter, I argued that Isaiah Berlin's tragic liberalism cannot offer a coherent distinction between exception and norm, and ultimately describes a version of liberal commitments that find fullest expression in states of emergency that require a suspension of liberal norms. While this is certainly a paradoxical and surprising claim, in a brief aside to Machiavelli in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss suggests why such a politics might follow from a pluralism that, at least as Berlin described it, was indebted to Machiavelli as much as anyone.[1] There, Strauss wrote that Machiavelli revolutionized political thought by "taking his bearings by the extreme situations in which the demands of justice are reduced to the requirements of necessity, and not by the normal situations in which the demands of justice…are the highest law." As a consequence of replacing justice with necessity, Strauss held, Machiavelli freed himself from having to "to overcome a reluctance as regards the deviation from what is normally right."[2] In taking the aims of politics as security, stability, and power, Machiavelli had made the survival of a given regime equivalent to justice. In so doing, he made exception the norm.

With this argument, Strauss drew a subtle but still unmistakable line between the dawn of modern politics and the nihilism that he would argue offered the intellectual foundation for fascism. As we've seen, to Strauss the great representatives of that nihilism were Nietzsche and Carl Schmitt, the latter of whom had opened his 1922 *Political Theology* with lines that have become among the

[1] Berlin credited his early reading of Machiavelli as having first "planted" in his mind the realization that "not all the supreme values pursued by mankind now and in the past were necessarily compatible with one another." "The Pursuit of the Ideal," PSM, 7.
[2] NRH, 162.

most quoted sentences of 20th century political thought: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception. "[3] Schmitt used the term as an opening salvo in his attack on a liberalism of rational procedure, a politics that in his view offered ideological justification to a "modern state that seems to have actually become what Max Weber envisioned: a huge industrial plant."[4] To Schmitt, the fact that certain circumstance would require and demand the suspension of liberal norms betrayed the ultimate fiction of liberalism's pretension of legal neutrality. If the possibility of exception was inescapable, then liberalism's self-understanding as a framework for the protection of individual rights was a lie. In denying the necessity of the political and its distinction between friend and enemy, liberalism obscured the fact that the sovereign in politics is ultimately the power that decides when the law must be suspended in the name of protecting friends against enemies.

As we've seen, Strauss followed upon Schmitt's claim that liberalism obscured its own faith commitments – faith in a reason that presumed to have dethroned revelation but had only attempted to do so through "mockery," and faith in the promise of human capacity to manipulate nature on behalf of endless material progress.[5] The resonance is often relegated to a matter of historical curiosity and even mild embarrassment in the literature on Strauss, as writers take pains to note that Strauss's admiration of Schmitt preceded the latter's involvement with the Nazi party.[6] The approach is fitting given the contours of the scholarship, which tends to emphasize their shared debt to one another, and the obviously disturbing course of Schmitt's political affiliations.[7] Yet such an approach deflates the ways in which, as Randi Rashkover and Martin Kavka note, Strauss's own

[3] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press: 2005), 5.
[4] Ibid., 65.
[5] I explored these claims in Chapter One. For the former, see the "Preface," JPCM, 170; for the latter, "Progress or Return," JPCM, 93-98.
[6] Strauss's last letter to Schmitt, thanking him for his support and letter of recommendation for a fellowship in Britain, was written after Schmitt joined the Nazi Party, but there is no evidence nor reason to believe that Strauss could have known of Schmitt's affiliation. See Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), xvii.
[7] See for example, Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, especially the introduction.

political thought amounted to a profound challenge and response to Schmitt's political theology. As they suggest, throughout Strauss's mature work runs an implicit challenge to Christian assumptions embedded in Schmitt's political theology.[8] Whereas Schmitt's account of politics rests on the centrality of sacrifice and God's miraculous intervention into secular time, Strauss held that the medieval Jewish writers understood that the sovereignty of law ultimately required a faith in revelation that unassisted reason could never provide. It isn't hard to see in this distinction between a view of sovereignty that rests on exception and one that rests on law an echo of the oldest and original defining question of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, over the authority of the law and the question of whether, in Paul's words, "the letter kills."

This particular argument is not always recognized as central to Strauss's work. The reason is that Strauss dedicated such effort to defending his claim that the classical tradition recognized the tension between philosophy and politics while modern political thought that conflated the two. Such a framework doesn't seem to take Judaism as particularly or distinctively relevant. Yet as we've already seen in Strauss's discussion of Weber, alongside this position ran a second equally crucial to Strauss's political thought: that the claims of revelation and those of philosophy were incommensurate. Insofar as revelation is understood as Biblical, the claim undoes any tidy equivalence we might assume between Strauss's position and that of the classics. But it also suggests that the question of tragedy that frames Weber's politics may be more central to Strauss's view than generally recognized.

In this chapter, I argue that Strauss's interpretations of both the classical tradition and Judaism revolve to a considerable extent around the question of how to authorize a sovereignty for law that can withstand the temptations of exception. I suggest that this question comes into view in respect

[8] Martin Kavka and Randi Rashkover, eds. *Judaism, Liberalism, and Political Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 3-4.

to his reflections on what he called at times the "political problem," the matter of whether it might be possible to offer a framework for political life that does not reduce justice to the matter of how to protect one's friends against one's enemies. Strauss's famous dichotomy between Athens and Jerusalem – a pair more adequately described as classical philosophy and revelation, and more precisely termed Socratic philosophy and medieval Judaism – is shaped by the approaches each tradition provide to this question.

I approach this argument through an interrogation of Strauss's enigmatic summary of Jewish exceptionalism, which we saw towards the end of Chapter Four. There, we found Strauss declaring that the Jewish people are "the chosen people" in the sense that "the Jewish problem is the most manifest symbol of the human problem insofar as it is a social or a political problem."[9] The concise and elusive description of Jewish chosenness takes us into a thicket of questions: what did Strauss mean by the political problem? By the social problem? By the human problem? How are they different? And what might it mean to find in the Jewish problem the "most manifest symbol" of "the human problem insofar as it is a political problem."[10]

In order to trace Strauss's meaning, I begin by explicating what he meant by the "political problem" and how he distinguished between classical philosophy's answer to that problem and Judaism's answer to it. That problem, as we'll see, amounted to how to reconcile the requirements of a politics with the demands of justice. According to Strauss, I suggest, the Bible and the Greeks both recognized the inherent limitations of politics from the perspective of justice, and both saw the exception as the most acute reflection of that limitation, but that each accented different sides of the

[9] JPCM, 143.

[10] In the question and answer period in the Chicago University Hillel House after "Why We Remain Jews," Strauss suggested that a great deal might hang on his summary. There, he told the audience that if his reflections on Jewish chosenness were "properly developed, the whole of the other things would come out. He didn't say what the "whole of the other things" were, but the aside suggests that Strauss considered his formulation of Jewish exceptionalism as a concise expression of ideas central to his thought as a whole (and that his meaning was by no means self-evident, for otherwise it would not need to be "developed"), JPCM, 340.

polarity – the classics emphasizing the needs of the city, the Biblical prophets accenting the demands of justice.

I then turn to what Strauss called the human problem. The "human problem," I argue, amounted for Strauss to the question how one might live with the political problem; in short, how one might accept the inherent and inevitable injustice of political life without succumbing to despair. Again, Strauss argued that both the Greeks and the prophets recognized the problem, and that both responded by accepting an inherent alienation from politics and accepting an exile beyond its demands. Yet as close as the two approaches were formally, the two exiles reflect very different ways of approaching the political problem, with the philosopher accepting its alienation in humor and the prophets responding with anguish.

I conclude by returning to the question of what it might mean for Strauss that neither approach could be definitively shown to be superior to the other, and how and why the Jewish problem might be the "most manifest" symbol of the problems so elucidated. Even as Strauss insisted that both revelation and philosophy offered a way to live "untragically," the tension between the two produced an account of Jewish politics that nonetheless is best understood as tragic. It is tragic in the sense that in Strauss's account the Jews have an exceptional commitment to the universal demands of justice, even as they reveal in exceptional fashion that in a world defined by friends and enemies, those demands will always require exception. In the conclusions both to the chapter and the dissertation, I'll suggest that as iconoclastic as Strauss's view of Judaism was, this tragic Judaism is more familiar to contemporary Jewish politics than one might expect.

The Political Problem and the Limits of Justice

In what is sometimes considered the inaugural argument of political philosophy, Plato famously held in *The Republic* that the best regime according to justice would be one in which the philosophers

rule. In his famously counterintuitive reading, Strauss argued that this position had to be recognized as Plato's "exoteric" view. According to Strauss, Plato taught that such a regime was by definition unattainable.

As Strauss summarized the argument in his 1948 *On Tyranny*, only in such a regime is justice possible because the wise "alone are discerning enough to assign to everyone what he deserves or what is good for him."[11] In the best regime so described, the rule of the wise must be unlimited – for if the rule of the wise were tempered by the unwise, it would obviously be imperfect from the perspective of wisdom. But the unwise, being unwise, will be unwilling to grant power to the wise, while the wise will be unwilling to accept power constrained by the unwise. This problem, as Strauss put it in *Natural Right and History*, is "the political problem," and it "consists in reconciling the requirement for wisdom with the requirement for consent."[12] The classical answer to the conundrum of how to resolve "the political problem," Strauss held, rested on a distinction between the best regime in theory and the best regime in practice. While the best regime in theory is rule by the wise, Strauss held that Plato recognized that such a regime was by definition impossible, and therefore described its realization in ways that were plainly unrealizable.[13]

Given the impossibility of the ideal regime, the best *actual* regime is one that recognizes the inevitability that the unwise will rule; as such it is a regime in which the unwise are constrained by law. In the best actual regime, "[t]he rule of law is to take the place of the rule of men, however wise."[14] Those entrusted to protect the law, the "gentlemen," must be constrained in three ways. First, they must recognize themselves as obligated and beholden to a law that all recognize as having authority over their own rule. Second, they must be a landed gentry comfortable enough that they

[11] OT, 193.
[12] NRH, 141.
[13] Strauss notes various elements of Plato's ideal regime that make it in practice impossible, above all the eradication of the family. See CAM, 116-117.
[14] NRH, 141.

do not have an incentive to override the law in their own interest and even have the leisure time required for learning. And third, they ought to govern a "mixed regime" which will combine aristocracy, democracy and Kingship.[15] The best regime so described is, Strauss concluded, "identical to the doctrine of classical natural right."[16]

This argument has understandably provoked a great deal of controversy.[17] Among the obviously problematic aspects is that Strauss seems to defend such plainly inegalitarian politics.[18] While the inegalitarianism of this account should of course be challenged, such readings don't always recognize the motivation of the argument, which is driven not by a defense of those declared fit to rule but by a worry over the fragility of law.[19] The problem with democracy, according to Strauss's

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[15] NRH, 142; OT, 194.

[16] NRH, 144. Note that natural right so defined is not the same and is even in opposition to "natural law" with which it is sometimes conflated. According to the tradition of natural right as Strauss describes it, there is no law of morality that can be known by all according to reason. Only the few are capable of being philosophers, only philosophers can know justice, the philosophers will never rule, and therefore the rule of law must be sovereign even though from the perspective of philosophy the law can never be just. The doctrine of natural right, in short, is the doctrine that follows from the right of the philosophers to rule and the inherent impossibility that this right could ever be exercised.

[17] The literature on Strauss and liberal democracy, and in particular American liberal democracy, is immense. For writings that reflect a wide variety of interpretations of Strauss a defender of liberal democracy, see the essays in Kenneth L. Deutsch and John A. Murley, eds. *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999). For a defense of Strauss that comes closer to my own view, see "Leo Strauss's Platonic Liberalism," in Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Much more than Smith, however, I read what Smith calls Strauss's "Platonic liberalism" as based in a profound worry about popular rule and commitment to law. For condemnation of Strauss as hostile to liberal democracy, see Shadia B. Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and Shadia B. Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997). See also Steven Taylor Holmes, "Truths for Philosophers Alone?," *Times Literary Supplement* (December 1989), 1-7; Robert C. Miner, "Nietzsche, Schmitt, and Heidegger in the Anti-Liberalism of Leo Strauss," *Telos* 160 (2012). Such readings all take Strauss's Socratic politics as affirming rule by the philosophers and/or rule by deceit; I don't see how such interpretations can be squared with Straus's insistence that the wise will refuse to rule. For a comprehensive refutation of Drury on these grounds, and by extension many of those critics of Strauss that follow her indictment, see "Leo Strauss – Teacher of Evil?" in Catherine H. Zuckert and Michael P. Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[18] This is how Shadia Drury summarizes Strauss's argument in an interview. Danny Postel, "Noble Lies and Perpetual War: Leo Strauss, the neocons, and Iraq," *OpenDemocracy*, 15 October 2003. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/article_1542jsp/ Accessed August 11 2020.

[19] This is, to be sure, not the whole of the motivation. The other is a worry over the consequences of a technology that, in Strauss's reading of the classics, is considered the condition for the universal aristocracy that democracy demands. Here is how Strauss puts it in WIPP, "The difference between the classics and us with regard to democracy consists exclusively in a different estimate of the virtues of technology. But we are not entitled to say that the classical view has been refuted. Their implicit prophecy that the emancipation of technology of the arts, from moral and political control would lead to disaster or to the dehumanization of man has not yet been refuted." See "What is Political Philosophy," in IPP, 36. This claim is, in my view, among the more troubling that Strauss raises, given a climate crisis he could not have predicted but that he suggests the classical tradition at implicitly did.

interpretation of the classical position, is that in practice it amounts to rule by the unwise rather than rule by law. This argument, to be sure, reflects a deep worry over popular rule, but in making it Strauss stands with much of the modern liberal tradition stretching from James Madison's Federalist No. 10 to John Stuart Mill to Isaiah Berlin.[20] It is this shared worry that led Strauss to declare, in one of his most oft-quoted lines, that "liberal or constitutional democracy comes closer to what the classics demand than any alternative viable in our age."[21] The line has been taken by many as evidence of Strauss's support for liberalism, but it is support of a very particular kind. Strauss does not defend liberalism on the grounds of an equality that adheres in every person nor on the inalienable right to autonomous choice nor on the natural right of all people to pursue happiness.[22] Instead, Strauss defines liberal democracy according to its respect for the rule of law and its separation of powers, and then commends it among the modern options because it most fully recognizes the fragility of law.[23]

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[20] In his 1945 "On Classical Political Philosophy," Strauss would directly turn to the American founding as example of the classical position, quoting Jefferson's words to John Adams: "that form of government is the best, which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of [the] natural *aristoi* into offices of the government." Jefferson, however, held that this "natural *aristoi*" was not reflected in the actually existing "*aristoi*." Unlike an aristocracy which imagined that virtue was a matter of birth, Jefferson held that democracy would allow the virtuous to emerge from different classes (of white owners of property, needless to say). This view rests on a simultaneous distrust of popular rule *and* aristocratic rule. This was not Strauss's position (although elsewhere he did describe the promise of democracy as a "universal aristocracy). See WIPP, 86; LAM, 10.

[21] OT, 195.

