

*Strauss' intro to Liberalism Ancient & Modern*

Liberalism is understood here and now in contradistinction to conservatism. This distinction is sufficient for most present practical purposes. To admit this is tantamount to admitting that the distinction is not free from theoretical difficulties which need not be barren of practical consequences. Of one difficulty one can dispose easily. Most people are liberal in some respects and conservative in others; a very moderate liberal may not be distinguishable from a very moderate conservative. This very observation implies, indeed, the existence at least of the liberal and the conservative as ideal types. Yet in this case, at any rate, the ideal types are quite real. Here and now a man who is in favor of the war on poverty and opposed to the war in Vietnam is generally regarded as doubtlessly a liberal, and a man who is in favor of the war in Vietnam and opposed to the war on poverty is generally regarded as doubtlessly a conservative.

A somewhat more serious difficulty comes to sight once one considers the fact that here and now liberalism and conservatism have a common basis; for both are based here and now on liberal democracy, and therefore both are antagonistic to Communism. Hence the opposition does not seem to be fundamental. Still, they differ profoundly in their opposition to Communism. At first glance liberalism seems to agree with Communism as regards the ultimate goal, while it radically disagrees with it as regards the way to the goal. The goal may be said to be the universal and classless society or, to use the correction proposed by Kojève, the universal and homogeneous state of which every adult human being is a full member; more precisely, the necessary and sufficient title to full membership is supplied by one's being an adult nonmoronic human being for all those times when he is not locked up in an insane asylum or a penitentiary. The way toward that goal, according to liberalism in contradistinction to Communism, is preferably democratic or peaceful, surely not war, that is,

foreign war; for revolutions backed by the sympathy, or at least the interests, of the majority of the people concerned are not necessarily rejected by liberals. There remains, however, one important difference between liberalism and Communism regarding the goal itself. Liberals regard as sacred the right of everyone, however humble, odd, or inarticulate, to criticize the government, including the man at the top.

Someone might say that many liberals are much too pragmatic to aim at the universal and homogeneous state: they would be fully satisfied with a federation of all now existing or soon emerging states, with a truly universal and greatly strengthened United Nations organization—an organization that would include Communist China, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Communist East Germany, although not necessarily Nationalist China. Still, this would mean that liberals aim at the greatest possible approximation to the universal and homogeneous state or that they are guided by the ideal of the universal and homogeneous state. Some of them will object to the term “ideal” on the ground that the universal and homogeneous state (or the greatest possible approximation to it) is a requirement of hardheaded politics: that state has been rendered necessary by economic and technological progress, which includes the necessity of making thermonuclear war impossible for all the future, and by ever increasing wealth of the advanced countries which are compelled by sheer self-interest to develop the underdeveloped countries. As regards the still existing tension between the liberal-democratic and the Communist countries, liberals believe that this tension will be relaxed and will eventually disappear as a consequence of the ever increasing welfarism of the former and the ever increasing liberalism, due to the overwhelming demand for consumer goods of all kinds, of the latter.

Conservatives regard the universal and homogeneous state as either undesirable, though possible, or as both undesirable and impossible. They do not deny the necessity or desirability of larger political units than what one may call the typical nation-state. For good or ill, they can indeed no longer be imperialists. But there is no reason whatever why they should be opposed to a United Free Europe, for instance. Yet they are likely to understand such units differently from the liberals. An outstanding European conservative has spoken of *l'Europe des patries*. Conservatives look with greater sympathy than liberals on the particular or particularist and the heterogeneous; at least they are more willing than liberals to respect and perpetuate a more fundamental diversity than the one ordinarily respected or taken for granted by liberals and even by Communists, that is, the diversity regarding language, folk songs, pottery, and the like. Inasmuch as the universalism in politics is founded on the universalism proceeding from reason, conservatism is frequently characterized by distrust of reason or by trust in tradition which as such is necessarily this or that tradition and hence particular. Conservatism is therefore exposed to criticism that

is guided by the notion of the unity of truth. Liberals, on the other hand, especially those who know that their aspirations have their roots in the Western tradition, are not sufficiently concerned with the fact that that tradition is ever more being eroded by the very changes in the direction of One World which they demand or applaud.

