

Justice and Relativism

Lyotard, Rorty, Strauss (on Justice)

Lyotard critiques liberal modernity in the form of a political debate in *Lessons in Paganism* (1989a); Lyotard emphasizes the political futility of both the liberal left and the right and argues that lessons in paganism are necessary for *justice in a godless society*. Lyotard traces injustice to the piety of believing in political and historical meta-narratives and grounds his critique in atheism; in the process sounding surprisingly Hobbesian:

If this superstitious fear of spirits were taken away and with it prognostics from dreams, false prophecies, and many other things depending thereon, by which crafty ambitious persons abuse the simple people, men would be much more fitted than they are for civil obedience. (1982, p. 19)

But justice is something closer to civil *disobedience* for Lyotard, and he rejects liberalism not on ethical so much as *aesthetic* grounds.

In contrast, Rorty *affirms* liberals as "people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do" (1989b, xv). Liberals are those who "have abandoned the idea that [their] central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance" and "who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease" (1989b, xv).

Unlike Rorty, Lyotard does not explicitly define liberalism, but he does suggest that liberals believe that people 1) primarily desire comfort 2) should be relatively free to live as they see fit 3) are all equal.

The problem with liberalism is best expressed by Nietzsche (one of Lyotard's primary influences): liberalism stems from a loss of meaning resulting from the death of God (both as a

spiritual and a cultural force.) When people no longer have a purpose worth sacrificing for, concern for personal comfort takes its place. When morality is denied any authority, hedonism takes its place. And when people are all equal, people are equally valueless.

Perhaps this is why Lyotard emphasizes paganism; not to promote yet another religion, or to promote polytheism (the pagan myths are acknowledged as such, hence the atheism) but to persuade us that there *are* purposes worth sacrificing for, there *are* grounds for morality, and that people *are* valuable *even with the death of God*. To illustrate, Lyotard refers to the *Pagus*, or the frontier. Such regions were the habitats of the gods, and the cults which seduced them. The prevailing godlessness was one of open duplicity. The cults deceived and seduced the gods through speech; *speech as a way of producing effects, not professing the truth* (of course one effect may be that of professing the truth.) As the ancient Greek sophist Gorgias defined it, *speech for the just is an art form, for the unjust it is the want to be right* (the difference being that between seducing versus demanding.) And the pagan gods were narrators themselves; demanding not so much a reaction as a reply. Thus, the creative power of making and telling stories is honored rather than any particular story, be it god or cultic.

But if Lyotard *demands* justice, how is his narrative theory anymore than clutching at straws? Rorty for one avoids the trap by suggesting that "liberal political discourse would do well to remain . . . untheoretical and simpleminded" (1989b, p. 121). Admitting no way of justifying belief, Rorty makes no effort to defend liberalism by an appeal to ahistorical criteria; instead he argues liberals should "regard the justification of liberal society simply as a matter of historical comparison (1989b, p. 53). Thus, Rorty affirms liberalism on much the same grounds that Lyotard refutes it (historical meta-narratives.)

But Rorty is caught in his own web: liberal democracy entails an abstract (and universal) public space in which the many debate public law. Unlike Rorty, Lyotard recognizes the many voices that are left out of this public space (women, children, slaves, foreigners, dissidents as in ancient Greece); in addition the liberal economy has its god (money), its mass (discharging debts), and its grace (profit), but it is godless in the sense that it only has respect for “the narrative which tells how narratives are told, listened to, and acted out” (1989a, p. 141).

The antidote Lyotard recommends is a dual strategy of combating liberal economic meta-narratives to seize opportunities to harass both state and capital; against the abuses and exploitation of capitalism use laws and institutions; against the state, maintain the capitalist right to undermine its monopolies:

Destroy narrative monopolies, both as exclusive themes (of parties) and as exclusive pragmatics (exclusive to parties and markets). Take away the privileges the narrator has granted himself. Prove that there is as much power – and not less power – in listening, if you are a narratee, and in acting, if you are the narrated (and let the fools believe that you are singing the praises of servitude when you do so). (1989a, p. 153)

What Lyotard *does not* promote as an antidote is relativism. Relativism is the result of a loss of faith in modernist epistemology; objective knowledge becomes simply one way of looking at things, just ‘telling stories’. However, relativism must legitimate its own claim to be more than just ‘one way of looking at things’ by imposing its own narrative as a meta-narrative, as the way of describing all ways of looking at things (1981, p. 67). Thus, Lyotard critiques relativism as a concealed narrative that in certain cases hides behind the presumption of rational discourse (and poses as a master narrative).