[22] The latter of these justifications is often credited to Strauss due to the opening lines of *Natural Right and History*, in which Strauss asks whether the United States still "cheris[es] the faith in which it was conceived and raised?" NRH, 1. For readings of Strauss that argue for his liberal democracy on these grounds, see for example Henry Jaffa, *Original Intent and the Framers of the Constitution: A Disputed Question* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1993), especially 322. For a concise criticism of the problems with this view, see Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas*, 136-139.

[23] This is why, to Strauss, "liberal democracy, in contradistinction to communism and fascism, derives powerful support from…the premodern thought of our western tradition." See "Three Waves," 98; LAM, 15-16. For a helpful explication of this point, see Emily and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*, 77. Nasser Behnegar argues that while Strauss had no philosophical preference for liberal democracy over classical aristocracy, he had a practical one given the conditions of modernity. I don't think that this objection implicates my general interpretation. The more serious objection is that Strauss thought that liberal democracy fulfills the aims of the classical endorsement of aristocracy while protecting against the classical warnings against democracy. See Nasser Behnegar, "The Liberal Politics of Leo Strauss," in *Political Philosophy and the Human Soul*, ed. Michael Palmer and Thomas L. Pangle (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 260-261. This is the position presented by Catherine and Michael Zuckert, in *The Truth About Leo Strauss*, 77. Such readings I think don't take account of the depth of Strauss's ambivalent portrayal of the "First Wave" of modernity and the severity of his concerns over liberalism as ultimately amounting to the protection of material acquisition. While American liberal democracy may gather "powerful support" from the classical position, it was still a product of the "first wave." For Strauss's account of the problems in this "wave," see Chapter One of this Dissertation.

While there is of course much more to say on the question of Strauss's relationship to liberalism, I want to leave the issue at this brief analysis in order to ask whether Strauss's own position can or ought to be reduced to the classical view as he summarized it. Among the first reasons to suspect it might not be is that immediately after describing this account of the best regime in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss notes that there are in fact three different classical right doctrines – that of Plato and Socrates, that of Aristotle, and that of Thomas Aquinas.[24] In his summary of the Socratic-Platonic, he runs immediately into a new problem that casts some doubt as to whether the "ideal regime" is, from the perspective of philosophy, actually ideal.

The central trouble with the ideal regime, as Strauss explains, is that even in the perfect city one must treat one's friends differently from one's enemies even though this distinction is wholly unrelated to merit or virtue. It is a distinction therefore that philosophy cannot accept on its own terms. Here is how Strauss puts the problem:

> To avoid the self-contradiction, the city must transform itself into the 'world state.' But no human being and no group of human beings can rule the whole human race justly. Therefore, what is divined in speaking of the "world-state" as an all-comprehensive human society subject to one human government is in truth the cosmos ruled by God, which is the only true city, or the city that is simply according to nature because it is the only city which is simply just.[25]

The absolutely ideal regime according to justice is a world-state in which all people are given what they are due, a state that could only be ruled by an entity that could know what all people were due – an all-knowing God. But this is only a postulate of the imagination.[26] Given the impossibility of such a regime, the "problem of justice transcends the limits of political life."[27] In short, justice according to nature is universal, while justice according to the city is defined by the political, by the distinction

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[24] NRH, 146.
[25] NRH, 150.
[26] In his exchange with Kojéve, Strauss would suggest that their dispute ultimately hangs on the question of whether all people can be philosophers. The classics insisted on a natural inequality in this respect, while Strauss suggests Kojéve rejects it. See OT, 211-212.
[27] NRH, 151.

between citizen and non-citizen, friend and enemy. Whatever is considered just according to the city will be – even in a perfect city –unjust from the perspective of wisdom.

It is this point, as mentioned throughout this dissertation, that motivates Strauss's famous argument on behalf of "exoteric" writing. Strauss put this point most explicitly several years prior to his reflections on Plato in his 1948 *On Tyranny*, his study of Xenophon's short dialogue *The Hiero.* There, Strauss described the necessary discrepancy between law and justice as "the tyrannical teaching," because it taught that from the perspective of philosophy, tyranny by the wise is superior to democratic rule by the people.[28] In terms that he would reiterate in his reading of Plato, the point of the teaching is that "[l]egal justice is a justice which is imperfect and more or less blind," while "legitimate government is not necessarily 'good government' and almost certainly will not be government by the wise." If the city is held together by citizens' shared allegiance to law, those who learn the "tyrannical teaching" cannot be loyal citizens. But they nonetheless recognize the necessity of the city's laws for the practice of philosophy which they prize. Therefore, they write in such a way that affirms those laws – that is, "exoterically" – while inviting close readers into the work of philosophy through an "esoteric" message that teaches the necessary discrepancy between philosophy and the laws of the city.[29]

It is this point that Strauss emphasized in his later reading of Plato, in his insistence on the necessity of the "noble lie" to all political life. As Strauss described in his long essay on the *Republic,*

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[28] He therefore described the teaching as nothing "more than a most forceful expression of the problem of law and legitimacy." OT, 76.

[29] In the letter in which he sent Kojève a copy of his short 1948 *On Tyranny* and asked him to review it, Strauss wrote that "no one has made the case for modern thought in our time as brilliantly as you." OT, 236. Strauss was not alone in this estimation. Kojève's famous seminar on Hegel held from 1933 to 1939 had few participants, but those participants would go on to shape much of modern philosophy – and each would attest to the definitive impact of Kojève upon their life's work. André Gluckman called Kojéve the force "behind Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Aron, and also Lacan, behind the thinking which dominates France between '45 and '70." Interviewed in *Le Nouvel Observateur* November 11, 1983 quoted in Robert Pippin, "Being, Time, and Politics: The. Strauss-Kojéve Debate," *History and Theory* 32, no. 2 (1993), 146. For an overview of Kojéve's influence, see Mark Lilla, "Alexander Kojéve" in Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (New York, NY: New York Review of Books, 2003).

given that even the best regime requires that citizens place care for one another before care for those outside the city, those citizens "must forget the true character of them becoming citizens out of mere human beings or out of what one may call natural human beings." Instead, in the city the "fraternity of all human beings is to be replaced by the fraternity of fellow citizens."[30] That replacement is achieved through positing a divine act that separates humans into various kinds and gives to each kind their own territory. While necessary for politics, such an idea must be a "lie" from the perspective of philosophy.

In his summary in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss notes that given the basic commitments upon which society rests, what the philosopher knows as "natural right would act as dynamite for society." For this reason, "natural right therefore must be 'diluted.'" The primary means of its "dilution" is, as we've already seen, to recognize that the best actual regime is not the regime of justice but the regime of law. The primary political role of philosophers is to instruct those who rule towards knowledge of this truth, recognizing that the good known by nature can never be in harmony with the good of "one's own," but that the two must be kept in relationship with one another.[31] Given that the particular form of that relationship will vary, based on the kind of regime under which one lives and the pressures to which a people is subject, "there will always be a need for inexactness in political or moral matters."[32] This sums up what Strauss describes as the "Platonic" view of natural right, guided by an acceptance of the distinction between friend and enemy that defines political life and a philosophical refusal to accept that distinction as anything other than a lie, however noble.

The Aristotelian picture, on the other hand, dispenses with the distinction between the good known by nature and the good of the city. For Aristotle, according to Strauss, "there is no

[30] CAM, 102.
[31] NRH, 152.
[32] NRH, 153.

fundamental disproportion between natural right and the requirements of political society, or there is no essential need for the dilution of natural right."[33] In other words, there is no need for a noble lie. Therefore, for Aristotle, "all natural right is changeable."[34] The reason it must be changeable is that once natural right is taken as synonymous with the good of the city, "the mere existence, the mere survival, the mere independence, of the political community" is of ultimate importance. Therefore, in an "extreme situation" in which "the very existence or independence of a society is at stake," there can be "no limits which can be defined in advance" and there can be "no assignable limits to what might become just reprisals." Once this is taken as hypothetically possible in situations of emergency, however, it turns out that the distinction between war and peace is not so easily sustained. "Considerations which apply to foreign enemies" Strauss notes, "may well apply to subversive elements within society." After raising this troubling possibility, Strauss suggests that we "leave these sad exigencies covered with the veil with which they are justly covered." But the implication is clear: according to Aristotle, "in extreme situations the normally valid rules of natural right are justly changed, or changed in accordance with natural right; the exceptions are as just as the rules." As a consequence, Strauss concluded, "Aristotle seems to suggest that there is not a single rule, however basic, which is not subject to exception."[35]

Some readers have taken this picture as an expression of Strauss's view, and therefore found in Strauss's depiction of classical right an affirmation of the provisional nature of all law and a conflation of political necessity with natural right.[36] But in the context of his discussion in *Natural Right and History*, it is obvious that Strauss is contrasting Aristotle's position unfavorably with Plato's. By conflating the justice of the city with natural justice, Strauss argued that Aristotle weakened the

[33] NRH, 156.
[34] NRH, 158.
[35] NRH, 160.
[36] As noted, for this interpretation see among others Vatter, "Natural Right and State of Exception."

authority of law as it had been presented by Plato. Although Plato distinguished natural justice from the justice of the city, that distinction in effect strengthened the law of the city. But this is not to suggest that Plato, according to Strauss, considered the law of the city absolute. As Strauss noted, Plato as well as Aristotle recognized "the variability of the demands of that justice which men can practice."[37] Both, as Strauss summarized it, held that "there is a universally valid hierarchy of ends, but there are no universally valid rules of action."[38] But one offered a theory of law that contained and limited "the valid rules of action" while the other weakened those constraints.

Strauss dedicates only a page to Aquinas' view of natural right, but it's enough to draw his story to a close, as the distance between the justice known by law and the justice known by philosophy insisted upon by Plato and narrowed by Aristotle is finally and fully closed by Aquinas. As Strauss puts it, according to Aquinas "no doubt is left, not only regarding the basic harmony between natural right and civil society, but likewise regarding the immutable character of the fundamental propositions of natural law."[39] Strauss writes that as a consequence, according to Thomas, "the principles of the moral law" captured above all by the second table of the decalogue, "suffer no exception, unless possibly by divine intervention."[40] This would seem to suggest that Thomas's view resists the sort of conflation of law and necessity that I am suggesting troubled Strauss not only in his reading of Machiavelli but also of Aristotle. This view would appear to be confirmed by Strauss's suggestion that Montesquieu "tried to recover for statesmanship a latitude" restricted by Thomas, and in so doing offering an account closer to the classics.[41]

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[37] NRH, 161.
[38] NRH, 160.
[39] NRH, 163. For a very helpful discussion of this point and its implications for Strauss's broader criticism of Christianity, see Leora Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas*, 127.
[40] Ibid.
[41] NRH, 164.

Given this summary of Aquinas, it is perhaps understandable that some readers consider Strauss's criticism of Aquinas' theory of natural right to amount to the view that it is overly restrictive and does not adequately recognize that "natural right must be mutable in order to be able to cope with the inventiveness of wickedness."[42] Such readings, however, mistake the relationship between Strauss's view of the necessary discrepancy between philosophy and law and the strength of the law.[43] As he makes clear in his discussion of Plato and Aristotle, once justice and political judgment are taken as indistinguishable, the necessities of politics are taken as synonymous with the requirements of justice. According to Plato as Strauss interprets him, recognition of the distance between the justice of nature and the demands of the city reinforces the strength of the law, while presuming a potential conflation between the justice of nature and the demands of politics weakens that law. While Montesquieu may have been closer to the classics, it was Aquinas who paved the way for Machiavelli.

It goes without saying that Strauss's reading of Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas can all be challenged. My interest, however, is not in the specifics of his readings but in underscoring the extent to which the categories of the political as defined by friend and enemy and the notion of sovereignty as exception associated with Schmitt run just under Strauss's analysis of the classical tradition. The defining issue in his reading of the distinctions between Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas is the question of whether the demands of justice are in tension or in accord with the distinction between friend and enemy, and therefore whether the exception from law can be considered

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[42] NRH, 161. For a reading of Strauss along these lines see S.J. James V. Schall, "Strauss on St. Thomas," in *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, ed. Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Nicgorski 1994).

[43] Strauss makes an argument parallel to his regarding Aquinas in his discussion of Rabbi Levi ben Gerson in *Philosophy and Law*. There, he notes that according to Gerson "human care fo the continuity of human associations, which Plato held to be necessary, is fundamentally dispensable because this continuity is sufficiently guaranteed by providence." As against Plato, for whom "the question of law, at first the necessity of human caring for human beings, has its ground in the absence of divine caring, and accordingly, the realization of the ideal state depends on chance." This summary points to the argument I'm suggesting regarding Aquinas, in that the conflation of divine revelation with wisdom shared by both Aquinas and Gerson weakens the law that Plato strengthens. See *Philosophy and Law*, 57.

correlative with justice. He argues that Plato above all understood that the distinction between friend and enemy, between citizen and foreigner, is essential to political life but contrary to any notion of justice known by philosophy – and that counterintuitively, such recognition leads to a more stringent defense of the law.

But this framework leads to an obvious problem. If political life as such is defined by the distinction between citizen and foreigner, friend and enemy, then whatever the law might be, however strong it is, is necessarily a law that serves citizens at the expense of foreigners. It is still defined by the political as Schmitt described it. We saw, however, that in his review of *The Concept of the Political* that Strauss concluded that such a politics was empty of morality or ethical content. One can see why, for those that take Strauss's own political thought as synonymous with the Platonic view as he described it, we might fairly conclude that his political philosophy is ultimately vacant of moral content as well.[44] But Strauss consistently reminded readers that the Platonic portrait of the best regime follows and is dependent upon the claim of philosophy to its own superiority as the best way of life.[45] Yet as noted at length in Chapter Two, Strauss argued that philosophy could not prove its superiority against the claims of revelation. If this is the case, Strauss's mature political position cannot be easily reduced to his interpretation of the classics. But what might be the political implication of revelation's refutation of classical philosophy's most basic claim? The answer, or so I'll argue, hangs again on the exception – as Strauss found in the medieval Jewish tradition an

[44] See above all the work of Shadia Drury noted in the introduction. The most significant piece of evidence on this score is Strauss's letter to Karl Löwith in which he wrote that he "might actually agree with everything Plato and Aristotle demanded" and that the polis as interpreted by both "is morally politically the most pleasing." But immediately after declaring so, he wrote that this "does not mean that I would want to live under such a polis…for philosophy's moral-political considerations are necessarily secondary." Leo Strauss and Karl Löwith , "Correspondence Concerning Modernity," Susannne Klein and George Elliot Tucker, trans. *Indendent Jourhnal of Philosophy/Unabhängige Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 4 (1983), 105-19. As Leora Batnitzky notes in respect to this letter, Strauss's disclaimer that philosophy's moral-political considerations are necessarily secondary is as much if not more consequential for his thought as a whole than his agreement that the polis as described by Plato is "morally politically the most pleasing." Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas, 214*.

[45] As already noted, from RCPR, 181.

alternative approach to the dilemma that distinguished Aristotle from Plato. Uncovering that alternative requires us to depart from Strauss's Athens, and make our way to his Jerusalem.

