

## Jaffa's *Thomism and Aristotelianism* After Seventy Years

John Grant

This paper examines Harry Jaffa's 1952 work *Thomism and Aristotelianism* in light of Jaffa's later work and Strauss's philosophic project. This perspective reveals tensions between Strauss's understanding and that of the mature Jaffa. In *Thomism and Aristotelianism*, Jaffa partially follows Strauss's treatment of Thomas Aquinas, particularly in his critique of the alleged conflation of reason and revelation in Thomas's treatment of Aristotle and his doctrine of natural law. Jaffa also follows Strauss in defending and promoting classical (in this case Aristotelian) political science from contemporary positivism. I think Jaffa and Strauss both intended to attack contemporary social science while making sure not to be confused with contemporary neo-Thomists.

But Jaffa does not simply follow Strauss in *Thomism and Aristotelianism*. I believe that critical elements of Strauss's overall approach are missing from Jaffa's argument. Professor Jaffa does not address the historical contexts or specific theological-political situations in which Aristotle and Thomas wrote, and he manifests no real interest in the question *quid sit deus* that is necessarily the fundamental question in any investigation of the meaning of the natural law. Jaffa's understanding of Thomas and the idea of the natural law in *Thomism and Aristotelianism* is hence incomplete. Strauss on the other hand evidenced a great deal of awareness of the theological-political context and a concern for relating the nature of God to the natural law in his treatments of the problem of natural right and natural law.

Jaffa's later work (e.g., his books on Lincoln and a number of shorter pieces) demonstrated a more robust awareness of the key philosophic questions in the same vein as Strauss's treatments of the idea of the natural law. In these works Jaffa does address the importance of the historical context for understanding the theological-political problem (and hence the meaning of the texts under consideration), and the question *quid sit deus* has a prominent place in his later writings.

The principal theme of *Thomism and Aristotelianism* is the defense of the possibility of classical, particularly Aristotelian,) political science against two main opponents: contemporary positivistic and relativistic social science on the one hand and what Jaffa takes to be the conflation of reason and revelation in Thomism on the other. Professor Jaffa

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reserves most of his efforts for his attempt to demonstrate that Thomas does not adequately distinguish faith from reason.

Jaffa was certainly taking his bearings from the work of Leo Strauss, his great teacher, or at least a partial view of Strauss's arguments. Jaffa did not, at least in *Thomism and Aristotelianism*, adopt Strauss's full perspective on Thomas or on how one should read texts or properly understand the nature of political philosophy. Professor Jaffa never offered any kind of comprehensive reconsideration of *Thomism and Aristotelianism* or Thomas, but I think his later works demonstrate a much closer affinity to Strauss's understanding of the proper philosophic approach. To borrow a distinction employed by Strauss in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, to be precise we must say that in *Thomism and Aristotelianism* Jaffa followed Strauss's exoteric teaching; Jaffa's later work adheres much more closely to Strauss's philosophic or esoteric intention.

To elaborate on Jaffa's debt to Strauss's teaching: *Thomism and Aristotelianism* was published in 1952. Strauss's *Natural Right and History* was published in 1953; a number of the chapters had been published separately between 1950-1952. It is obvious that some critical arguments from *Natural Right and History* are very much in the foreground of *Thomism and Aristotelianism*. First, the critique Jaffa offers of contemporary social science is a prominent theme in *Natural Right and History*. Second, Jaffa follows and expands upon a number of Strauss's remarks on Thomas. I should say he follows the thrust of Strauss's remarks: he does not seem to note that Strauss had criticized Thomas tentatively, at least on the issue of *synderesis* or the natural inclination to seek what is good and avoid what is evil. Strauss's critique of Thomas in *Natural Right and History* can be boiled down to two key points: first, Thomas conflates reason and revelation. Strauss goes so far as to say that in the Thomistic doctrine theology absorbs the natural law; hence the natural law is no longer grounded in the unassisted human reason or philosophy. In other words, Thomas doesn't really have a natural law doctrine; his teaching is dependent on revelation. The natural law is not known by the unassisted human reason. Second, Thomas's natural law teaching is alleged to be rigid and dogmatic: it denies the flexibility necessary to proper statesmanship. Surprisingly, given his harsh criticism of the early modern philosophers in *Natural Right and History* (among other places) Strauss even praises the early modern philosophers, Montesquieu in particular, for rebelling against Thomism to restore the independence of

philosophy from theology and some latitude to statesmanship; this latitude is allegedly denied by the inflexibility of Strauss's Thomas. The early moderns are closer in spirit to the classics than Thomas!