It is worth noting that Lyotard's political alternative is based not on ethical, but *aesthetic* judgments. In this manner Lyotard considers that he is really just restating what is already the case (a politics of opinion):

It is quite clear that today a rational politics is no longer possible. I mean by that the project of a science of politics must be abandoned. Politics is not a matter of science. Then, the only tenable position, as far as I am concerned, is one that I would call 'a politics of judgment,' a sort of 'critique' of political judgment. In other words, a politics that would admit that its realm is that of opinions... I am for, I am against, yes, no. Assent granted or denied. I think that it is this sort of judgment that is put into play by any political judgment. (1985, p. 81)

While Strauss would no doubt agree with Lyotard's critique of liberalism (but perhaps not for the same reasons), he might respond by first asking Lyotard what's nature? The question of justice is the question of natural right as far as Strauss is concerned; in *Natural Right and History* Strauss attempts to account for the idea of natural right (a value standard discoverable in nature.) To have knowledge of natural right is to have knowledge of nature, this requires philosophy. The Old Testament explicitly rejects philosophy, and by consequence the idea of nature (as Strauss rejects theology.) Strauss is in agreement with Lyotard that justice is godlessness but he would question whether an aesthetic politics based on a narrative theory could offer much in the way of justice. Not narrative, but principles are required for justice. And while pagan myths may be in accord with philosophy, it precedes not from nature, but from the gods. It is philosophy that rejects the divine for the natural, and discovers nature, and by consequence natural right.

Regarding Lyotard's rejection of historical meta-narratives Strauss may have no disagreement, but regarding Rorty's claim that there are no ahistorical criterion to judge beliefs Strauss would contend that his arguments are naive: "historicism asserts that all human thoughts

or beliefs are historical, and hence deservedly destined to perish; but historicism itself is a human thought; hence historicism can be of only temporary validity, or it cannot be simply true” (1950, p. 25). Historicists such as Rorty exclude their own *transhistorical* insight from their historical thesis and thus contradict themselves.

As far as Lyotard’s claim that a rational politics is no longer possible, Strauss would assert that might be true for modern instrumental rationalism, but a classical rationalism can and ought to be revived. And a critique of political judgment as Lyotard proposes would be incomplete without a critique of political opinion; for such a critique would be irrelevant without a value standard on which to base it.

For Strauss, liberal modernity is not so much in need of narrative as a conservative reformism in the spirit of Socrates; Lyotard might reply that that’s a story that’s been told before.

Relativism and Historicism

Relativism is generally understood to be the thesis that all points of view are equally valid. In ethics, this amounts to saying that all moralities are equally good; in epistemology it implies that all beliefs, or belief systems, are equally true. Strauss argues relativism is incoherent since it implies the validity even of the view that relativism is false. Strauss’ critique of relativism is focused on its three modern manifestations: logical positivism, historicism, and nihilism. All three *are both products of and a response to* the enlightenment.

Logical Positivism

Strauss considered logical positivism to be in his time the “school which is externally the most powerful in the present-day West” (1989c, p. 22). To give some background: the enlightenment was divided between the rationalists (Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza) who claimed the origin of knowledge is found in the mind, and the empiricists (Locke, Berkeley, Hume) who

claimed that the origin of knowledge was the senses (sense experience). Kant, following the rationalists and empiricists, claimed knowledge originates in the mind (a priori) and is validated in experience (a posteriori), but the truth of this was inaccessible to reason. At the turn of the century, the logical positivists (Russell, Whitehead, early Wittgenstein, Carnap, G. E. Moore) rejected such metaphysical statements as meaningless; or as Strauss puts it, “logical positivism rejects the a priori” (1989c, p. 22). Hence, the logical positivists are caught in a historicist trap that they would like to deny. For without a rational genesis, science can only be considered a historical project of the human organism to predict and control, not discover truth (instrumentalism.)