In a letter to his one-time employer and early intellectual antagonist Julius Guttman in 1949, Strauss pointed to the close link between his reading of the classical tradition – and especially *The Hiero* – and what he had come to conclude was an astonishing fact about Moses Maimonides. "If my hunch is right," he wrote, "then Maimonides was a 'philosopher' in a far more radical sense than is usually assumed today and really was always assumed." It would, however, be explosive to argue that the figure widely considered to have most forcefully and thoroughly synthesized Jewish law and philosophy in fact followed upon the classical approach and insisted on the fundamental irreconcilability between the two. Therefore, Strauss wrote to Guttman, "I wanted to present the problem in principle of esotericism – or the problem of the relationship between thought and society…with respect to some strategically favorable, non-Jewish object." *The Hiero* was a seemingly safe choice, because "if *even* Xenophon, this seemingly harmless writer, then all the more…"[46]

As Strauss predicted, his view of Maimonides and the medieval Jewish tradition more generally has been met with no small degree of controversy. In arguing that Maimonides was a "philosopher" in the sense in which Strauss meant it – i.e. someone who recognized the necessary distance between law and justice, who had learned the "tyrannical teaching" – Strauss rejected the common view that Maimonides had reconciled Jewish law with Greek philosophy. In short, against the standard interpretation of Maimonides as Aristotelian, Strauss held that he followed upon Strauss's provocative reading of Plato.[47] As a consequence, most scholars agree that Strauss's account of the medieval approach to law offered by Maimonides and other medieval writers both Jewish and

[46] Quoted in Jeffrey Alan Bernstein, *Leo Strauss on the Borders of Judaism, Philosophy, and History* (Albany: State University of New York, 2015), 48.
[47] For a particularly helpful overview of this point, see Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, Chapter Four.

Islamic closely parallels his account summarized above with respect to Plato.[48] Some, however, have suggested that Strauss found in Maimonides a model for the coordination of politics and philosophy to which the classical tradition may have pointed but that only the medieval writers completed.[49] But if this is the case, what did Strauss find in Maimonides that was absent from the classics? If Maimonides followed upon Plato, in what respect if any did the account of Biblical revelation that Maimonides defended change the nature of the "political problem" as Plato and the classics had described it?

As is so often the case in his writings, Strauss posed the relevant questions with much more clarity than he did any answers. In the 1941 "Maimonides' Statement on Political Science," Strauss declared that Maimonides "forces us to consider the effects produced on the character of laws by the change from paganism to revealed religion."[50] Yet the remaining five pages of the essay offer an elusive overview of Maimonides' method rather than anything resembling a straightforward answer as to the significance of this change. In another essay from the same year, "The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*," Strauss wrote that Maimonides "acknowledges, and even stresses, the accordance which exists between the philosophers and the adherents of the law in every respect except as regards the question (which, however, is the decisive question) of the creation of the world."[51] But what is the political implication of Maimonides' belief in a God who is the creator of

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[48] To take just one indicative example of this argument, here is Haim O. Recnitzer summarizing the relationship: "Following Maimonides, Strauss perceives revealed law as a binding political law that incorporates mythos and estoric philosophical teaching. Law is the noble lie, a creation of a myth….The law is "noble" because it sustains the mechanism needed for the well-being of society at large….in this sense, although the substance of Maimonides' philosophical thought is Aristotilian, it functions within the Platonic framework of political philosophy, with the meataphor of the Platonic cave at its core." Haim O. Rechnitzer, "Judaism and the Idea of the Law: Leo Strauss and Yeshayahu Leibowitz's Philosophical and Ideological Interpretations of Maimonides," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 79 (2008). For a detailed version of this argument, see Cahtherine Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, Chapter 4.

[49] For a helpful discussion of the various ways in which Strauss described the relationship between Maimonides' position and the classical one, see Dana Hollander, "Plato Prophesied the Revelation: The Philosophico-Political Theology of Strauss's *Philosophy and* Law and the Guidance of Hermann Cohen," in Kavka and Rashkover, *Judaism, Liberalism, and Political Theology*. See for example Leora Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas*, especially Chapter 9.

[50] "Maimonides Statement on Political Science," WIPP, 165.

[51] PAW, 43.

the world? And why is that the decisive question?

While Strauss gestured at this question in his many writings on Maimonides, he explored it most explicitly in his essay on Judah Halevi, the 1943 "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*." Like many of Strauss's works, that essay is a detailed exegesis of a dialogue. Written in the 12th century, the *Kuzari* portrays a series of conversations based on the ostensibly true story of the conversion of the Kazaars to Judaism. After a dream in which he hears a voice that tells him that his intentions are good but his actions are wrong, the King of the Kazaars calls before him a philosopher, a Muslim, a Christian, and a Jew to offer their cases for which form of life he should pursue. The Muslim and the Christian are dismissed out of hand. The bulk of the book is a conversation between the Jewish sage and the King, in which the sage responds to the charges of the philosopher as they are presented by the King. The King, ultimately convinced of the truth of Judaism, converts.

In Strauss's view, the key line of the dialogue is the philosopher's statement to the King that he "may take whichever religion he prefers, invent one for himself, or turn the law of the philosopher into a religion."[52] With this, Strauss argues, the philosopher indicates that he accepts any manner of religion as philosophically sound.[53] If this is the case, Strauss points out, then the "religion of the philosopher" cannot be identical with the "sum dictates of right reason concerning objects of action." For if it were, Strauss asked, how could one set of dictates be exchanged for another? But for the philosopher, the fact that philosophy is the best way of life is religiously irrelevant.[54] From the philosopher's point of view, one can practice philosophy regardless of one's publicly expressed religion.[55] Religion is just one or another set of public codes to live by, equivalent to any political

[52] PAR, 115.
[53] PAR, 115.
[54] Here is how Strauss puts it: "the way of life of the philosopher who is a member of the most excellent political community, or the way of life of the philosopher who leads an absolutely private life, is without any question preferable to any other religion; but their being preferable does not make these ways of life indispensable and hence obligatory PAR, 117.
[55] Ibid.

law. So long as a religion offers stability, it can be supported by the philosopher. Halevi's philosopher, in other words, has learned the tyrannical teaching.

Halevi's Jewish sage, however, has an ambiguous relationship to this view. Before the King's conversion, the sage argued that the philosopher's religion cannot be truthful, for how could so many philosophers support different conclusions unless they were mistaken about that truth? Given such disparity, such a "religion" could only lead to chaos. Once the King has embraced Judaism, however, the scholar reverses his attitude. After his conversion, the sage describes the law of reason which the philosophers profess as consisting of one main teaching: fearing God, which he then declares is the basic condition for any society. As Strauss puts it, the Jewish sage waits until the King has converted in order to declare that what the philosophers understand by the laws of reason are "the sum of rules which describe the indispensable minimum of morality required for the preservation of any society."[56]

Two things, Strauss notes, are surprising here. The first is that the "rational *nomoi*" are described as consisting of "fearing God," which doesn't seem to correspond to the dictates of reason at all but rather is among "the most sublime religious obligations." Second, the philosophy that the sage had dismissed earlier as leading to anarchy is now described as the condition for *any* society.[57] There seems to be a double contradiction: the "law of reason" initially rejected as both irreligious and leading to anarchy appears to be both religious and the requirement of basic morality. The contradiction softens, however, once reason is understood to recognize that the basic condition of a just politics is a revelation that reason can never provide. Once the King is converted, the sage can acknowledge what had previously been derided as the great weakness of philosophy as its great strength. A philosophy that is aware of its own limitations recognizes the necessity of that which

[56] PAR, 127.
[57] PAR, 128.

cannot be philosophically justified. As Strauss puts it, "unassisted reason is able to perceive that without religious beliefs and actions no society whatsoever can last, but reason is unable to determine the right kind of such actions and beliefs."[58] Philosophy can determine what it cannot determine, and religion can fill the absence.

But this points to a limitation not only of philosophy as such but of classical political philosophy as a whole. Here is how Strauss puts the issue towards the end of the essay, in lines that, given Strauss's reputation, are among his most striking:

> For if the philosophers are right in their appraisal of natural morality, of morality not based on divine revelation, natural morality is, strictly speaking, no morality at all: it is hardly distinguishable from the morality essential to the preservation of a gang of robbers. Natural morality being what it is, only a law revealed by the omnipotent and omniscient God and sanctioned by the omniscient and omnipotent God can make possible genuine morality, "categoric imperatives;" only revelation can transform natural man into "the guardian of his city," or to use the language of the Bible, the guardian of his brother. One has not to be naturally pious, he has merely to have a passionate interest in genuine morality in order to long with all his heart for revelation: moral man as such is the potential believer.[59]

The crucial point here is that "natural morality," i.e. the morality of classical philosophy (or more precisely of Plato), is no morality at all. The reason is clear in light of the political problem as we saw it described above. What Strauss called "the tyrannical teaching" is amoral, and in two different respects. First, the law of the city is recognized as amoral from the perspective of philosophy, in the sense that the law of the city is taken as one that is necessarily and inevitably unjust. But philosophy so described is also amoral, for philosophy that is predicated on the superiority of the philosophical way of life, a way of life that cannot and does not take morality as an aim and is necessarily corrosive to all laws including the laws of morality. Only a law that is considered universally binding can provide a morality in the sense of "categoric imperatives," necessary commands and absolute prohibitions. The philosopher cannot assent to these absolute prohibitions philosophically, but the

[58] PAR, 134-135.
[59] PAR, 140.

philosopher need not assent to them. They need only long for them and recognize their political necessity.

But then comes a surprising slide in the language. Strauss holds that "only revelation" can make someone a "guardian of their city" or, "to use the language of the Bible, the guardian of his brother." But these are, it would seem, two very different things. The city, as we've seen, is defined by the distinction between citizen and foreigner, friend and enemy. Biblical morality, insofar as it is a universal morality, defines "brother" in terms that extend to all of humanity. In a striking footnote to this sentence, Strauss points to the significance distinction in terms that bring us back to the question of exception.

There, Strauss notes that "the philosophers would not deny that in the large majority of cases the rules of justice are, for all practical purposes, obligatory." In other words, the standard laws of the city will, most of the time, be more than sufficient. But "the *crucial question* concerns the crucial cases*, the cases of extreme necessity*."[60] And, Strauss notes, given that even the Torah allows that in extreme cases all Biblical law can be transgressed "with the exception of prohibitions against murder and inchastity" we can safely assume that those communities bound to laws revealed by less all-powerful Gods would happily dispense with such constraints. "Above all," Strauss continues "the philosophers would deny that the rules which are called obligatory by the societies are obligatory strictly speaking."[61]

According to classical philosophy, as we've seen, the laws are necessary to maintain social peace and to provide for the possibility of philosophy. But on account of this logic, the law is always and necessarily instrumental for social peace. It therefore can be suspended in the name of that social peace. In "Maimonides' Statement on Political Science," Strauss distinguishes the implications of

[60] PAR, 140, note 141. Emphasis added.
[61] Ibid.

this position from the Maimonidean view. "The divinely revealed law" defended by Maimonides he writes "is universal as regards place and perpetual as regards time" and is "therefore necessarily *free from the relativity*" of the law of the city as described by the classics.[62] Given the centrality of the charge of "relativism" in Strauss's broader thought, it is to put it mildly striking to find him here describing classical philosophy as beholden to the fundamental problem which he generally used to indict modern philosophy. But the logic is consistent: only a law that is universal can be just without being relative to the requirements of political life and the distinction between friend and enemy upon which that life rests.

This point is definitive for how we might understand Strauss's famous distinction between Athens and Jerusalem. While the typology is perhaps the most popular legacy of Strauss's work, he elaborated explicitly on the dichotomy only very briefly, in two lectures largely dedicated to Jewish themes, the 1952 "Progress or Return" and the 1967 "Athens and Jerusalem."[63] The pair is generally described as referring to the rival claims of philosophy and revelation as to whether "unassisted reason" is sufficient for a life of wisdom and virtue. And to be sure, that difference is of course central to Strauss's account of both revelation, philosophy, and the relationship between them. But I want to suggest that such a summary of the difference elides the significance of their rival approaches to the problem of politics that they both recognize. In the 1952 lecture, Strauss explained that both the Bible and philosophy agreed on the necessity of justice and the "problem of justice" – that is, the fact that what seems to be justice is upon investigation only convention. But each, he suggested, resolved the problem in opposing fashion. Philosophy held that justice could be determined by investigating nature. We've seen where this argument led: Socrates and Plato concluded that the justice known by nature is politically disastrous, and that philosophy had to

[62] WIPP, 164.
[63] Both are reprinted in JPCM.

affirm a law that, from the perspective of philosophy, was necessarily unjust.[64] The Bible on the other hand, as Strauss was fond of noting, has no word that corresponds to "nature."[65] To the Bible, there is nothing beyond God to which God might appeal. The Biblical God is both omnipotent and mysterious and cannot, even theoretically, ever be known.

This, however, presents a dilemma, as an omnipotent and mysterious God must simultaneously be unknowable (for otherwise such a God would be subject to reason's authority) while the law that God revealed must be legible. But how can an unknowable god reveal a knowable law? The Bible resolves this problem, Strauss argues, through the act of covenant and the revelation revealed within it.

> Only the biblical authors, we might say, understand what omnipotence really means, because only if God is omnipotent can one particular code be the absolute code. But an omnipotent God who is in principle perfectly knowable to man is in a way subject to man, insofar as knowledge is power. Therefore a truly omnipotent God must be a mysterious God…But if man has no hold whatever over the Biblical God, how can there be any link between man and God? The biblical answer is the covenant, a free and mysterious action of love on the part of God; and the corresponding attitude on the part of man is trust, or faith, which is radically different from theoretical certainty. The biblical God is known in a humanly relevant sense only by His actions, by his revelation…This experience, and not reasoning based on sense perception, is the root of biblical wisdom.[66]

This formula illustrates why in Strauss's view only the Biblical God can provide the framework for a universally obligatory morality. Only the Biblical God can assert absolute prohibitions that are not subject to the modifications or suspensions demanded by worldly reason because only the Biblical

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[64] It should be noted that in "Jerusalem and Athens," Strauss notes that "Plato teaches, just as the Bible, that heaven and earth were created or made by an invisible God who he calls the Father, who is always, who is good, and hence whose creation is good." JPCM, 397. Strauss held, however, that there was a crucial difference in the way in which that God is understood by the prophets and by Plato. The Platonic God only creates the world after looking to the forms – the forms, therefore, are authoritative even for the Platonic God. But those forms are in theory as accessible to the philosopher as they are to the Gods. The point is that nature, and not God, remains the ultimate authority. For a more extensive development of this point in respect to Maimonides, see LAM, 178-182.

[65] i.e. in "Progress or Return:" "It should be noted that there is no Hebrew-Biblical term for nature, the Hebrew word being derived very indirectly from a Greek word which is an equivalent of 'nature" in Greek, *charakter*, *teva* in Hebrew." JPCM, 111.

[66] JPCM, 119. See also in "Athens and Jerusalem:" "The Biblical God is a mysterious God: He comes in a thick Cloud (Exod. 19:9); He cannot be seen; His presence can be sensed by not always and everywhere; what is known of Him is only what He chose to communicate by His word through His chosen servants." JPCM, 393.

