

EL PLACER DE PENSAR

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Respuesta de Ira Straus a Carlos Escudé respecto de la cuestión de los puentes entre el Ser y el Deber Ser, a propósito del Documento de Trabajo N° 278 de Escudé, intitulado “Cultural Superiority and the Just War”

Comments by Ira Straus to Carlos Escudé, on the issue of the bridges between the Is and the Ought, à propos Escudé’s Working Paper # 278 on “Cultural Superiority and the Just War”

Texto de Carlos Escudé - I shall first make my case for ethical superiority and the demands it poses. The proposition that holds that all human individuals have essentially the same rights and transcendent value is a libertarian matrix that was discovered, was lost time and again, was recovered as many times as lost, and remains in the back of all human minds to be rediscovered by whatever society or culture has not yet done so. It is of necessity anchored in a natural law conception that had its origins in Classical Greece, was adopted by Scholasticism during the Christian Middle Ages, and was cast into its modern form by the Enlightenment. Natural law establishes a bridge between the realms of the Is and of the Ought. Human life is a fact and a value at the same time, inasmuch as death is a self-evident physical reality, and the paramount value of life is a self-evident normative truth.

Respuesta de Ira Straus - *That's Hobbes' atheist and ultra-pessimist version of the bridge. I prefer the more agnostic version, a more indirect bridge from fact to value, which I more or less derived from Hume and Russell: that the value of life flows from the fact that we are a rational species, capable of asking what is the ultimate value of things, is there any Good in Itself and how to arrive at it; a question which necessarily includes doubting whether our own existence is worthwhile; and this capacity to ask and investigate the question, potentially objectively despite our inherent bias, provides the reason for thinking that our existence is more likely to be productive of Positive or Justified values than would our non-existence. I'm occasionally bothered though by the counter-arguments: that our prejudice in favor of our own existence is too great for us ever to admit it if we are Bad in Itself, or figure out what to do about it; and we are*

anyway producing such capacities for destruction and self-destruction that we may end up destroying not just ourselves but all other species capable of intelligent thought. It would have been better to destroy ourselves at a time when our means were more primitive and would have left the other advanced species to survive. Or if we allow technology to develop much further, maybe we'll develop the means to destroy all life altogether, and the very possibility of a renewed evolution of intelligent life on the planet; and discover it in a form that is bound to proliferate and get used. Indeed the means of destruction of the entire universe -- and eventual development and use of those means -- may be inevitably encompassed in the final discovery of unified field theory, just as the atomic bomb was inherent in the discovery of general and special relativity. At this point I begin hoping for the existence of parallel universes and other quantum fantasies. But maybe we'll find the way to destroy all the universes at once. The entire universe of universes. At that point I would be left to hope for a God outside of the range of all our quanta possibilities, who can dream up other dreams after we've destroyed our own vast range of them.... By the way, these possibilities are just as much an argument against your Hobbesian version of natural law as against my neo-Humeian one. In general, I think the Hobbesian version is weaker, because it leaves the question of the justification of life unexamined, and most philosophers quite reasonably say that this justification is something that deserves to be questioned.

Aristotle held that only "the good life" is worth living. I'm not quite sure what the criteria are for the good life, but anyway Leo Strauss agreed with Aristotle, adding perhaps a certain demonic Nietzschean tinge; he was against Hobbes for favoring all life, a view which Strauss deplored as a "better Red than dead" view, surrender propaganda, craven slavish cowardice. Socrates held that "the unexamined life is not worth living"; here is a more precise root of the view I was expressing above and attributing (maybe wrongly?) to Hume and Russell. Humanity's existence is justified because it produces "examined lives", not among all people to be sure or even a majority, but some nevertheless; and these in turn develop enough influence, because they see farther into the depths of things, to justify the species.

This in turn justifies the growth of human life-powers not quite unconditionally, but (a) in conditions of liberty of thought, particularly freedom to examine the "meaning"

or "purpose" (or lack thereof) of life, and (b) in conditions of adequate control of means of destruction of thought and life. Defining "adequate control" is hard. Hobbes might have been able to help here, but he was unaware of the problem. Socrates similarly never had the misfortune to see the destructive power which "examination" would produce; it could have led him to wonder - as it led Einstein to wonder - whether it was all worth it. Of course he wanted examination of life more than examination of things, the preferred sport of other philosophers against whom he was reacting; perhaps this would have led him today to something like the Streitian view that the instruments of mutual political control and social organization need to catch up with and get ahead of the instruments of physical control and destruction. In any case, he could not have imagined that an ideological and structural situation of nationalism would produce something approaching a *laissez-faire* approach toward dissemination of techniques of mass destruction.

In the end, the Socratic, "examined life" line of reasoning also provides a kind of justification for Hobbes' pro-life and pro-government-qua-security brand of natural law, but in a more subtle and conditional manner than Hobbes' own, and in my view, a more sustainable manner. It is life + liberty that is justified. Sound natural law justifies the internally solid and balanced state, not a mentally unbalanced Leviathan. We should remember Leibniz's caution that no actual state was ever constructed on Hobbes' principles, and if one were, it could not endure. Locke came back partway to balance; Hume, building on the Scottish Enlightenment, did it better, by a more balanced conception of human nature.

Hume absorbs Hobbes' arguments - about the falsity of ideologies that slide from *Is* to *Ought*, from *Power* to *Right*; about the chimerical character of the standard scholastic arguments for the existence of God; about the security dilemma - some of which Hobbes built through the construct of the "individual conceived in isolation". But at the same time Hume recovers the roundedness of Aristotle's concept of man as a social animal; for him the Hobbesian dialectics of the individual-in-isolation are useful only as a thought-experiment.