We remain closer to the surface by saying that the conservatives' distrust of the universal and homogeneous state is rooted in their distrust of change, in what is polemically called their “stand-patism,” whereas liberals are more inclined than conservatives to be sanguine regarding change. Liberals are inclined to believe that on the whole change is change for the better, or progress. As a matter of fact, liberals frequently call themselves progressives. Progressivism is indeed a better term than liberalism for the opposite to conservatism. For if conservatism is, as its name indicates, aversion to change or distrust of change, its opposite should be identified with the opposite posture toward change, and not with something substantive like liberty or liberality.

The difficulty of defining the difference between liberalism and conservatism with the necessary universality is particularly great in the United States, since this country came into being through a revolution, a violent change or break with the past. One of the most conservative groups here calls itself Daughters of the American Revolution. The opposition between conservatism and liberalism had a clear meaning at the time at which and in the places in which it arose in these terms. Then and there the conservatives stood for “throne and altar,” and the liberals stood for popular sovereignty and the strictly nonpublic (private) character of religion. Yet conservatism in this sense is no longer politically important. The conservatism of our age is identical with what originally was liberalism, more or less modified by changes in the direction of present-day liberalism. One could go further and say that much of what goes now by the name of conservatism has in the last analysis a common root with present-day liberalism and even with Communism. That this is the case would appear most clearly if one were to go back to the origin of modernity, to the break with the premodern tradition that took place in the seventeenth century, or to the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns.

We are reminded of that quarrel immediately by the fact that the term “liberal” is still used in its premodern sense, especially in the expression “liberal education.” Liberal education is not the opposite of conservative education, but of illiberal education. To be liberal in the original sense means to practice the virtue of liberality. If it is true that all virtues in their perfection are inseparable from one another, the genuinely liberal man is identical with the genuinely virtuous man. According to the now prevailing usage, however, to be liberal means not to be conservative. Hence it is no longer assumed that being liberal is the same as being virtuous or even that being liberal has anything to do with being

virtuous. Being liberal in the original sense is so little incompatible with being conservative that generally speaking it goes together with a conservative posture.

Premodern political philosophy, and in particular classical political philosophy, is liberal in the original sense of the term. It cannot be simply conservative since it is guided by the awareness that all men seek by nature, not the ancestral or traditional, but the good. On the other hand, classical political philosophy opposes to the universal and homogeneous state a substantive principle. It asserts that the society natural to man is the city, that is, a closed society that can well be taken in in one view or that corresponds to man's natural (macroscopic, not microscopic or telescopic) power of perception. Less literally and more importantly, it asserts that every political society that ever has been or ever will be rests on a particular fundamental opinion which cannot be replaced by knowledge and hence is of necessity a particular or particularist society. This state of things imposes duties on the philosopher's public speech or writing which would not be duties if a rational society were actual or emerging; it thus gives rise to a specific art of writing.

In earlier publications I have tried to lay bare the fundamental difference between classical and modern political philosophy. In the present volume I adumbrate that difference in the following manners. First I discuss liberal education and then the question as to the sense in which classical political philosophy can be called liberal. I next illustrate the liberalism of premodern thinkers by elucidating some examples of their art of writing. The most extensive discussion is devoted to Lucretius' poem. In that poem, not to say in Epicureanism generally, premodern thought seems to come closer to modern thought than anywhere else. No premodern writer seems to have been as deeply moved as Lucretius was by the thought that nothing lovable is eternal or sempiternal or deathless, or that the eternal is not lovable. Apart from this, it may suffice here to refer to Kant's presentation of Epicureanism as identical with the spirit of modern natural science prior to the subjection of that science to the critique of pure reason.

Every observer of present-day liberalism must be struck by the very frequent "personal union" of liberalism and value-free social science. One is thus led to wonder whether this union is merely accidental or whether there is not a necessary connection between value-free social science and liberalism, although liberalism is not, as goes without saying, value-free. At any rate, the critical study of present-day social science is no mean part of the critical study of liberalism. The essay entitled "An Epilogue" deals with this subject.

Not much familiarity with political life is needed in order to see that it is particularly difficult for a nonorthodox Jew to adopt a critical

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posture toward liberalism. Even Jews who are politically conservative can be observed to defer to contemporary Jewish "opinion leaders" who can in no sense be described as politically conservative. This state of things induces one to raise questions such as these: In what sense or to what extent is Judaism one of the roots of liberalism? Are Jews compelled by their heritage or their self-interest to be liberals? Is liberalism necessarily friendly to Jews and Judaism? Can the liberal state claim to have solved the Jewish problem? Can any state claim to have solved it? To these questions I address myself in the two statements that conclude this volume.

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