God reveals itself through its actions and its law.

This formula helps explain why Strauss insisted on the political necessity of "revelation" rather than "faith" or "religion."[67] With this terminology, Strauss reversed the Kantian account that dominated 19th-century approaches to the relationship between religion and politics, among Christian as well as Jewish writers. Kant had held that revelation was contrary to morality, for as opposed to the morality that could be known by reason, revelation could only be known by witness and memory. Judaism, Kant concluded following upon Spinoza, was a political community of coercive law and not a religion at all.[68] Strauss, in obvious opposition to this position, argued that it was only revelation's autonomy *from* "reason" that gave it its moral force and that it was precisely because the Biblical God revealed politically coercive law that revelation could provide a universally binding moral framework. As we saw in Chapter Four, Strauss held that revelation so understood had not been defeated by the Enlightenment attacks upon it, and could not be defeated by such attacks.

This account of Jewish revelation is, again, one that can obviously be disputed, and many have held that Strauss's account of revelation presumes an trans-historical Judaism that he nowhere sufficiently defends.[69] But my interest in this chapter is pursuing a different question: if revelation is in fact binding on all, wouldn't that dissolve the distinction between friend and enemy and therefore the political problem as described by the classics? In "Jerusalem and Athens," Strauss summarized Hermann Cohen's later work as a response to the question, "[w]hat is the fundamental defect of Platonic philosophy that is remedied by the prophets and only by the prophets?" In Strauss's

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[67] Strauss notes this distinction explicitly in the introduction to PAW. "Revelation as understood by Jews and Muslims has the character of Law (*torah*, *shari'a*) rather than of Faith." PAW, 9.
[68] Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 152-155.
[69] See Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), Chapter Two; Zachary Braitermen, "Against Leo Strauss," *The Journal of Textual Reasoning*, online at (http://jtr.shanti.virginia.edu/volume-3-number-1/against-leo-strauss/).

reading, Cohen answered this question by pointing to the distinction between citizen and foreigner to the classics and its absence to the prophets. Given the inevitability of the political, Plato recognized "there will be war as long as there will be human beings." It was this limitation that, in Cohen's view as Strauss summarized it, was "remedied by the prophets precisely because they lack the idea of science and hence the idea of nature, and hence they can believe that man's conduct towards one another can undergo a change much more radical than any change ever dreamt by Plato."[70]

Strauss concluded that in making this distinction, "Cohen has brought out very well the antagonism between Plato and the prophets." While Plato accepts the distinction between friend and enemy as permanent albeit unjust, the prophets cannot accept it as permanent and so decry it as unjust. This was the difference between the approach to the political problem as presented by Athens and Jerusalem. While Plato viewed the permanence of the political problem as a necessary feature of human life and defended philosophy's possibility within it, the prophets lamented the permanence of the political problem and longed for its resolution.

For Cohen, however, philosophy pointed beyond the distinctions of citizen and foreigner even as it accepted them. For this reason, the vision of universal justice that the classical tradition suggested was completed only by the Biblical God and the prophetic politics the Bible inaugurated. Strauss, however, disputed Cohen's view of the ultimate reconciliation of the Biblical tradition with the classical. "Cohen's thought belongs to the world preceding World War I," Strauss noted. "Accordingly, he had a greater faith in the power of modern western culture to mold the fate of

[70] JPCM, 399. Later in the lecture, Strauss would expand on the nature of the transformation that the classics foreclosed and that the prophets promise. "In the most perfect order as Socrates sees it, knowledge of the most important things will remain, as it always was, the preserve of the philosophers i.e. of a very small part of the population." For this reason, according to Socrates the best regime "will animate a single city which as a matter of course will become embroiled in wars with other cities." According to the prophets, on the other hand, "in the messianic age 'the earth shall be full of knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the earth' (Isaiah 11:9), and this will be brought about by God himself." As a consequence, peace will reign and "nation shall not lift up sword against nation." JPCM, 403.

mankind than seems to be warranted now." From the other shore across an ocean of blood, "we wonder whether the two ingredients of modern culture, of the modern synthesis, are not more solid than the synthesis."[71] For this reason, Strauss concluded, "we are ultimately confronted by a problem rather than a solution."[72] But what is the "problem" with which "we are confronted"? Wouldn't we expect Strauss simply to declare the classics correct in their understanding of the permanence of those human problems that the prophets only incorrectly and dangerously imagined might be overcome?

As we've seen, according to Strauss the classical account may correctly teach the inherent limits of law but the politics it offers is ultimately amoral. The prophetic account, on the other hand, declares a universally binding morality and gives to political history a moral purpose and meaning. Yet the prophets suggest an unwarranted hope in human transformation. This is the problem with which Cohen forced a confrontation: philosophical politics needs prophetic politics to provide a floor for basic morality, but prophetic politics rests on a dangerous view that justice and law might be finally reconciled. Left unconstrained by prophecy, politics is amoral; but left unconstrained by philosophy, prophecy in practice fails to recognize the nature of human limitation.

The familiarity in form of this problem provides a first inkling of why Strauss might have held, given his distinctive understanding of it, that the Jewish problem was a particularly acute reflection of the political problem. As we saw in Chapter Three, the insolubility of the "Jewish problem" for Strauss followed from his conclusion that Zionism rested on a paradox, as the revelation upon which political Zionism depends unravels the aims to which political Zionism appeals. Here, we find the same form of argument more generally described. Revelation is necessary to secure the basic morality upon which political life depends, but revelation presumes a conflation of politics and

[71] "Jerusalem and Athens," JPCM, 399.
[72] Ibid.

wisdom that is at best politically dangerous and at worst catastrophic.

The problem so described, however, presses only more strongly on the question of whether and how political life can be described as moral at all. If the "two ingredients" – a classical philosophy that reduces law to the needs of the city and a prophetic tradition that rests universal morality on the possibility of human transformation – cannot be synthesized, we seem to be left with an insoluble problem. Do we simply reconcile ourselves to a politics defined by friend and enemy and a notion of sovereignty that amounts to exception? Is the morality that only the Biblical God can offer a morality that no worldly politics can accept? Strauss is, I think, far more invested in posing these questions than in offering precise answers, so however we conclude the matter is bound to be ambiguous and tentative. But we can gain some clarity by turning our focus away from the matter of the answers themselves to the issue of how to approach the questions, and how we might live with their enduring force. And that issue is what Strauss sometimes referred to as the human problem.

The Human Problem and the Limits of Politics

Among the handful of places where Strauss used the term "the human problem" are the culminating pages of what some consider the most thorough and explicit expression of his own views, the blandly titled 1954 "Restatement." That essay was a response to his long-time friend Alexander Kojève's review of Strauss's earlier 1948 *On Tyranny*, discussed in brief above. In his response to Strauss, Kojève agreed that the philosopher will find tyranny particularly tempting. Given that the philosopher seeks to return to the pursuit of wisdom, the philosopher will prefer that form of government in which the ruler is most ably and readily able to implement the philosopher's vision. The philosopher who enters politics, however, runs into a dilemma. Either the ruler will reject the philosopher's advice because it fails to account for the actual realities with which the ruler

has to contend, or the ruler will accept the philosopher's advice. The first option represents an obvious failure. But the latter, counterintuitively, presents a graver problem. The philosopher's political vision of an "ideal state," writes Kojève, necessarily depends for its implementation on a violence that is at odds with the virtue the philosopher prizes. This, Kojève summarizes, is "nothing else than the conflict of the intellectual faced with action" and is "according to Hegel…the only authentic tragedy that takes place in the Christian or bourgeois world." It is, Kojeve writes, "a *tragic* conflict because it is a conflict with no way out, a problem with no possible resolution."[73]

Kojève's reference here to Hegel's theory of tragedy suggests the analysis noted in the last chapter. As discussed, according to Hegel's definition tragedy was produced by a conflict between multiple ways of life each considered to demand absolute and mutually exclusive allegiance, the pursuit of one entailing the destruction of the other.[74] According to Kojève, philosophy recognizes the tragedy, but against both Weber and Berlin he insists that it is not permanent.[75] While the

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[73] OT, 166. Emphasis in the original

[74] Kojève's emphasis on violence seems to bring him close to Weber, but his reference to Hegel's interpretation of *Hamlet* suggests a different point of emphasis. That interpretation helps underscore the sorts of tensions and conflicts that Strauss insisted, against Kojève, had to be maintained rather than "sublimated." To Hegel, the distinctively modern aspect of the tragedy of Hamlet was its portrayal of a particular conflict emblematic of modern thought and in particular modern subjectivity as it emerged in the 17th century: the conflict between the claims of individual conscience and the claims of universal reason. As a consequence of this conflict, Hegel wrote, "the agent finds himself knowing and not knowing." Unlike Antigone or Creon who see their commitments as fundamentally impersonal (to the law of the city, or the law of family), the modern or romantic tragic hero is shaped by a conflict that is personal and internal. For this reason, writes Hegel, "[a]cting in accordance with the knowledge revealed," whether by subjective consciousness or from a universal position, "finds out the deceptiveness of that knowledge." Either one acts according to universal reason and violates individual conscience in its individuality, or one acts according to personal conviction and violates the universal. Either way, in acting one does "violence to the other." According to Hegel, *Hamlet* is the highest expression of this conflict for Hamlet himself is so aware of the conflict, so doubtful of his own subjective experience. Hegel also points to a second feature of modern tragedy as distinct from the classical version. In the classical tradition, tragedy is described as a consequence of inevitable events and forces that cannot be avoided. Hamlet's eventual death on the other hand is the result of a series of absurd accidents – Polonius happens to be found out behind the curtain, Hamlet acts uncharacteristically rashly and kills him, which sets in motion Laertes' revenge and the cascade of might-have-been-otherwise coincidences (the poisoned cup and the switched rapiers) that lead to the bloody conclusion. With this emphasis on the absurd nature of existence, modern tragedy, Hegel writes, leaves "the conception that the modern idea of individuality, with its searching definition of character, circumstances, and developments," is adrift in the "contingency of the earthly state," aware of the discrepancy between its own search for purpose and the meaningless and accidental nature of human life. We've already seen in Chapter Two the importance of chance was to the classical tradition as Strauss interpreted it; the more fundamental feature of alienation is the main axis that shapes his debate with Kojève. For the selections from Hegel in this note (which are from the *Phenomenology*) see Anne and Henry Paolucci, ed. *Hegel on Tragedy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1962), 294-296.

[75] OT, 167.

tragedy cannot and will not be resolvable by any single philosopher, in history an ongoing dialectic between philosophy and politics will reveal a narrative in which philosophy informs politics which in turn informs philosophy, perpetually pushing history forward. Without that interchange, Kojève writes, "there would be no progress," and "no History properly so called."[76] Because they cannot be satisfied independently, politics and philosophy can and will be satisfied mutually.[77]

In his 1959 "Restatement," Strauss did not dispute Kojève's portrait of the tragic conflict. What he rejected was that it might be resolved. Whereas for Kojève, the philosopher both desires to stay outside of politics and desires to rule through politics, to the classics, Strauss argued, the philosopher had a much more modest political aim of defending philosophy before the tribunal of authority and educating those who would rule to protect the law. These were aims that were plainly realizable. For this reason, as Strauss put it provocatively, "for the classics, the conflict between philosophy and the city is as little tragic as the death of Socrates."[78]

This is a striking claim and in the context of the exchange with Kojève it is a clear reference to Hegel's interpretation of the same event. As against the majority of Enlightenment philosophers that interpreted Socrates as a martyr for reason against the irrationality of a popular mob, in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* Hegel argued that Socrates' death was tragic in the by now familiar sense. For the Greek state, wrote Hegel, "the first principle" is that "there is no reason or conscience or righteousness or anything else, higher than what the State recognizes as such."[79] Socrates' teaching therefore, from the perspective of Greek democracy, "attacked and destroyed Athenian life in two

[76] OT, 175.
[77] OT, 175. This is the central claim of what Robert Pippin calls Kojéve's "extreme point: that the ends of the theoretical life and the political life are ultimately the same and cannot be satisfied independently." Robert Pippin, "Being, Time, and Politics: The Strauss-Kojéve Debate," *History and Theory* 32, no. 2 (1993), 149.
[78] OT, 207.
[79] Ibid., 361.

fundamental points," undermining the authority of public religion and family piety.[80] The Greek world, in short, "could not yet bear the principle of subjective reflection."[81]

From the perspective of Socrates, however, it is only "subjective reflection" that has any authority at all. This is why in Socrates's death, Hegel concluded, "we have…the universally moral and tragic fate." It is a clear case in which "two opposed rights come into collision, and the one destroys the other."[82] In the case of Socrates, "one power is the divine right, the natural morality whose laws are identical" with the authority of the city and the freedom that authority makes possible. The other is the power of "consciousness or subjective freedom; this is the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, i.e. of self-creative reason and it is the universal principle of Philosophy for all successive times."[83] Rather than a personal conflict between a craving for order and the absurdity of the world or universal reason and subjective will, this is a conflict between the personal demands of philosophy and the political requirements of law.

Given Strauss's insistence on the incommensurability and mutually exclusive demands of politics and philosophy, it would seem that he would agree with Hegel's interpretation of the conflict. To Hegel, however, tragedy is produced not only in the meeting of two incommensurable powers, but in a meeting in which "one destroys the other." To Strauss, however, by accepting the law Socrates demonstrated that the incommensurability between philosophy and politics need not be tragic, for it needn't result in the destruction of either philosophy or politics. Crucially for Strauss, Socrates accepted the judgement of Athens willingly. As he explained in "What is Political Philosophy," Socrates' judgement to accept the verdict was a political one, based on his

[80] Hegel on Tragedy 358. As he goes on to put it: "If the public religion on which everything was built and without which they State could not subsist," was allowed to be so undermined, it would "mean the subversion of the Athenian state."
[81] Ibid., 362.
[82] Ibid., 364.
[83] Ibid., 364.

determination of what was required for the future of philosophy in Athens.[84] By embracing the sentence, Socrates demonstrated the allegiance of philosophy to law while teaching future philosophers (and above all Plato) of the necessity to philosophize in way that recognizes the essential and fundamental tension between philosophy and politics.[85]

In the "Restatement," Strauss noted that if politics and philosophy can be brought to cohere as Kojève imagines they eventually must, this necessarily entails the eventual achievement of a universal political culture. The merit of Kojève's position, Strauss suggests, rests therefore on the question of whether such a culture, what Strauss calls a "world-state," could ever be the "best social order."[86] To Strauss, the answer was clear. A state in which the distance between the personal pursuit of wisdom and the political culture of humanity had been finally overcome would be a state in which the practice of philosophy would no longer be possible. There could be no debate over the good, no pursuit of the whole, no clarification of fundamental problems. All that would be left would be acquisition and the pursuit of pleasure. This, to Strauss, is the "state in which the basis of man's humanity withers away." In terms we've already seen Strauss deploy, he declares that it would be "the state of Nietzsche's 'last man.'"[87]

It is here that Strauss deploys the term "the human problem." If "the universal and homogenous state is the goal of History," he concludes, then and only then would "history [be] absolutely 'tragic.' Its completion will reveal that the human problem, and hence in particular the

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[84] WIPP, 33. See also, PAW, 16-17.