The *Is-Ought* distinction, of course, is common to Hume and Hobbes, it is simply stated more delightfully in Hume. I think Leo Strauss is right that Hobbes still has a

conception that moves from Is to Ought, but in a different, much more subtle, dialectical way than in the ideologies of traditional societies that move there directly (and Strauss is essentially arguing in favor of a reversion to a traditionalist reverence for the concrete social Is as also an Ought). Hume also has a conception of such a bridge, despite his authorship of the Is-Ought distinction; having argued that the Will is derived from Is-things (needs, interests, wishes, emotions, sentiments) not from Ought-things (scholastic reasoning about the Good in Itself), he then makes a seemingly non-logical statement that this Is as it Ought to be. But he carefully selects the sentiments which he wishes to rule the Reason and Will, choosing sentiments of mutual sympathy as the guiding ones, upon which it was possible to build a mild modern version of natural law. Taking a mild view of human nature, with a favorable balance between its virtues and vices, he nevertheless favored balancing structures in politics because of the danger of mutual sympathies -- in themselves virtues not vices -- running amok and producing collective opinions that go off the deep end. He still has something in common with Socrates, applauding the saving minority that lives an examined life. Hume's political essays are devoted to keeping society developing in freedom through its balances among factions, and in the essay on the Natural History of Religion, there is a beautiful conclusion about keeping space for individuals to think freely in the interstices between the massive mounds of religious faith and sects that dominate in most parts of society.

Needless to say, Hume is no nihilist, nor Hobbes, although there are tinges of nihilism here and there in Hobbes. (The elements of nihilism are not because of Hobbes' sometimes-clear Is-Ought distinction, but because of the passages where he writes as if Is and Ought were the same thing, equating Power with Law, saying there is no law at all without power, no covenant without the sword, and God creates Good by his fiat rather than by conformity to reason or nature. Here Hobbes is directly opposite to Socrates, for whom Good exists in itself prior to God's doing it. The reason is that Hobbes is supporting Protestant theology against Catholic scribes with their version of natural law which Hobbes hated. As usual with Hobbes, he got carried away with his polemic and his clever lines, and went much too far). Strauss is wrong in accusing them, and practically all of modernity, of nihilism. In this, Strauss is writing a variant on German romantic nationalist doctrine, with its obsessive fears of the decadence of modernity, and its

appeals to either classical antiquity or the Middle Ages as the antidote to modern decadence; and is trying to persuade the rest of the Western world to join in that mentality, writing off modernity as nihilism-prone. It is a demagogic attack, grossly indiscriminate, failing to seriously examine all the subtle variants of Is-Ought distinction and Is-Ought bridging.

Leo Strauss seems to be arguing instead that the only viable version of an Is-Ought connection, the only one not subject to degeneration into nihilism, is the most naive, unsubtle version -- either the medieval one where the Ought is embedded directly in the Is, because all authority comes from God and the social structure is seen as organically corresponding to the religion; or preferably (for Strauss) the classical one, where the Founders of the Polity unite Is and Ought by being gods themselves or else close to the gods, and the Is of the political structure is the same as the Ought because derived from the founder-gods.

The near-deification of the American Founding Fathers is appealing to Strauss as the kind of myth that we need to hold onto to stave off modern decadence and for at least awhile keep the masses obeying the laws, even if the natural law of the American Founders is degenerative because Madisonian i.e. based on balance among common men not on striving for Excellence as a good Aristotelian classicist would. (This reference to Excellence in opposition to the Ordinary sounds to me more like Nietzsche than Aristotle, who in politics favored moderation.) Never mind the brazen unbelievability in the modern world of any myth of derivation of government from the gods, and patent untruth of saying the American government was formed by closeness to God when the Founders were the most agnostic of all generations of Americans. These realities make such a pretension enormously vulnerable to much faster "degeneration" than a naturalistic justification for our government would be; and it tends to degenerate in both of two directions -- extremism because of myth run amok without balance, and nihilism because of loss of faith in the myth. Nihilism of course is not a consequence of loss of faith per se, but if people are taught that the only alternative to this faith is nihilism -- and most faiths teach this, and Strauss supports them in teaching it -- then lots of them really will become nihilistic or suicidal upon losing faith. A poor girl in my Russian philosophy class in grad school argued in favor of Dostoevsky and his novels portraying people who lose

faith as logically going crazy, killing their father or landlord or an old woman or committing suicide. Then she committed suicide. A true story. I argued Dostoevsky was nuts; the professor argued he was profound, and cited statistics showing lots of criminals think there is no God so they can do anything. I answered that if Christianity obviously isn't able to hold their belief, given the elementary modern knowledge that everyone gets in high school science, we had better teach more about natural law instead and stop telling people that they would be profound to become criminals if they were to lose their faith in God. So the argument went. Who encouraged her to commit suicide?

The argument for a myth in favor of founding father-gods, uniting Is with Ought, is the exact opposite of an evolutionary epistemology such as yours, in which we learn better with time, including learning more subtle versions of Is-Ought connection. Such learning starts with the elemental Is-Ought distinction, which rejects the direct Is = Ought equation of traditional society and power structures; then moves on to look to find subtle, dialectical connections instead, e.g. the connection between the Is of thinking and the Ought of thinking about what ought to be. Socrates was the founder of this whole line of distinction, not just distinguishing Is from Ought, but God from good: the gods do it because it is good, he said, it is not made good simply because the gods do it. The Russian existentialist Lev Shevtsov, following Nietzsche, called this the shared view of all philosophy and the original murder of God; Leo Strauss has something in common with this Nietzschean view, unlike normal Enlightenment modernity which builds on Socrates. The Is-Ought distinction is not nihilism; only an absolute Is-Ought chasm, in which no bridge at all is allowed between them no matter with how many dialectical turns, would be nihilism. Strauss is not the heir of Socrates; Hume might be.