Jaffa follows and expands on Strauss's criticism of Thomas on these points. He maintains, with Strauss in *Natural Right and History*, that Thomas confuses reason and revelation, especially regarding *synderesis* and the natural and supernatural ends of man.<sup>1</sup> He also argues that the Thomistic natural law is inflexible when compared to Aristotelian natural right.<sup>2</sup>

Jaffa also follows Strauss in *Thomism and Aristotelianism* concerning two general points relating to Thomism. First, Strauss indicates that contemporary followers of Thomas fail to relate Thomas's thought to the two issues of utmost importance in our day: the conceptions of science and history which dominate recent thought. Strauss argued that contemporary neo-Thomists failed to address the problems of positivism and historicism.<sup>3</sup> Failure to recognize the power of these ideas leads to an inability to understand past thinkers (including Thomas) as they understood themselves; if we don't confront the dominant thoughts of our time, we tend to adopt unthinkingly those thoughts and distort the thought of the past.<sup>4</sup> Not reckoning with the leading thoughts of one's time also precludes the rebirth of authentic philosophy; we must dig our way out of what Strauss called, in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, the "pit beneath the cave" by reading old books and understanding those old books in the way their authors intended them to be understood. If we do not do this, we will mistake pseudo-philosophies for genuine philosophizing.<sup>5</sup> Jaffa was trying to understand Aristotle and Thomas as they understood themselves; he certainly offers a vigorous defense of Aristotle in light of contemporary social science in *Thomism and Aristotelianism*. Jaffa did seek to liberate his mind from the dominant positivism of the day; as we will see, his effort would

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 164, and Harry V. Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism: A Study of the Commentary by Thomas Aquinas on the Nicomachean Ethics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 146ff., allege that Thomas's discussion of the two ends implies the insufficiency of natural reason; natural reason is said to point beyond itself as it is insufficient.

<sup>2</sup> Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism*, 182-84.

<sup>3</sup> See Strauss, "Review: Anton Pegis, ed., *Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*," *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 285-86.

<sup>4</sup> See Strauss's critique of W. von Leyden in "Locke's Doctrine of Natural Law," *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 197-220.

<sup>5</sup> Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 154-55.

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have borne more fruit had he also sought to grasp the historical context necessary to grappling with the theological-political problem in general and the question *quid sit deus* in particular.

Jaffa's spirited attempt to prove that Thomas conflates reason and revelation and disentangle reason (or Aristotle) from the clutches of revelation is also very much related to a part of Strauss's project. Strauss maintained that "in our age it is much less urgent to show that political philosophy is the indispensable handmaid of theology than to show that political philosophy is the rightful queen of the social sciences ... even the highest lawcourt in the land is more likely to defer to the contentions of social science than to the Ten Commandments as the words of the living God."<sup>6</sup> Strauss admits that it may be necessary to argue that philosophy is the handmaid of theology—hence reminding us of the importance of context; at the time Strauss and Jaffa thought it was necessary, due to the circumstances, to focus on the independence of reason from both social science and theology. We will see that Jaffa altered his emphasis on this point in later years—more on this in a moment. This reorientation was philosophic.

Jaffa in *Thomism and Aristotelianism* follows Strauss's argument closely in a number of ways; but it is very important to note that he does not simply follow Strauss on Thomas or Strauss's larger view of how to read texts or understand the nature of political philosophy. First, Strauss offers us a strikingly different portrayal of Thomas's natural law doctrine in his chapter "On Natural Law" in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* when compared to the discussion of the same subject in *Natural Right and History*. In this essay, Strauss does not argue that Thomas conflates reason and revelation; *synderesis* is not even mentioned. There is also no allegation that the Thomistic natural law doctrine is inflexible or denies the necessary latitude for proper statesmanship. It may not be too much of an exaggeration to posit that Strauss proffers a thin and tendentious account of Thomas in *Natural Right and History*; in "On Natural Law" the reader encounters a richer, nuanced, and neutral or honest treatment.