[85] In this interpretation Strauss followed closely upon the reading of Socrates' death offered by Hermann Cohen. In his 1904 *Ethik des Reinen Willens* (Ethics of Pure Will), Cohen argued that Socrates recognized that philosophy was impossible absent the law of the city. As Shira Billet has recently explained, Cohen concluded that Socrates' acceptance of the verdict represented an affirmation of the legal regime of Athens. While the law to which he was found guilty was unjust, to oppose the ruling would be to call into question the political system that had allowed in practice for his philosophy. Strauss agreed with Cohen that Socrates' death was not tragic, and for the same reason. To Strauss, by accepting the verdict Socrates affirmed the simultaneous tension between philosophy and law alongside the dependence of the former upon the latter. See Shira Billet, *The Philosopher as Witness: Hermann Cohen's Philosophers and the Trials of Wissenschaft Des Judentums*, diss., Princeton University 2019, especially 244.

[86] OT, 208.

[87] OT, 209.

problem of philosophy and politics, is insoluble."[88] To Strauss, only the achievement of a universal political culture could render human history tragic, because only such a culture would destroy the possibility of philosophy. But so long as philosophy remained possible, the limits of politics – their partiality from the perspective of justice, the necessity of violence, the requirement of noble lies – could be accepted and even affirmed. As Strauss put it near the conclusion to his series of lectures on Socrates, "philosophy in the Platonic sense is a solution, and in fact *the* solution, to *the* human problem, the problem of happiness."[89] It is the only solution because it offers a way of life by which the insolubility of the political problem can be accepted and even embraced. They can be accepted because of an understanding of the essential and inherent limits of politics, and they can be embraced because philosophy understood as a quest does not require a perfect justice but only depends on the stability the law provides.[90]

We ought be wary, however, before taking the above account as summary of Strauss's comprehensive position. The reason, as already noted, is that Strauss insisted that from the perspective of revelation, philosophy cannot be considered an adequate response to the problem and is therefore no solution at all. Its loss in the "world-state" would therefore, from the perspective of revelation, not be especially significant. So, what is the response to the human problem, the at least potentially tragic discrepancy between justice and politics, from the perspective of Jerusalem? And would a world-state destroy the possibility of that response?

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[88] Ibid.

[89] RCPR, 181. Italics are Strauss's.

[90] This may be a strange conclusion, given that that philosophers are not generally considered the great engines of modern tyranny, but in the closing lines of the "Restatement" Strauss finally refers to the figure who has remained in the shadows throughout his discussion, Martin Heidegger. In the very last sentences, Strauss summarized the difference between his position and Kojève's by noting that the source their mutual concern were those philosophers who "lacked the courage to face the issue of Tyranny, who therefore *et humiliter serviebant et superbe dominabantur* were forced to evade the issue of Being as well, precisely because they did nothing but talk of Being." In light of the argument of the Restatement, one particular claim of Heidegger's is especially relevant. As against Heidegger's argument that *Dasein* always seeks a "dwelling" within the world, Strauss insisted that classical philosophy recognize its homelessness. OT, 213. (In his reference to Heidegger, Strauss is quoting Livy: "Those who are obsequiesly subservient while lording it over others.")

In a 1936 essay on Farabi and Maimonides, Strauss wrote that the prophets ran into the same circumstance as had Plato in Athens. "They had shown by their actions and by their speech that the man who loves perfection and justice must leave the cities inhabited exclusively by the wicked," he wrote, and instead must "search for a city inhabited by good men." If such a city cannot be found or if he cannot establish one, then he must prefer "wandering in the desert or in caverns to the association of evil men."[91] It would seem, given this description, that while they differ on the account of the law Judaism and philosophy lead to a quite similar destination, at least as far as the ways of life each offer in relationship to that law. As we just saw, the philosopher in the classical sense is thrust into a position of political alienation: they recognize the need for a law that they cannot assent to philosophically. Similarly, the prophets affirm a law that is beyond the city and are therefore strangers within it. Given this parallel, Eugene Sheppard has argued that Strauss developed his account of philosophy out of his own reflections on both medieval Jewish writing and his own experience as a refugee.[92] To Sheppard, Strauss grafted the Jewish condition of exile onto a philosophy of esotericism, making of the philosopher a stranger modeled on Jewish alienation. While Sheppard's analysis is undoubtedly compelling, I want to suggest a more significant difference in Strauss's account of how Judaism and classical philosophy approach this state of alienation than his analysis, and Strauss's own brief summary in 1936, imply.

Towards the conclusion of "Why We Remain Jews," Strauss provocatively declared Judaism a "delusion." "What is a delusion?" he asked. It is also a "dream" he continued, "and no nobler dream was ever dreamt."

> It is surely nobler to be a victim of the most noble dream than to profit from a sordid reality and to wallow in it. Dream is akin to aspiration. And aspiration is a kind of divination of an enigmatic vision. And an enigmatic vision is the perception of the ultimate mystery, of the

[91] SRPS, 19-20.
[92] Eugene Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile,* especially 5-6; 77-80; 118-130.

truth of the ultimate mystery, that being is radically mysterious.[93]

Strauss's evocation of "dream" here harkens to Theodore Herzl's famous words on behalf of Zionism: "if you will it, it is no dream." Strauss, however, suggested that precisely *because* it is a dream, it *cannot* be willed. In this, he mirrored the argument we saw in Chapter Two from his 1941 New School lecture, where he insisted that modern philosophy in distinction from the classics imagined that the ideal regime *could* be willed. Both classical philosophy and Judaism, Strauss suggested, recognize that ideal justice is by definition a dream and therefore cannot be instantiated through human labor. But while philosophy recognizes that such justice is a "dream," it nonetheless offers an account of that regime and its shape. It is not an "ultimate mystery," nor an "enigmatic vision." It is simply practically impossible, given the nature of nature. But what hangs on this distinction?

In his 1936 essay, Strauss would concisely put the difference when he described how the prophets resolved the problematic nature of their exilic condition: they embraced it through "a hope provided by the messiah." As Strauss summarized the Maimonidean view in that essay, the "Messiah is king; this means that his rank is inferior to that of the legislator-prophet," that is Moses, who had revealed to the people of Israel God's law. The days of the Messiah, therefore, "will be situated in this world, the natural course of which will not be changed." The Messianic age will not bring about a new law nor a rupture in the law nor in the nature of the world, but the transformation in human life will be fundamental, as "the earth will be filled with knowledge of God."[94] With this refrain, Strauss referred directly to Maimonides' depiction of the messianic age in the *Mishneh Torah*. Just prior to the phrase that Strauss quotes, however, Maimonides describes its practical political consequence. Citing the rabbis of Sanhedrin, Maimonides wrote that "The sole difference between

[93] JPCM, 328.
[94] SRPS., 20.

the present and the Messianic days is delivery from the servitude to foreign powers."[95] The definitive characteristic of the messianic age, in short, is that it will be the end of the exile; and the exile will only conclude when, as Maimonides puts it in words Strauss would borrow, "The one preoccupation of the whole world will be to know the Lord."[96]

But why is the end of exile so described – that is, as a time when Jews no longer live in "servitude to foreign powers" – only possible when the whole world knows the Lord? Strauss gestures to the reason in the argument described above regarding the simultaneous necessity of revelation for any moral politics alongside that revelation's limited power. As I suggested, revelation so described insists all are each other's brother (and sister), and therefore dissolves the distinction between friend and enemy upon which politics rests. Only in a world where all considered each other as brother or sister rather than friend or enemy could the revealed law be total, and only in such a world would the law of the Bible and the law of the nations be in harmony. Until then, the Jews live in "servitude to foreign powers;" the revealed law cannot and will not be the law under which Jew are subjects, whether as serfs or as citizen (or, for that matter, as King or Queen or "sovereign over themselves").

This was why, as Strauss put it in the "Preface to Spinoza's Critique," while the founding of the state of Israel may be a revolution in Jewish history, it was not the end of *galut*.[97] Any Jewish state

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[95] This is the relevant passage from the *Mishneh Torah*: "The words of Isaiah: "And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid" (Isa. 11:6) are to be understood figuratively, meaning that all Israel will live securely among the wicked of the heathens who are likened to wolves and leopards [Jer. 5:6] ... All similar expressions used in connection with the Messianic age are metaphorical... Said the Rabbis: "The sole difference between the present and the Messianic days is delivery from the servitude to foreign powers" (Sanhedrin 91b) ... In that era there will be neither famine nor war ... The one preoccupation of the whole world will be to know the Lord." David Hartman, "Maimonides' Approach to Messianism and Its Contemporary Implications," *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 2, no. 3 (1978).

[96] It would seem that this is a at least in theory a world that might be brought about through human action. But as Gershom Scholem notes in his reading of the position, "Maimonides nowhere recognizes a causal relationship between the coming of the Messiah and human conduct. It is not Israel's repentance which brings about redemption; rather, because the eruption of redemption is to occur by divine decree." *The Messianic Idea in Judaism: and other Essays in Jewish Spirituality,* (New York: Schoken, 1995), 30-31. This was clearly Strauss's view. For an alternative reading, see Hartman, "Maimonides' Approach to Messianism."

[97] JPCM, 143.

remained defined by the distinction between citizen and foreigner upon which politics rests and which Biblical revelation rejects. In the closing paragraphs of "Why we Remain Jews," Strauss would put this point in particularly memorable terms when he declared that "the Jewish people and their fate are the living witnesses of the absence of redemption."[98] The fact of Jewish difference and the exile that defines the Jewish condition reveals the continued discrepancy between the justice proclaimed by the Bible and the justice known to the world. That condition could only end in a world in which God's law reigned, and where all people were considered one another's brothers rather than citizens and foreigners, friends and enemies. Judaism was a witness to the absence of this condition, a witness that Strauss suggested found no greater expression than in *Aleinu* prayer. While he did not recite the lines, they include the following:

> It is our duty to praise the Lord of all things, to ascribe greatness to Him who formed the world in the beginning, since He has not made us like the nations of other lands, and He has not placed us like other families of the earth, since He has not assigned to us a portion as to them, nor a lot as to all their multitude.[99]

This is perhaps the most explicit affirmation and even celebration of exile in the Jewish liturgy. But why might exile be a reason for praise?

The answer points to the fundamental difference between the approach to the human problem offered by Judaism and that presented by the classics. The Jewish exile creates a condition in which the Jews are committed to a law that, from the perspective of philosophy, is not a lie: it is the product of a perfectly just God and therefore universal. As a consequence, there is no discrepancy between that law and the demands of wisdom or justice. Even more importantly, they stand at a distance from the law of sovereign power and can freely recognize that while that power is of practical authority it is not of natural or divine authority. They do not need to lie about Jewish revelation, and they do not need to lie about the politics under which they live. The Jews are subject

[98] JPCM, 327.
[99] The prayer is quoted in the published version in JPCM, 327.

to a law that is sovereign, rather than a "sovereign" who decides on the exception to that law.

This gives to Judaism a radically different perspective on the political problem than that offered by classical philosophy. The classical approach, as we've seen, solves the human problem of happiness through a way of life that accepts the insolubility of the problem of justice. In so doing, philosophy presents an answer to the problem of happiness. According to Socrates, Strauss held, while full or perfect virtue may be impossible, there is no reason for the "happy few" philosophers to be "contrite, repentant, or express a sense of guilt." Guilt is a consequence, Strauss suggests, of feeling "pity toward him whom I have hurt or ruined and the feeling of fear of him who avenges my crime." But the philosopher in pursuing philosophy hurts no one.

The Biblical God, on the other hand, in making "all men brothers…hollows pity" and in so doing demands contrition and guilt. While "the philosopher lives in a state above fear and trembling as well as above hope," the believer in revelation "lives in fear and trembling as well as in hope." The philosopher therefore lives a serenity that the prophet can never know, while the prophet is outraged at injustice in a way that the philosopher cannot comprehend.[100] As Strauss noted on more than one occasion, Socrates "left us no example of weeping, but on the other side he left us an example of laughing. He left us many examples of his joking and none of his indignation." For these reasons, "he is not a tragic figure, but it is easy to see him as a comic figure."[101] One could make the precise opposite point in regard to the prophets. It is difficult to imagine the prophet's laughter, while their weeping and fury is ever-present.

So, if philosophy approaches the incommensurability between justice and politics comedically, does Judaism approach it tragically? Is the Jewish exile as tragic as is the death of Socrates? It might

[100] Strauss described this difference in both "Progress and Return" and "Athens and Jerusalem" by contrasting the prophet Nathan's outrage at King David for his act of murder and adultery with the classical equivalent of such rebuke: Xenophon's "playful" depiction of Simonides' attempts to convince the tyrant to be more reasonable and Socrates' reproof of Critias. JPCM, 109, 404.
[101] RCPR, 106.

at first seem so. After all, just as Socrates preserved the possibility of philosophy, the injustice of a world in which Judaism is estranged and political morality is impossible could only count as tragic if obedience to God's law were not possible in a world unredeemed. But so long as it is, that law can be obeyed and that morality proclaimed. Yet the anguish of the prophets in the face of the "political problem" suggests that the matter is not so easily resolved.

While Philosophy contends with the problem of politics through the practices of esoteric writing, Judaism solves it through exile, affirming a law that will only be practically sovereign with the coming of the messianic age. Much more explicitly than the philosopher, however, Judaism proclaims the injustice of a politics defined by this problem. It does so both through its declaration that the world is created by a loving God, and through the fact of a Jewish existence that necessarily reveals the limited power of that loving God. According to this framework, the Jews are exceptional in that they proclaim the truth of a universal morality that only recognition of God's creation can provide, and they are exceptional in that they reveal that until that recognition is universal, sovereign will be he who decides on the exception. This need not be a tragic condition so long as one recognizes this is simply the consequence of commitment to revelation in a world unredeemed. But it is tragic in the more colloquial sense in that Judaism so described is fated to declare the universal power of a justice that Jewish existence will always and necessarily reveal as at best partial and more often absent.

We can now, finally, see why to Strauss "the Jewish Problem" was the *most* manifest expression of the political problem. First, the demands of Jewish revelation alongside the practical limitations of all politics offer the living instantiation of the fact that the "problem of justice transcends the limits of political life." Judaism proclaims a universal morality, and in so doing reveals the limited morality of all politics that rests on friend and enemy. Biblical revelation not only illuminates the inherent injustice of all worldly politics, it also creates a people apart from those worldly politics. In appearing

apart, the Jews reveal the persistence of the distinction between friend and enemy that shapes all political life. The Jewish problem as a problem produced by social reality proves the inescapability of the political and the distinction between friend and enemy, while the Jewish problem as a problem produced by revelation reveals the inherent immorality and injustice of that distinction.