Strauss argues that this way of accounting for science is bunk in an age of thermonuclear weapons; the developments of science in highly developed industrialized societies are not necessary for human survival, let alone happiness; and even threatens “underdeveloped” societies:

Who still dares to say that the development of those societies, i.e., their radical transformation, the destruction of their traditional way of life, is a necessary condition for those peoples’ living or living well? (1989c, p. 23)

While Strauss traces the origins of logical positivism to Hume, he adds the crucial qualifier that “Hume still viewed human things in the light of man’s unchanging nature; he did not yet conceive of man as an essentially historical being” (1989c, p. 22). Logical positivists supplemented Hume’s critique of reason (which was supplemented with natural belief and natural instinct) with symbolic logic and the theory of probability without offering any grounds for doing so. Or as Strauss puts it, “according to positivism, rational value judgments are impossible” (1989c, p. 23).

In hindsight, Strauss' critique is right on the mark: several developments in theoretical physics and the philosophy of logic themselves called into question the validity of logical positivism (1979, p. 181). Perhaps the most important was Heisenberg's uncertainty principle: the exact position and velocity of a particle cannot be determined simultaneously; the energy level of a particle at a specific point in time cannot be determined simultaneously. The universe is indeterminate and an "observer effect" disturbs reality; empiricism alone cannot account for reality. Logic was also called into question with the logician Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem: *every* logical system is inconsistent *or* incomplete. Perhaps the most damning critique came from within its own camp: Bertrand Russell, along with Northrop Whitehead, attempted to ground logic and mathematics (in *Principia Mathematica*) in order to demonstrate that logic (or set theory) could explain everything. Russell stumbled upon a contradiction now known as Russell's Paradox: the set of all (logical) sets is itself an illogical set, or phrased in a question: is the set of all sets itself a set? As a result, scientists were forced to acknowledge the problems that Strauss raised.

Historicism

Strauss considers modern historicism to be a particular form of positivism "which held that theology and metaphysics had been superseded once and for all by positive science or which identified genuine knowledge of reality with knowledge supplied by the empirical sciences" (1950, p. 16). In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss contrasts classical conventionalism with modern historicism (which emerged in reaction to the French Revolution) in order to account for historicist's critique of natural right (1950, p. 13). Conventionalists were not anti-historical, but they presupposed the distinction between nature and convention as the most fundamental distinction. Modern historicists on the other hand take the relativist position to its ultimately

contradictory conclusions by viewing all human thoughts or beliefs as historically determined.

But historicists are caught in their own web: “historicism asserts that all human thoughts or beliefs are historical, and hence deservedly destined to perish; but historicism itself is a human thought; hence historicism can be of only temporary validity, or it cannot be simply true” (1950, p. 25).

Historicists responded to political revolutions of the enlightenment era by “insisting on the wisdom and on the need of preserving or continuing the traditional order (1950, p. 13).

Historicists recognized that abstract or universal principles threaten the established order. Yet, the historicist is unable to derive any norms from history; “Thus all standards suggested by history as such prove to be fundamentally ambiguous and therefore unfit to be considered standards...Historicism culminates in nihilism (1950, p. 18).

Nihilism

Perhaps more than any other philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche forced people to face the implications of relativism. As Strauss states, “Friedrich Nietzsche is *the* philosopher of relativism: the first thinker who faced the problem of relativism in its full extent and pointed to the way in which relativism can be overcome” (1989c, p. 24).

Relativism ultimately leads to nihilism according to Nietzsche. Nihilism can be understood as 1) the belief that norms or standards cannot be justified by rational argument; and (2) a mood of despair over the meaninglessness of human existence. Nietzsche refers to both these meanings in his God is dead thesis (1977, p. 57).

Strauss specifically focuses attention on German nihilism as a “rejection of the principles of civilization as such” (1999, p. 365). The anti-enlightenment character of nihilism is summed up by Strauss with a quote from Faust, “Just despise reason and science, the very highest power of

man, and I have got you completely” (1999, p. 364). This critique of modern ideals are of English origin; Strauss concludes that “it is the English, and not the Germans, who *deserve* to be, and to *remain*, an *imperial* nation” (1999, p. 373). Rather startling, Strauss suggests that what others might consider to be a modern liberal democratic nation (with a puppet monarchy) is in fact imperial (and hence, not essentially relativistic, historicist, or nihilistic); and thus offers the English as an example of a modern alternative to relativistic politics.

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