The young Professor Jaffa did not take account of the theological-political context in *Thomism and Aristotelianism*. In other words, he simply compared the pertinent texts of Aristotle and Thomas without taking into account the difference between the polytheistic, post-Sophistic Enlightenment world inhabited by Aristotle and the medieval world

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<sup>6</sup> Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 978), 1.

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dominated by the idea of the Biblical God. The older Professor Jaffa takes the historical, political-theological context much more seriously, thus making it possible to comprehend fully the Aristotelian dictum that all natural right is changeable.<sup>7</sup> To put it simply, the young Professor Jaffa did not ask himself if Aristotle would have written the *Ethics* in the same way if he was writing in the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

Strauss often wrote in the same manner as the young Jaffa—it is enough to consider the comparison of ancients and moderns in the title essay of *What Is Political Philosophy?*<sup>9</sup> or the bulk of *Natural Right and History*. In these works, the texts and arguments of the authors are generally treated in abstraction from the very different theological-political situations in which they lived and wrote. But Strauss was careful to note the importance of the theological-political context: he even discusses the importance of context in *Natural Right and History*. For example, he points out that the idea of the City of God diminishes the importance of the best regime, and Christianity makes the study of natural law independent of an investigation in the nature of the best regime possible.<sup>8</sup> The importance of context is the theme of the chapter “Maimonides’ Statement on Political Science” in *What Is Political Philosophy?*<sup>9</sup> In that place Strauss explains the Maimonidean teaching on the distinction between the Greek world, where human beings were governed by laws made by wise men, and the medieval world, where men are governed by divine law.

The historical context and the relation of that context to the theological-political situation is absolutely essential to the possibility of the natural law: Strauss notes that the key to the natural law doctrine is a conception of divine providence which supplies divine sanctions for obedience and disobedience to the requirements of virtue.<sup>9</sup> This is the critical distinction between the classical natural right doctrine and the idea of natural law. The advent of monotheism and a cosmopolitan political context make a cogent natural law doctrine possible. By way of contrast, the Stoic natural law doctrine is not coherent, because there is no divine lawgiver who enforces the natural law; god is only a corporeal principle.

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<sup>7</sup> See Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War* (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), chap. 2; *The American Founding as the Best Regime: The Bonding of Civil and Religious Liberty* (Claremont, CA: The Claremont Institute, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 144.

<sup>9</sup> Strauss, “On Natural Law,” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

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Professor Jaffa, in *Thomism and Aristotelianism*, evidenced no interest in the relation between natural right and natural law when seen in the light of the radically altered theological-political situation of Thomas's day.

The young Professor Jaffa also shows little concern for the question "*quid sit deus*" (what is a god?) in *Thomism and Aristotelianism*. Jaffa was aware that the Thomistic natural law doctrine requires a divine lawgiver, but he does not investigate what kind of deity would be required for the existence of a coherent natural law teaching. For instance, a willful God, a God "who shall be what he shall be," cannot be the lawgiver who promulgates a natural law, which is by definition a law knowable to the unassisted human reason. A God who is beyond good and evil would be unknowable aside from His particular deeds and ordinances, and those deeds and ordinances would be unpredictable or changeable. Jaffa was content with demonstrating the fact that there was no divine lawgiver in the case of Aristotelian natural right: this was enough to show the apparent incompatibility of Thomas and Aristotle. A neglect of the theological-political context led Jaffa to fail to see the full meaning of the Aristotelian teaching that all natural right is changeable; in other words, what is right by nature will have a different "look" in different contexts.

Strauss, on the other hand, was deeply concerned with the question "*quid sit deus*" throughout his career. This is evident in his early *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, his lecture from late 1940's "Reason and Revelation," and his very late book *Socrates and Aristophanes*.

The older or mature Jaffa altered his understanding of the nature of political philosophy and the proper way to interpret texts to follow the way of thinking of his teacher much more closely. This is not to say that Jaffa changed his approach due to the study of Strauss's books; I know of no evidence that Jaffa carefully studied the relevant texts of Strauss. But how Jaffa arrived at this new, superior understanding is not important—the important point is that he did so.