This is a striking account of Judaism but given Strauss's criticism of Hermann Cohen noted above it is remarkable just how indebted it is to the great Marburg neo-Kantian. As already noted, for Cohen, by virtue of their separation from the societies in which they lived, Jews revealed the extent to which the universal human dignity promised by both philosophy and the prophets had yet to be realized.[102] In this account, it is only through Jewish difference that Jews can be the ever-present foreigners that challenge the polities in which they live to be just enough to include them as equals. Only as distinct people shaped by a particular law can the Jews fulfill their prophetic purpose: of demonstrating to the world the need for a politics that is sufficiently pluralistic to allow for the protection and flourishing of otherness in equality. That such a politics is forever and always to be achieved provides, for Cohen, both the condition and the need for Judaism. As Steven S. Schwarzschild has described it, this is a Judaism of "tragic optimism' (although as Shira Billet has noted it is more aptly described as hopeful than optimistic).[103] It is tragic in that it accepts Jewish suffering and suffering more broadly as a condition of worldly politics; but it is hopeful in that it insists on the possibility of a politics that is not defined by injustice, even if such a politics remains ever out of reach.

Strauss embraced the form of Cohen's Jewish exile while reversing its aim. He followed upon Cohen's account of Jewish exilic politics, but insisted that it could not and must not be reconciled to the tradition of the classics as Cohen had assumed it could be. Whereas the prophetic tradition as

[102] Hermann Cohen, Hermann Cohen, Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1995), especially Chapter Thirteen.
[103] Billet, 269.

Cohen described it ultimately and finally pointed towards a "world-state" in the sense of a world governed by God's law, Strauss insisted that the political – in the sense in which both Schmitt and Plato understood it as relying ultimately on a divide between citizen and foreigner, friend and enemy – was one that could not and must not be overcome. It was the persistence of the political in this respect that the Jewish condition as a social condition represented. Rather than casting the exilic character of Judaism as pointing to the possibilities of a politics that might eventually reconcile justice and law, Strauss's account described Judaism in terms that emphasize the permanence of the opposition. It was this correction that the classical tradition provided to the prophetic. While classical philosophy required a morality that only Biblical revelation could provide, the prophetic tradition failed to sufficiently recognize the dangers that attend any and all attempts to overcome the political problem. While Cohen's exilic Judaism pointed to the possibilities of politics and the ultimate possibility (if only theoretically) of harmony between philosophy and revelation, in declaring the incommensurability of philosophy and revelation Strauss's exilic Judaism revealed the inevitable and necessary limits of all politics.

This difference in emphasis has profound implications for how we might interpret Strauss's Judaism. In insisting that the Jewish problem was the most manifest symbol of the political problem, Strauss suggested that the absolute law of the Bible was the condition for a political morality that no politics can fully accept. Judaism in this account embodies the possibility of a politics that fulfills the demands of justice while also revealing that such a politics will be, in this world, only a dream. This is a Judaism as tragic as that offered by Cohen, in that it accepts that the morality that Judaism declares is one that Jews in their difference will reveal to be of limited authority. In a world defined by citizen and foreigner, friend and enemy one must not and cannot forget that political life will require amendment to the universal moral law and that one must be obligated not only to God but to one's own. While those committed to revelation hope that such a world can and will eventually be

transformed, they recognize that such change will not be brought about by fragile human hands or frail human hearts.[104]

Conclusion

Despite Strauss's notoriety in many political circles, the constructive consequences of this argument – both for Jewish politics and for politics more broadly – are highly ambiguous. While Strauss held that the classical philosophers and the medieval Jewish writers had a much greater understanding of threats that had come to flourish in the 20th-century, he was hesitant in suggesting that they offered any obvious normative direction.[105] As several scholars have suggested, he was much more interested in naming what he took as the most pressing challenges of politics than he was in offering any constructive solutions for how those problems might be met. Above all, he warned against the temptation to imagine that the challenges might be fully and finally overcome.

Several of Strauss's readers have therefore concluded that insofar as he suggested any concrete political ideology it was one of moderation, a commitment to the rule of law, and a concern over concentrations of power.[106] Given these positions, we can see why interpreters like Steven B. Smith firmly situate Strauss within the tradition of postwar liberalism with which Isaiah Berlin is often considered exemplary.[107] To the extent that liberalism is shaped by a commitment to the rule of law over the whims of any interest including and above all interests considered common or popular to all, one would have to conclude that despite Strauss's relative indifference to matters of individual

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[104] Ironically, as much as Strauss grants to Jewish revelation the source of all morality, this is a Judaism that can only recommend philosophy. For while philosophy may receive a near-fatal blow from revelation's insistence that the life of philosophy cannot be demonstrated as superior to revelation, it nonetheless offers a way of accepting the injustice of the world without anguish.

[105] See for example Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*, 12-15.

[106] Robert Pippin puts the point succinctly: For Strauss, he writes, "the chief political virtue is moderation, the chief vice, idealism." Pippin, "The Modern World of Leo Strauss," *Political Theory* 20 (no. 3) August 1992, 451. See also Leora Batnitzky on this point, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas*, 205.

[107] See Smith, 15.

freedom he offered a much more coherent defense of liberalism than did Isaiah Berlin. It is counterintuitive that the force of Strauss's liberal preoccupations come into focus not in his turn to classical philosophy but in his efforts to demonstrate the legitimacy and political necessity of Biblical revelation.

There is of course much more that might be said about Strauss's politics and how we might interpret them, and whether and how they support a conservative politics or even a neo-conservative politics, a nationalist politics, a liberal politics, or no politics at all. Strauss's ambiguity on these matters is the source of the controversies, and any attempt at this late stage of this dissertation to offer a conclusive interpretation on these matters is bound to be partial at best. Instead, I want to close this last chapter by suggesting the surprising way in which Strauss's account of Judaism is both more and less iconoclastic than it is sometimes taken to be.

That iconoclasm is hopefully by now fairly clear. Almost all the strands of contemporary Jewish politics, from the most conservative to the most radical, from the Zionist to the anti-Zionist to the socialist, insist upon a practical wisdom that Judaism can offer to modern political life. Jewish political argument remains governed by an apologetics in which Judaism is considered especially supportive of liberalism, nationalism, socialism, or some combination to these together. In so doing, most contemporary Jewish political argument follows on the basic trajectory of modern Jewish thought in insisting upon a harmony between Judaism and modern politics or at least the possibility of such a harmony. In his insistence that Judaism be recognized as above all exilic, as representing dedication to a law that is by definition alienated from the conditions of political life in general and modern political life most especially, Strauss stands against all efforts to define Judaism in such a way that easily or even uneasily accommodates it to the requirements of political life.

Yet Strauss's strenuous assertion that the exceptionalism of Biblical revelation provides a universal morality that Jewish life only reveals as of necessarily limited authority illuminates some

powerful but often hidden currents in that same political debate he so clearly stands outside of and against. Those currents come into view again in respect to the exception, as Judaism is taken by many today, particularly many liberal Jews, to represent an exceptional commitment to universal morality and the legal norms that reflect that morality – even as Jewish survival is taken to require an exception to those norms. This is a tragic Judaism insofar as Judaism declares the necessity of a politics insufficient to protect the survival of Judaism. According to this position, Jewish history teaches the dangers of nationalism alongside the necessity of a Jewish exception to the warning. While Strauss may not have explicitly embraced this position, his account of Judaism helps illuminate it. In the conclusion to this dissertation, I want to suggest that it that has a stronger hold on contemporary Jewish debate than generally recognized.

Conclusion

"The Core of 21st Century Judaism" and The Tragedy of Jewish Politics

Among Leo Strauss's most quoted lines is one from the introduction to his 1958 work on Machiavelli: "The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things."[1] It's a phrase that earns the frequency of its citation, simultaneously straightforward and elusive. But in its context, Strauss's meaning is clear. The problem inherent in the surface of things in the case of Machiavelli is that he seems upon initial reading so profoundly disturbing. Could it be, as Machiavelli seems to insist, that political life is ultimately amoral?

Throughout this dissertation we've seen that this problem was inherent in the surface of Strauss's work, and likewise at the heart of that work. It is a problem that, as Strauss himself suggested, was inseparable from his reflections on the Jewish question. I have argued that it emerged through his engagement with Zionism, was brought into urgent focus by the triumph of fascism, and found its fullest and most explicit expression not in Strauss's interpretations of the classics (as much as that reading was, as we've seen, shaped by the same problem) but in his readings of the medieval Jewish writers and in the distinction between Athens and Jerusalem that he drew from those readings.

We have seen a similar problem in both the surface and the heart of Berlin's writing, and for similar reasons. Berlin also worried about the way that the instrumental aims of politics could easily justify all manner of horror, and turned to an account of pluralism that might chasten the tendencies of modern political life to constrain and coerce in the name of freedom or any other goal. For Berlin too, this worry was intimately related to the Jewish question, as the tensions between the two forces

[1] TM, 13.

that together produced that question – Enlightenment liberalism with its notion of individual autonomy and nationalism with its declaration of the nation as the ultimate value – formed the defining paradox at the center of his political thought.

These political and philosophical projects were, of course, rooted in their historical contexts, as all our projects are. For Strauss and Berlin, that context was one in which the ashes of the death camps still smoldered and a nuclear stand-off hovered over daily life. Both determined that the signal political challenge of their time was totalitarianism, and that such a challenge could only be met by recognizing that the temptations of such totalitarian politics were woven deep in the Western political tradition. I have argued that they defined those temptations in surprisingly similar terms and that they sought to mitigate them through a similar insistence on the inescapability of fundamental political dilemma, of which, for both, the Jewish question – even as they defined it in very different terms – was paradigmatic.

Given the degree to which their thought was shaped by the particular legacy of European fascism and colored by the politics of the Cold War, the relevance of their work for our own time requires explanation. This is particularly so given what I have suggested are the problematic implications of Berlin's liberalism and the extremely ambiguous implications of Strauss's views. And yet as unsatisfying or problematic as their constructive responses to these problems may have been, the last few years have demonstrated that the questions with which they wrestled are very much alive. Despite the the limitations of their analysis of those problems, their critical power remains.

Given the revolts against liberalism that have colored so much politics in the United States and Europe over the last five years, several recent essays have sought to revive Berlin's pluralism as resource for a liberalism.[2] As several writers have recently suggested, Berlin's warnings against

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[2] Müller

liberalism's tendency to eviscerate the claims of community and belonging have once again proven prescient, as we have seen how left unchecked this tendency leads liberalism to self-destruct. Berlin's relative inattention to the various forces that might contribute to that evisceration (above all economic ones) does not make his analysis on that score less urgent.[3] Nor is that basic point undermined by my criticism of what I have called Berlin's tragic liberalism. As I have suggested, such a liberalism all too easily fortifies the forces against which it is ostensibly opposed. But the inadequacy of Berlin's constructive project does not on its own call into question the force of his critique. In some respects, it confirms it.

We might say something similar regarding Leo Strauss. While his argument that liberalism tips into nihilism may seem at first more extreme and therefore less immediately applicable than Berlin's, recent politics suggest that he was on this score all too prescient. As we've seen, Strauss argued that liberalism was at best unlikely to deliver on its promise of security and material comfort. Among the reasons was that the notion of reason upon which it was premised was so closely tied to the idea of science as a force that could be utilized to manipulate nature on behalf of the alleviation of suffering. Strauss considered such an idea theoretically untenable, as science so understood was empty of any moral or ethical content. It therefore was bound to produce as much (or more) misery as benefit, and as it did the idea of progress upon which so much modern liberalism is tied can no longer be sustained.[4] Given that failure, a liberalism that rested on a particular conception of reason as wed to modern science and that promised progress as a consequence of greater scientific discovery was

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Mueller, Jan-Werner, "What Cold War Liberalism Can Teach Us Today." *New York Review Daily*, November 26 2018. https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/11/26/what-cold-war-liberalism-can-teach-us-today/ (Accessed September 2020); Joshua Cherniss, "Liberal Understanding for Our Troubled Times," *The Critique*, January 15 2017. http://www.thecritique.com/articles/liberal-understanding-for-troubled-times/ (accessed September 2020)

[3] As noted earlier in this dissertation, Berlin did note the ways that economic forces could erode liberty, particularly in the "Introduction" to the volume that "Two Concepts" appeared in. Yet in the great scope of his work, it was a very minor focus. See "Introduction," FEON.

[4] I discussed this view in relation to Strauss's essay "Three Waves of Modernity, but Strauss offered a more concise articulation of it in "Progress or Return," JPCM, 97-98.

bound to eventually collapse, and in so doing provoke a revolt against its most basic principles. Strauss wrote under the shadow of nuclear war. I write at a time when many conclude that industrial capitalism has already made the world uninhabitable, and when the tools of social media that promised democratization seem more likely to deliver tyranny than any semblance of popular rule. In such a context, it is extremely difficult to dismiss the most basic indictments Strauss leveled, which seem if anything less extreme today than they did in his own time.

Strauss, however, was as inattentive as Berlin was to some of the more powerful factors that might contribute to this rebellion – chief among them the mass inequality that global capitalism encourages and the forces of white supremacy, patriarchy, colonialism and imperialism upon which both modern liberalism and modern nationalism rely. Nonetheless, as Wendy Brown has recently argued, our politics today are engulfed in the nihilist revolt Strauss described.[5] It is a revolt shaped by a rejection of the failed promises of the last half-century and directed at the social and political norms with which those promises have been associated. In a world in which the most basic justice seems unavailable – a world where, as I write, "essential workers" are often treated as the most expendable, where agents of the state continue to kill Black (and not only Black) citizens with impunity, and where "the world is on fire" can no longer be dismissed as metaphorical hyperbole – then it is all too tempting to embrace the politics that most forcefully exposes hypocrisy. Such a politics turns nihilist when it becomes untethered from imagination or hope; in such a context, as Strauss implicitly warned, a nihilist politics will take delight in a cruelty that masquerades as courage. In the United States, such a politics is today dominant on the Right, and among the many ironies of Strauss's reception is that while he diagnosed this tendency so acutely and spent his scholarly life trying to recover a model of political thinking that might alleviate it, some of the most recognizable

[5] Wendy Brown, "No Future for White Men: Nihilism, Fatalism, and Resentiment"," in *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). She emphasizes Nietzsche rather than Strauss, but Strauss as we've seen was indebted to Nietzsche for his account.

practitioners of the style count him as an intellectual hero.[6] But any quick perusal of Twitter ought to quickly disabuse anyone of the view that Trump and his followers have a monopoly on this particular political style.

Yet despite the force of these criticisms, throughout this dissertation I have suggested that neither offers adequate resource for responding to the challenges they each so forcefully describe. Berlin, I have argued, offers an account of liberalism that weakens the norms it aspires to protect. Strauss, for his part, offers an account of philosophy and revelation that emphasizes the necessity of law but provides for that law a determinate normative content that is at best of extremely limited practical power. Strauss ultimately was far more interested and invested in securing the floor for political life than offering a ceiling. As Milton Himmelfarb helpfully put it in an early remembrance, Strauss's political thought can be summarized by an adage: "if it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change."[7] In practice, this is a politics appropriately described as conservative. But it is a conservative position that one might lament as largely absent in our current politics, as it is above all driven by a warning against tyranny, rule without law.

