The Straussian Moment

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For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see,
Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be;
Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails,
Pilots of the purple twilight dropping down with costly bales;
Heard the heavens fill with shouting, and there rain'd a ghastly dew
From the nations' airy navies grappling in the central blue;
Far along the world-wide whisper of the south-wind rushing warm,
With the standards of the peoples plunging thro' the thunder-storm;
Till the war-drum throbb'd no longer, and the battle-flags were furl'd
In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.
There the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe,
And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law.

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Locksley Hall"

The twenty-first century started with a bang on September 11, 2001. In those shocking hours, the entire political and military framework of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and indeed of the modern age, with its emphasis on deterrent armies, rational nation-states, public debates, and international diplomacy, was called into question. For how could mere talking or even great force deter a handful of crazy, determined, and suicidal persons who seemingly operated outside of all the norms of the liberal

West? And what needed now to be done, given that technology had advanced to a point where a tiny number of people could inflict unprecedented levels of damage and death?

The awareness of the West's vulnerability called for a new compromise, and this new compromise inexorably demanded more security at the expense of less freedom. On the narrow level of public policy, there needed to be more x-ray machines at airports; more security guards on airplanes; more identification cards and invasions of privacy; and fewer rights for some of the accused. Overnight, the fundamentalist civil rights mania of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which spoke in the language of inviolable individual rights, was rendered an unviable anachronism.

Even as the debate over freedom and security gathered strength, whatever military force could be mustered was used to track down those responsible for the violence of September 11. Despite rapid mobilization, those efforts met with limited success. America's antiquated military was not suited to fight such an enemy, for the enemy needed to be pursued not only in America, or in a handful of terrorist camps in Afghanistan, but to the very ends of the Earth. Even worse, like the Hydra, the enemy proliferated, so that for every slain jihadist, ten more arose to seek martyrdom in perverse emulation.

On the broader level of international cooperation and development, September 11 called for wholly different arrangements. The issue of unilateralism, and of the institutions designed to provide a cover for unilateralism, could be raised publicly by serious people for the first time since 1945. Much has been said elsewhere about the relative roles of the United States and the United Nations in the political sphere, but the underlying debates extend to even more fundamental issues.

For present purposes, it is worth drawing attention to one such fundamental issue, the twentieth-century policy debate about the containment of violence. Following World War II, the centrist consensus on international development called for enormous wealth transfers from the developed to the developing world. Under the aegis of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and an array of other organizations, hundreds of billions of dollars were funneled (in cheap loans or outright grants) to Third World governments, thereby, as the theory went, fostering economic growth and prosperity. But was this consensus right? Are economic incentives in fact powerful enough to contain violence?

Ex ante, wealth transfers made a certain amount of sense in the late 1940s. Those who had taken Marx seriously and were haunted by the specter of communist revolution hoped the wealth transfer apparatus would help win

the Cold War and bring about world peace. For the Rockefellers to keep their fortunes (and their heads), it was perhaps prudent for them to give some of what they had to the wretched of the Earth and make them a little bit less wretched.

But *ex post,* one wonders how policymakers could have been so naïve. Let us set aside the inconvenient fact that the wealth transfer apparatus never worked as advertised, so that the West's wealth was largely squandered on white elephant projects, no real economic development took place, and even in the best of cases the money simply circulated back to the West, ending up in Swiss bank accounts held by Third World dictators. As recent events have illustrated vividly, the real problem with the theory goes much deeper. For when the long-expected blow finally came, it did not come from the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, or from starving peasants in Burkina Faso, or from Tibetan yak herders earning less than a dollar a day. On the contrary, it came from a direction none of the modern theories had predicted: the perpetrators were upper-middle-class Saudi Arabians, often with college degrees and with great expectations. Their mastermind, Osama bin Laden, had inherited a fortune now worth an estimated $250 million, mostly made during the Saudi oil boom of the 1970s. Had he been born in America, bin Laden could have been a Rockefeller.

In this way, the singular example of bin Laden and his followers has rendered incomplete the economically motivated political thought that has dominated the modern West. From *The Wealth of Nations* on the right to *Das Kapital* on the left, and to Hegel and Kant and their many followers somewhere in between, the brute facts of September 11 demand a reexamination of the foundations of modern politics. The openly intellectual agenda of this essay is to suggest what that reexamination entails.

The Question of Human Nature

From the Enlightenment on, modern political philosophy has been characterized by the abandonment of a set of questions that an earlier age had deemed central: What is a well-lived life? What does it mean to be human? What is the nature of the city and humanity? How does culture and religion fit into all of this? For the modern world, the death of God was followed by the disappearance of the question of human nature.

This disappearance had many repercussions. If humans can be approximated as rational economic actors (and, ultimately, even Adam Smith and

Karl Marx agree on this point), then those who seek glory in the name of God or country appear odd; but if such odd people are commonplace and capable of asserting themselves with explosive force, then the account of politics that pretends they do not exist needs to be reexamined.