The critique of the Thomistic natural law doctrine from the perspective of Aristotle in *Thomism and Aristotelianism* was incomplete because Jaffa had not read Aristotle as literally as he did in his later career. In his mature work, the idea that natural right is changeable is linked to the theological-political problem explicitly, particularly in chapter 2 of his *magnum opus*, *A New Birth of Freedom*, where Jaffa provides us with a fascinating examination of the theological-political history of the West through a discussion of authors such as Dante

and Shakespeare as a necessary background to elucidating the meaning of the social compact theory of the American founding. The whole chapter is an extended analysis of the relation between natural right and theological-political context. We also see evidence of Jaffa's turn to the importance of historical context in his claim that Aristotle would have written something very much like Locke's *Second Treatise* if Aristotle had lived in the seventeenth century.<sup>10</sup> This is very far from the decontextualized treatment of texts and philosophic doctrines in *Thomism and Aristotelianism* (not to mention *Natural Right and History*).

Jaffa's late work also manifests his deep concern with the question "*quid sit deus*," a concern not evident in *Thomism and Aristotelianism*. Jaffa's arguments in essays such as "Leo Strauss, the Bible, and Political Philosophy" about the Biblical God, and how revelation and reason both disagree and agree, are profound. One might compare the foregoing work with Strauss's "Progress or Return" to see the similarity in approach of the mature Jaffa and the mature Strauss; of course Jaffa's moralism was more overt than Strauss', but that moralism was profoundly philosophic. Jaffa understood that in our time the philosophic defense of what is often termed traditional morality is more philosophic than the skepticism appropriate to a Socrates. As Rousseau understood well, the Socratic rationalist will appear under the guise of a Cato in the appropriate circumstances.<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, Jaffa's moralism was often not appreciated by his interlocutors. Walter Berns specifically attacked Jaffa's spiritedness as unphilosophic.

Jaffa's thought experiment, in "Who Owns the Copyright to the Universe," about the possibility of a contemporary natural right doctrine that depends neither on modern science (e.g. evolution) or monotheism is another example of a deep engagement with the theological-political problem.

The later Jaffa was less concerned, which is not to say that he had no concern, about the conflation of reason and revelation. Rather than aiming to demonstrate clearly the boundary between the two, Jaffa wished to focus on how they can and should work together against their common enemy—modern nihilism. Nihilism denies the possibility of either reason or revelation possibly providing an authentic account of how one is to live; the mature Jaffa was interested in defending the idea that both reason or Socratic rationalism and the Biblical

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<sup>10</sup> See Jaffa, "Aristotle and Locke in the American Founding," *Claremont Review of Books* 1, no. 2 (Winter 2001).

<sup>11</sup> See Harry Neumann, "Is Philosophy Still Possible?" *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 36, no. 4 (October 1972): 545-65.

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revelation provide us with sound guidance about how to live. This concern is different from that of the young Jaffa and the leading "East Coast" Straussians, who consistently dwell on the incompatibility between reason and revelation. This contrast is evident if one compares the late Jaffa's treatment of revelation and morality with that of Thomas Pangle in his *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham*.

The radical character of the mature Jaffa's defense of the Biblical revelation can be seen in his *New York Times* review of the Bartlett/Collins translation of Aristotle's *Ethics*. Jaffa took this occasion to emphasize, contrary to the argument he made in *Thomism and Aristotelianism*, the harmony of reason and revelation in general and Aristotle and Thomas in particular. The difference between Aristotelian magnanimity and Biblical humility is minimized; Professor Jaffa goes so far as to suggest that Aristotle's conception of nature "requires a supernatural correlate, the afterlife."

Jaffa helps us to see the proper understanding of the philosophic endeavor for genuine knowledge: sometimes we must look at things (e.g., reason and revelation) together, and sometimes we must look at them apart in order to comprehend fully the different aspects of what Plato called the ideas or the permanent problems. Serious students of political philosophy and the study of the American regime are indebted to Harry Jaffa for the rich insights of his works as well as the deep understanding of the permanent problems.