My criticisms, however, should not be mistaken for a condemnation of Berlin and Strauss's insistence on the tragic or limited nature of our politics. Insofar as tragedy entails cost to some values we take to be important and even ultimate, to be alive in the 21st century is to live in a tragic condition.[8] There is no way to exist without contributing to the forces of domination, racism, and exploitation that shape our world. The world's history is so full of crimes and injustices that the

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[6] See Peter Thiel, "The Straussian Moment," in *Politics and Apocalypse* (Anne Arbor: University of Michigan, 2007). Thiel is both among the most powerful figures in Silicon Valley and a prominent supporter of President Trump. See also Ben Shapiro, *The Right Side of History: How Reason and Moral Purpose Made the West Great* (New York: Harper Collins, 2019).
[7] Milton Himmelfarb, "On Leo Strauss," *Commentary* August 1974. https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/milton-himmelfarb-2/on-leo-strauss/ (Accessed September 2020)
[8] Among those who have wrestled with the question of how to harness the resources required for a politics that recognizes the inevitability of tragedy, see especially the work of Cornel West and Eddie Glaude, for example "Pragmatism and the Tragic," *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993) and Eddie Glaude, "The Magician's Serpent: Race and the Tragedy of American Democracy," *James Baldwin Review* 5, 2019.

notion that some future might exist in which such wrongs are made right is on its face one that is blind to the full scope or scale of those crimes. Under such conditions, the prerequisite of any adequate politics has to be heeding James Baldwin's warning that "the innocence is the crime."[9]

The critique that I have attempted to level is that Berlin and Strauss offer unsatisfying responses to the tragedies and limits they insist must be recognized. Chief among their weaknesses is that Berlin and Strauss do not offer us a satisfying way of distinguishing between the kinds of political dilemma that we must accept and those that may reflect the inevitably tragic nature of our lives but that nonetheless require our courage and fortitude and energies to address. I have argued that Berlin obscures the social conditions and histories upon which any politics rests, and in so doing renders the distinction between necessary losses and unnecessary losses, between unavoidable suffering and outrageous injustice, a matter of nothing other than subjective perception. Strauss lacerates Berlin and others for a politics that cannot make such basic distinctions. Yet while recovery of classical political philosophy and medieval Judaism reminds us of the limits of any justice that politics might be reasonably expected to provide, he offers little to suggest the substance of the justice, however partial, that politics might be expected to achieve. But these inadequacies are part of what makes their claims worth attention. The notion that our most profound challenges cannot be met but only managed runs deep in contemporary politics; and it too is part of the reason for the revolt upon us.

Much more could be said about these points, but the topic of this dissertation draws the focus away from these general concerns and towards the issues and questions of modern Jewish politics and of Zionism especially. Throughout the preceding chapters I have argued that Berlin and Strauss found the fact that Judaism proved unassimilable into the structures of the modern nation-state the

[9] James Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," in James Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison, The Library of America (New York: 1998), 296.

grounds for their critique and their theoretical reconstruction of those structures. For Berlin, that critique led to his argument that liberalism required an acceptance of the inescapability of tragedy; for Strauss, it led to his recovery of a premodern tradition that recognized the inevitable limits and necessity of law. For both, the persistence of the Jewish question represented the permanence of political limitation and the dangers of utopianism. In the conclusions to the last two chapters, I have suggested that the positions of Strauss and Berlin help illuminate dynamics that run through a good deal of Jewish political argument over the implications and future of Zionism.

This suggestion is likely surprising. Much contemporary Jewish thought and popular Jewish argument is framed by an apologetic insistence on behalf of Judaism's compatibility with and support of both liberalism and Zionism and most especially the two together.[10] Given the dominance of this basic view, it would seem surprising to find Berlin's tragic politics or Strauss's exilic Judaism holding much purchase in Jewish political debate. Yet as noted in the preface to this dissertation, just under and alongside the contemporary argument on behalf of compatibility lies resignation that the fate of the Jews under modern conditions is one defined by a tragic condition. I want to conclude by turning briefly to two contemporary and influential articulations of this view, in order to suggest that whatever else we might learn from Berlin and Strauss, they help us see the power of this position in contemporary Jewish debate, and its troubling implications.

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[10] The most manifest expression of this apologetics is the state of crisis provoked by the relentless fear that the coherence is under threat. The circumstances of the crisis shift, but in the United States eruptions are now almost annual. Here is Ronald Lauder, former president of the World Jewish Congress and the Jewish National Fund, warning in winter of 2018 of the consequence of the Knesset passing the nation-state law that would declare Israel the "national home of the Jewish people. "For over 200 years, modern Judaism has aligned itself with enlightenment. The Jews of the new era have fused our national pride and religious affiliation with a dedication to human progress, worldly culture and morality. Conservatives and liberals, we all believe in a just Zionism and a pluralistic Judaism that respects every human being. So when members of Israel's current government unintentionally undermine the covenant between Judaism and enlightenment, they crush the core of contemporary Jewish existence." Ronald S. Lauder, "Israel: This is Not Who We Are," *New York Times*, Aug 13, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/13/opinion/israel-ronald-lauder-nation-state-law.html (Accessed September 2020)

In the central chapter of his 2013 *My Promised Land*, Israeli journalist and self-described liberal Zionist Ari Shavit described the massacre and forced expulsion at Lydda, a Palestinian village destroyed during Israel's war of independence.[11] On July 11th 1948, an Israeli battalion led by Moshe Dayan attacked the Palestinian militia defending the village. In the ensuing battle, the battalion lost nine men, and killed many dozens of Palestinian fighters. The next day, after two Jordanian armored vehicles entered the city, Israeli soldiers opened fire on homes. They shelled a mosque. "In thirty minutes, two hundred and fifty Palestinians were killed," Shavit writes. "Zionism had carried out a massacre in the city of Lydda."[12]

The following day, Ben-Gurion ordered the remaining villagers expelled. By that evening, thirty-five thousand Palestinians were forced from their homes, leaving the village in a long column. In three days, Shavit writes, "Zionism had obliterated the city of Lydda." To Shavit, this was a profound crime, morally unconscionable. It was also necessary. "If Zionism was to exist, Lydda could not exist." Without the forced expulsion, he writes, "the State of Israel would not have been born." The soldiers who forced residents to flee "did the dirty, filthy work that enables my people, myself, my daughter, and my sons to live." For this reason, Shavit concludes, "I'll stand by the damned."[13]

The ghosts of those damned, Shavit laments, continue to haunt Israel. For how can such brutal crimes be forgiven? How can the victims of ethnic cleansing ever declare such a crime legitimate? For Shavit, Israelis are beholden to one of two fictions – the Right imagines that the crimes were not as severe as they actually were, while the Left believes that they weren't so severe that they can't be forgiven. The delusions of peace rely on both. "Peace promised us that we could be pure and

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[11] Ari Shavit, *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*, First edition. (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2013), Chapter 5. Most of chapter was excerpted, largely unchanged, as "Lydda, 1948" in *The New Yorker*, October 21st, 2013.
[12] Ibid., 108
[13] Ibid., 131

righteous and beautiful," he declares. "Peace meant we would not have to fight for centuries, for we could write a happy ending to our tragedy."[14] But the horrible truth of tragedy, Shavit reminds his readers, is that there isn't a thing you can do to escape it.

Upon its publication, Shavit's work was showered with attention.[15] The New York Times published two glowing reviews.[16] Thomas Friedman suggested that if the President of the United States were to read one book on the conflict, this was it.[17] On his speaking tour through North American synagogues and Jewish institutions, Shavit filled sanctuaries and auditoriums.[18] Here, it seemed, was a Zionism without denial, a celebration of Israel that didn't shy from the brutality of the country's founding and the horrors of its occupation.[19] As novel as the argument seemed to many, however, part of the reason that it resonated so deeply was that it rested upon a framework familiar from a century of Jewish discussion.

The refrain that Zionism is defined by a tragic dilemma was already familiar enough in the years before Israel's founding that Martin Buber could lament in May of 1946 that "we often hear it said that the Jewish-Arab problem in this country is by its nature a true dilemma, a tragic conflict to which there is no genuine solution."[20] Twenty years earlier, in 1926 Jabotinsky had written that "the

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[14] Ibid.
[15] His star has dimmed since accusations of sexual harassment. Peter Baker, "Ari Shavit, Celebrated Israeli Columnist, Resigns After Sexual Harassment Accusations," *The New York Times*, Oct. 30, 2016.
[16] Dwight Garner, "Son of Israel, Caught in the Middle," Nov. 19, 2013; Leon Wieseltier, "The State of Israel," *The New York Times*, Nov. 21, 2013.
[17] Thomas Friedman, "Something for Barack and Bibi to Talk About," *The New York Times* Nov. 16, 2013. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/31/world/middleeast/israel-ari-shavit-sexual-harassment.html Accessed September 2020.
[18] For a description of one such sold out event, see the review (negative in a way reflective of much right-leaning commentary on the book) by Alan Gerson, "The Contrition and Confusion of Ari Shavit," *Moment Magazine*, February 5th, 2014.
[19] To others, of course, Shavit's work was evidence of the moral vacuity of the liberal Zionism he claimed to defend. See Omri Boehm, "Tragedy or Political Correctness? Ari Shavit and the Confusion of the Zionist Liberal Left," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 27th 2014. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/tragedy-political-correctness-ari-shavit-confusion-zionist-liberal-left/ Accessed October 12th, 2018.
[20] Martin Buber, "A Tragic Conflict?" in *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs,* ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr, (University of Chicago, 2005), 187. Buber, it must be noted, rejected this description and insisted it need not be tragic if Zionist policy dramatically changed.

tragedy is such that there lies herein a collision between two truths," the truth of the Jewish right to national life and the Arab. As a consequence, Jabotinsky declared, "this tragedy cannot bequeath us a possibility for peace. There is no room for peace."[21] And in In 1944, Hannah Arendt declared that by adopting statehood as their official goal, "the Zionists have now indeed done their best to create that insoluble 'tragic conflict' which can only be ended through cutting the Gordian knot."[22]

Over the next century, the description of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as tragic would become de rigueur among many, particularly on the liberal Zionist left. "The confrontation between the Jews returning to Zion and the Arab inhabitants of the country is not like a western or an epic, but more like a Greek tragedy," wrote Israel's most famous novelist Amos Oz in 1967. "It is a clash between right and right."[23] To Oz, the question was what kind of tragedy it was going to be. "At the end of a Shakespearean tragedy," Oz said, "the stage is strewn with dead bodies and maybe there's a measure of justice hovering high above. A Chekhovian tragedy, on the other hand, ends with everybody disillusioned, embittered, heartbroken, disappointed - indeed, absolutely shattered, but still alive." In 1992 the Rabbi and Israel-American public intellectual David Hartman would similarly write that "our conflict with the Palestinians is not an issue of good versus evil, where there is no uncertainty about moral choice." Instead, the conflict reflects a tension between two goods. One is justice, "the dignity one accords to human beings and their collective history and culture. The second is survival, security, and self-preservation." To Hartman, "the dilemma can be summarized as follows: how much can I risk survival for the sake of justice and how much am I allowed to give up for the sake of love?"[24]

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[21] From "After Establishing the Border Corps" cited in Micah Goodman, *Catch-67: The Left, the Right, and the Legacy of the Six-Day War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 185.
[22] Hannah Arendt, "Zionism Reconsidered," in *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schoken, 2008), 344.
[23] Amos Oz, *Under This Blazing Light: Essays* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 91.
[24] David Hartman, "Living with Conflicting Values," in *Conflicting Visions: Spiritual Possibilities of Modern Israel* (New York: Schoken, 1990), 234.

As noted in the preface, this view was given stark expression a few weeks before the Israeli election in the Spring of 2019 by Knesset member Yair Lapid in *New York Times*. His party had emerged as the primary opposition to the man who would shortly become the longest serving Prime Minister in Israeli history, and the headline for the interview asked, "Can This Man Oust Netanyahu?" Among the questions posed was one hardly discussed in the Israeli campaign: what was his plan to end the occupation? "It's a very American question," Lapid responded, 'because Americans think 'everything is fixable.'" But, he explained, "really, really wanting something or desiring something strongly is just not enough," he explained. "I'm not willing to see one Jew die because someone took an unnecessary risk in the name of values I really cherish. Like peace, like humanity, like people's need for self-recognition," he continued. "The Holocaust taught us that the only test of moral people is in immoral times. This translates in Israel into daily dilemmas. You're a young officer and someone is shooting at you and your soldiers from inside a hospital. What do you do? Who do you protect? How do you solve this problem? This tension between morality and survival is to me the core of 21st-century Judaism," he said. "It is true in Pittsburgh. It is true in Tel Aviv. It is true everywhere. And I consider myself the keeper of this dilemma."

This description of Zionism as beset by tragic dilemmas finds its legal parallel in the law of the State of Israel, whose first provisional government just one month after the declaration of independence declared a State of Emergency that, three quarters of a century later, remains in force.[25] That law has provided the legal justification for a litany of State actions, from the 1950 Absentee Land Law that allowed the state to confiscate the property of all Arab residents that had

[25] The original declaration of the state of emergency was pronounced by the Provisional Government on May 19, 1948, and approved by the Provisional Council of the State, and came into force on May 21. "The Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, proposed that the following proclamation be promulgated: 'By virtue of Section 9(a) of the Law and Administration Ordinance 1948, the Provisional Council of State hereby proclaims that a state of emergency is in force in the State.' A vote was taken and the proposition was adopted." Provisional Council of State Minutes, Session B, May 19, 1948, 10. The declaration was published on May 21, 1948. Cited in Yoav Mehozay, *Between the Rule of Law and States of Emergency: The Fluid Jurisprudence of the Israeli Regime* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2016), 34.

left the country in 1948 and been unable to return, to the military occupation of Palestine villages under Israeli sovereignty until 1966, to the legal apparatus of the Occupied Territories under which the Israeli military holds nearly limitless power to declare and revoke all manner of rules when determined necessary according to military necessity. Whether or not one wants to describe the state of exception as necessarily bound to a tragic framework, it is nonetheless striking that Jewish sovereignty has, legally speaking, achieved "normalization" only through the legal category of exception.[26]

These various depictions of tragedy all share the same formal features that we have considered throughout this dissertation, and all take Zionism to be characterized by a tragic dilemma in which Jewish sovereignty is taken to require compromise to some absolute value: the national aspirations of another people, Jewish justice, or basic human dignity.[27] Shavit, however, offered a particularly acute and extreme version of this formula. To Shavit, the Jewish people are fated to either commit crimes against humanity or be the victims of crimes against humanity. The dilemma posed in this way was and is compelling to those trying come to terms with what is from most any perspective a profound tragedy: the historical fact that hundreds of thousands of stateless Jewish refugees of the European genocide were only granted legal protection through the expulsion of hundreds of thousands Palestinians who quickly became stateless refugees themselves.[28] We might however, follow Strauss's method in respect to Weber and ask what are the commitments that produce the tragedy as Shavit describes it and generate his conclusion that it cannot be resolved. Let me suggest three.

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[26] On this point see David Lloyd, "Settler Colonialismand the State of Exception: The Example of Palestine/Israel" in "Past is Present: Settler Colonialism in Palestine," special issue, *Settler Colonial Studies 2*, no 1 (2012): 59-80 and Joan Cocks, *On Soveriegnty and Other Political Delusions* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 100-101.
[27] It should be noted that Buber and Arendt both rejected the claim that the tragedy was inevitable, and both insisted such a view demonstrated that the particular view of Zionism that generated the tragedy was profoundly problematic.
[28] On this point, see Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism,* Chapter 9.