There is, of course, an older Western tradition, a tradition that offered a less dogmatically economic view of human nature. That older account realized that not all people are so modest and lacking in ambition that they will content themselves, like Voltaire's Candide, with cultivating their gardens. Instead, it recognized that humans are potentially evil or at least dangerous beings; and, while there are vast differences between the Christian virtues of Augustine and the pagan virtues of Machiavelli, neither thinker would have dared lose sight of the problematic nature of humanity.[1]

The most direct method for comprehending a world in which not all human beings are *homo economicus* would therefore appear to involve a return to some version of the older tradition. However, before we try to embark on that return, there is another mystery we must confront: Why did the older tradition fail in the first place? After all, it seemed to ask some obvious and important questions. How could these questions simply be abandoned and forgotten?

On a theoretical level, the older tradition consisted of two radically incompatible streams symbolized by Athens and Jerusalem. An enormous gulf separates Athens from Jerusalem. Pierre Manent summarizes this division in *The City of Man:*

> In the eyes of the citizen, what value is there to the mortification of the Christian, when what matters is not to fall on one's knees but to mount one's horse, and the sins one ought to expiate or rather correct are not the sins one commits against chastity and truth, but military and political errors? In the eyes of the Christian, what value is there to the political and military endeavors of the citizen, when he believes that, victory or defeat, whatever the regime, this world is a vale of tears ravaged by sin and that states are nothing more and better than vast bands of robbers? To each of the two protagonists, the sacrifices the other calls for are vain.[2]

For a long time, in the Middle Ages and thereafter, the West tried to gloss over these conflicts and instead to build on the many things these traditions had in common, but in the long term, like two giant millstones grinding against one another, "city and church . . . wore each other down as they went from conflicts to conciliations. Each one's efforts to return to its original truth had

strangely wrought its own defeat."[3] Neither side ever could win decisively, but in the long term, each side could decisively discredit the other, thus giving rise to the modern "individual" who defines him- or herself by rejecting all forms of sacrifice: "Since the city and the church reproach one another with the vanity of their sacrifice, the individual is the man who rejects each form of sacrifice and defines himself by this refusal."[4]

In practice, this dialectic was never simply or even primarily intellectual. For when one takes these questions seriously, they have serious repercussions, and the same holds for the modern and inverse movement that involved their abandonment.

The early modern era of the West—the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—was characterized by the disintegration of these two older traditions and by ever more desperate attempts to force everything back together into some functioning whole. Where agreement over questions of virtue, the good life, and the true religion was unraveling, the immediate attempt involved forging such an agreement through force. This force escalated in the periods of the Reformation and Counter Reformation, and culminated in the paroxysm of the Thirty Years' War, which remains perhaps the most deadly period in the history of Europe. By some estimates, in Germany, the locus of the conflict, well over half the population was eradicated.

However, at the end of this process, agreement had become more elusive than ever, the differences greater than ever. The violence had failed to create a new unity. This failure was formalized in the Peace of Westphalia, so that 1648 can be fixed as the single year that dates the birth of the modern era. Questions of virtue and the true religion henceforth would be decided by each sovereign. The sovereigns would agree to disagree. Inexorably, questions of virtue and religion became private questions; polite and respectable individuals learned not to talk about them too much, because they could lead to nothing but unproductive conflicts.

For the modern world, questions about the nature of humanity would be viewed on par with the struggle among the Lilliputians about the correct way to cut open an egg. Hobbes, the first truly modern philosopher, boasted of how he deserted and ran away from fighting in a religious war; a cowardly life had become preferable to a heroic but meaningless death.[5] *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* had been an important part of the old tradition; henceforth, it would be seen as nothing more than an old lie.

And so, the Enlightenment undertook a major strategic retreat. If the only way to stop people from killing one another about the right way to open an egg involved a world where nobody thought about it too much, then the

intellectual cost of ceasing such thought seemed a small price to pay. The question of human nature was abandoned because it is too perilous a question to debate.

John Locke: The American Compromise

The new science of economics and the practice of capitalism filled the vacuum created by the abandonment of the older tradition. That new science found its most important proponent in John Locke and its greatest practical success in the United States, a nation whose conception owed so much to Locke that one exaggerates only slightly to describe him as its definitive founder.

We must return to the eighteenth century to appreciate the tremendous change Locke wrought. Revolutionary America was haunted by the fear of religious war and the fanatical imposition of virtue on the entire state. The Declaration of Independence's evocation of "the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" had a counterpoint in the older tradition, in which the first two had not existed and the pursuit of happiness would have seemed inferior to (and certainly much more subjective than) the virtuous life. When one fast-forwards to the America of the 1990s, the larger context of the Founding had been forgotten: America had proved so successful in shaping the modern world that most Americans could no longer recognize the originality and strangeness of its founding conception.

Locke's personal example is instructive of the subtle path toward the liberalism of the American Revolution. Locke's argument proceeds in an understated manner; he does not wish to inflame passions by taking sides in the contentious debates of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But since it would be offensive to suggest that the things that matter most to people are silly or irrelevant, he also must avoid inflaming passions by openly denigrating all those who do take sides. In no place is there a greater need for sensitivity than on the question of religion. Religious passions had led to religious wars, but a passionate repudiation of religion (and of Christianity in particular) did not promise peace. Locke did not need the examples of the French or Russian Revolutions to know this.

And so the philosopher takes a seemingly moderate path. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity,* the philosopher sets out to denounce those "justly decried" atheists who have openly questioned the importance of the rules set for mortals by the deity.[6] But in the process of this denunciation, we learn many new things about those rules. Locke teaches us that the command