First, if indeed the conflict is tragic in the precise way that Shavit describes it, then his commitment to Jewish sovereignty is ultimately and counterintuitively one that has no rational basis other than an affirmation of power. According to Shavit, the rights of both Jews and Palestinians to a secure home cannot be measured against one another. This is what distinguishes his view from the consequentialist position, also familiar from the annals of Zionism, that recognized the wrong that Zionism inflicted upon the Palestinians but insisted that it was necessary in view of the needs of the Jews. Among others, that position was given memorably succinct voice by Vladimir Jabontisky in his testimony before the Peel commission in 1936: "When the Arab claim is confronted with our Jewish demand to be saved, it is like the claims of appetite versus the claims of starvation."[29] There is of course nothing particularly "tragic" about letting those who want food go hungry in order to save those who need food from starving. For Shavit, the claims are not so easily ordered. But if this is the case, then the rights in question are strictly subjective according to those whose survival is at stake, and the only relevant question is who has the power to expel whom. What appears as a position of agonized moral anguish turns out in practice to affirm the most blatant and basic affirmation of power for its own sake. We can see in this trajectory the way in which pluralism so quickly transforms into the nihilism that Strauss described.

Second, while Shavit describes the relevant values in conflict as the existence of his family and his world on one side and the homes and country of Palestinians on the other, we should take note of the particular way in which Shavit conceptualizes Jewish survival. As Omri Boehm notes in his incisive review of Shavit's book, the expulsion of Lydda was indeed necessary for Zionism to exist

[29] Ben-Gurion offered a similar argument in testimony before the United Nations in 1947: "The conscience of humanity ought to weigh this: where is the balance of justice, where is greater need, where is the greater peril, where is the lesser evil and where is the lesser injustice?" And Chaim Weizmann also urged the Peel Commission to take the "line of least injustice." These citations are from Gideon Shimon's review of Chaim Gans' *A Just Zionism.* Gideon Shimoni, "Starving for Zion," *The Jewish Review of Books*, Winter 2012. Online at https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/224/starving-for-zion/ (accessed September 2020).

insofar as Zionism was taken to require a state with a Jewish majority.[30] Such a view assumes that the Jewish people could only (and by extension can only) survive in the context of a state cleansed of most of its Arab population. Prior to 1948, this was by no means a matter of consensus even within Zionism (let alone by those who rejected Zionism); it was the position of the Zionist right (and arguably far-right). If Shavit is indicative of contemporary liberal Zionism, then what makes the "liberal Zionist" "liberal" is not that they reject this logic but that they accept it and regret its necessity.

Third and most importantly, in describing the conflict as a tragic one, Shavit suggests that it can only be responsibly accepted or naively denied. But if such actions could not have been avoided, then why would there be reason to hold anyone responsible for them? After all, they were horrible and regrettable violations, but necessary. Such a view recognizes the wrongs of the past while insisting that there is no way such wrongs might ever be righted or even remedied, and therefore abdicates any responsibility for addressing them. What appears to be a recognition of responsibility turns out in practice to amount to an abdication of responsibility. If the Jewish people are fated to tragedy, then all that one can do is bear its costs. The wrong can be acknowledged, so long as it is recognized that such acknowledgement need not provoke any change. For what could possibly be the point?

It is revealing that while Shavit is a well-known journalist in Israel, his book was published only in English and clearly intended for an audience of American Jews. There is much we might draw from this fact, but I want to suggest that it counterintuitively reveals a surprising resonance between American Jewish liberalism and Strauss's iconoclastic account of Jewish exceptionalism. As much as Strauss may have indicted a Judaism fit to accommodate liberalism, and as much as his critique of

[30] See Omri Boehm, "Tragedy or Political Correctness? Ari Shavit and the Confusion of the Zionist Liberal Left," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 27th 2014. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/tragedy-political-correctness-ari-shavit-confusion-zionist-liberal-left/ Accessed October 12th, 2018.

pluralism exposes the assumptions in an account like Shavit's, in describing Judaism as declaring a universal morality that is inevitably in tension with the survival of Judaism, Strauss provides a framework that can easily accommodate Shavit's tragic Zionism. For both Shavit and Strauss, Jewish survival and Jewish morality are incommensurate.

Where Shavit is surely correct is that the sources of his existence rest on great crime. But this is true for a great many of us (albeit some of us to a far greater extent than others). The question is what do we do when we come into recognition of this fact? Do we simply "stand with the damned?" Or does our recognition of the horrors upon which our lives rely lead us to reconsider what it might be that we owe one another, and what justice might require? Needless to say, this choice is by no means unique to Israelis nor to Jews. But the Jewish people are particularly tempted by such a narrative, given the immensity of the horrors that befell the Jews in Europe, and the dispossession and occupation that continue to shape the conditions of Jewish sovereignty. Shavit offers one version of the temptation, one that proved particularly appealing to American liberal Jews. In Israel, Micah Goodman has offered another.

In the past several years, Goodman has become perhaps the most famous public intellectual in Israel. His 2017 *Catch-67: The Left, The Right, and the Legacy of the Six Day War* spent an entire year as the top selling non-fiction book in Israel and became required reading among Israel's political class.[31] It received a lengthy review by a former Prime Minister, and the Knesset scheduled a day of discussion of its arguments.[32]

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[31] Micah Goodman, Catch-67: The Left, the Right, and the Legacy of the Six-Day War (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

[32] For summary of the book's reception, see Isabel Kershner, "A Best-Selling Israeli Philosopher Examines His Country's Inner Conflict," *The New York Times*, June 9, 2017 https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/09/world/middleeast/a-best-selling-israeli-philosopher-examines-his-countrys-inner-conflict.html (accessed June 2020); for the review, see Ehud Barak, "What the Israeli Right Gets Wrong About Security and the Occupation," *Haaretz,* December 5, 2017 https://www.haaretz.com/israel-

The "catch" to which the title refers is that Israelis cannot live with occupation over the Palestinians but cannot live without it. They cannot live with it, Goodman argues, because living with it jeopardizes Israel's survival as a democracy. But they cannot live without it because relinquishing control over the territory would threaten Israel's security. The Right imagines that Israel can live with occupation by annexing the whole of the West Bank, while the Left clings to the fantasy of an agreement with the Palestinians and an end to occupation, and in so doing ignores Israel's security needs. But the conflict between security and democracy is not one that can be resolved, Goodman insists it must be accepted. Therefore, the question is not how to end the conflict through either annexation or withdrawal. Instead, utopian dreams must be replaced with recognition of necessary compromise.[33] Goodman, in an echo of the formula we saw in Chapter Five, insists that "ideological" rigidity must be replaced with "pragmatic" consideration.[34]

Throughout the book, Goodman shows why various facets of the conflict are shaped by incommensurate claims that cannot be reconciled. In an argument parallel to that offered by Shavit, Goodman holds that those who have imagined that peace can be achieved by relinquishing territory and establishing two states ignore the significance of the *nakba* and the claims of Palestinian refugees. Those who imagine that the occupation can be ended and two states achieved fail to recognize the severity of the loss Palestinians have suffered. Israel's security will forever remain at issue because the crimes that have been committed cannot ever be forgiven.[35]

Goodman effects a neat reversal here, as it is those on the Left who fail to recognize the extent of Palestinian suffering and the strength of Palestinian claims. But it's an argument in some tension

news/.premium.MAGAZINE-ehud-barak-reviewed-a-book-for-haaretz-and-wrote-a-political-manifesto-1.5471053 (accessed June 2020).

[33] Goodman summarizes most of these points in his introduction, "Can the Israeli Conversation be Healed?" Goodman, *Catch-67*,1-15.

[34] Ibid., especially 133-144.

[35] Ibid., 78.

with the basic framing of the book. Like Shavit, Goodman claims that the occupation of the West Bank is peripheral to the more fundamental issue of the expulsion of the Palestinian people from their homes in 1948. But it doesn't follow from this claim that the occupation of the West Bank is necessary for Israel's security – an argument central to Goodman's framing but to which Goodman devotes hardly more than a paragraph. Given the incongruence, a reader can be forgiven for suspecting that the "catch" between security and democracy that frames the book is not ultimately the dilemma with which Goodman is most concerned. The incongruence suggests that we might again follow Strauss's method and pursue the obscured commitments that provoke the tragedy.

The clues start to come together over the subsequent chapters, each of which continues the pattern of taking a given dilemma, insisting on its intractability, and then pointing towards a compromise opened up once resolution is abandoned. In each chapter, however, the dilemma explicitly presented leads to another more subtly described. One might expect, for example, that, given Goodman's framing, a chapter entitled "The Moral Dilemma" would explore the tension between the immorality of the occupation and the moral requirement of security. But after describing the obvious injustice of occupation, Goodman instead asks whether the land of "Judea and Samaria" should even be considered occupied at all. After all, it could be occupied only if a particular country had prior sovereignty over it. But prior to 1967, Jordan's sovereignty over the area was recognized by only two countries – and was relinquished when Jordan joined in the attack against Israel. To Goodman, it is self-evident that "a hostile power defeated in a war that it has initiated is clearly not entitled to overturn the results of that war." Returning the land to Jordan would have only rewarded the crime of aggression. This allows Goodman the kind of rhetorical flourish in which he delights: "The territories are not occupied, but the Palestinian people *are*."[36] It

[36] Ibid., 104.

turns out that the moral dilemma is not between occupation and security but between ruling over another people in perpetuity and rewarding a war of aggression.

The same pattern persists in "The Jewish Dilemma," a chapter in which Goodman reiterates the injustice of occupation. But, he holds, the land of the West Bank is integral to Jewish identity. "Zionism's great achievement," he writes, "was to awaken the national spirit of the bifurcated Jewish identity from its ancient slumber."[37] While the occupation is unjust, "a withdrawal from Judea and Samaria would be a blow to Zionist identity because it would be an admission that Judaism is not a healthy nationality, but rather a lightweight religious culture."[38] To Goodman, "[n]ations with a healthy national consciousness feel no need to justify their ownership of their homeland," he declares, "just as people never feel the need to justify the ownership of their bodies."[39] To underscore the point, Goodman quotes Jabotinsky: "Ask a French farmer such a question, whether France is his land! These are axioms, not riddles. Only pitiful figures, with their Diaspora psyche, have turned this axiom into a 'riddle' that needs to be investigated and 'solved.'"[40] This is straightforward and perhaps unremarkable blood and soil nationalism. But if this is "pragmatic" rather than "religious" thinking, we might ask what is gained by the distinction.

Yet as much as Goodman frames the various aspects of the conflict in terms that follow upon the basic tragic framework we've seen throughout this dissertation, in contrast to Shavit (and Berlin) he insists that the conflicts among the relevant values can be compromised and the harms produced by the tensions minimized. Minimizing those harms is the work of what Goodman calls "shrinking" the conflict, which amounts to Israel allowing greater freedom of movement for Palestinians: rights of travel, movement between Gaza and the West Bank, greater road infrastructure in the territories,

[37] Ibid., 112.
[38] Ibid., 113.
[39] Ibid., 112.
[40] Ibid.

etc. Such a shift, he writes, would transform the conflict from one between a "state and its subjects," to one between "a state and its neighbors."[41] It should go without saying that so long as Israelis control Palestinian air space, maintain a military presence along the border between the Palestinian territories and Jordan, and retain rights of ongoing military and police operations within Palestinian territory (all of which Goodman insists upon as non-negotiable requirements), the Palestinians will remain the subjects of Israeli sovereignty. Imagining that such conditions would turn them into "neighbors" is either delusional or bad faith.

Goodman's achievement is in describing this regime of domination as liberal, democratic, and moral. To Goodman, it is moral because its pragmatism recognizes the fact of value pluralism. "Pragmatism is based on a complex moral conviction," Goodman writes. "One that is totally uncompromising. It is one that refuses to renounce either moral concern but rather insists on clinging to both of them without compromise."[42] We might read this as straightforwardly cynical: how could perpetual military rule over another people reflect a moral conviction? But to Goodman, the relevant moral concerns are a commitment to Jewish sovereignty and Jewish land, and his proposal ensures that neither are compromised one iota. This is a distinctive understanding of morality, but there is nothing particularly novel in suggesting that morality requires the domination of another people. It is what Empire has always offered as justification for its rule.

What is so plainly missing from this picture, of course, are the subjects of these "compromises." Needless to say, Goodman would never accept a condition of perpetual subjugation for Jews, and it is not surprising to read that he has not found a single Palestinian amenable to his plan to "shrink" the conflict.[43] The reason is that freedom from arbitrary military power is a value that many consider difficult to compromise on. To Goodman, however, Palestinians are inconvenient subjects, the

[41] Ibid., 153.
[42] Ibid., 174.
[43] Goodman concedes this in his interview with Horowitz; see Horowitz, *The Escape Artist*.

unfortunate cause of agonizing Jewish decision. The injustice they experience is of course real, but it is one value among others and therefore must be compromised with those others. Politics entails loss, someone must bear the cost, and to imagine otherwise is naïve. In alarming clarity, we see the ways in which, as I suggested in Chapter Five, pluralism can obscure the very social conditions to which it suggests it is being attentive.

It is tempting to dismiss Goodman's book as extreme, but its success is not a consequence of the novelty of its ideas. Goodman is helpful above all in illuminating the consequences of the particular tragic framework that shapes Ari Shavit's narrative as much as it does Goodman's recommendations. According to both, perpetual domination of another people simply is the cost of Jewish national survival. While that consequence may be acceptable for Goodman and Shavit, for those who find such a future intolerable it is essential to appreciate how such a position can appear reasonable and even moral.

Isaiah Berlin and Leo Strauss are both more sophisticated, creative, nuanced and interesting thinkers than either Shavit or Goodman. Nonetheless, Shavit and Goodman show the ways in which the view that the modern Jewish condition is beset by a tragic condition has taken hold of contemporary Jewish debate. According to such a view, morality and survival are locked in incommensurate conflict, the injustice of occupation must be accepted, and the wrongs of Zionism simultaneously recognized and defended. Berlin and Strauss help demonstrate the great power of such a position. We continue to live in the shadow of the politics they forged, along with others of their generation. It will be up to ours and those that follow to move beyond it.

Abbreviations

Texts by Isaiah Berlin

AC: *Against the Current*
AE: *The Age of Enlightenment*
CTH: *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*
MN: *The Magus of the North*
PI: *Personal Impressions*
POI: *The Power of Ideas*
FEL: *Four Essays on Liberty*
PSM: *The Proper Study of Mankind*
RR: *The Roots of Romanticism*
RT: *Russian Thinkers*
SR: *The Sense of Reality*

Texts by Leo Strauss

EW: *Early Writings*
JPCM: *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*
LAM: *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*
OT: *On Tyranny*
NRH: *Natural Right and History*
PAW: *Persecution and the Art of Writing*
PL: *Philosophy and Law*
TM: *Thoughts on Machiavelli*
RCPR: *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*
WIPP: *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*

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