Leo Strauss, George Grant, and Historicism

Over the past several decades, thoughtful students of political philosophy have become increasingly interested in a small but influential group of conservative thinkers—thinkers with distinctly pre-modern or classical approaches to understanding political order. Of these thinkers, Leo Strauss has probably gained the greatest reputation, and perhaps the largest following of any of the post-war classical revivalists. His defense of Platonic and Aristotelian reason and the life of virtue in the face of “progressivist” and totalitarian irrationality has truly struck a chord among students searching for a more profound purpose to human existence; one that transcends the positivistic assumptions of contemporary social science. Indeed, it is hard to disagree with Laurence Berns when he says that the contemporary discipline of political philosophy owes a tremendous debt to Leo Strauss (Berns 1978, 1-2). The classical authors are once again a reputable area of study, and followers of Strauss are continuing to provide serious challenges to the prevailing orthodoxy of democratic liberalism.

This is not to say that the interpretive methods and conclusions of Strauss and his disciples are in all cases the most appropriate and convincing, even from within a classical perspective. Strauss has indeed led a large number of students down a path which promises (and delivers) a genuine intellectual renewal. But it is important to emphasize the general direction of this path; Strauss is but one individual voice of renewal, one possibility among many. Strauss himself, like any thinker of rank, would not expect those who hear his arguments to believe that his own distinctive approach to pre-modern thought is the last word on the subject. For this reason, it is discouraging to witness today some of the most competent disciples of Strauss adhering to an intellectual dogmatism that seems at times to betray the spirit of Strauss’s own creative philosophical adventure. Even if one agrees wholeheartedly with Strauss’ fundamental rejection of certain premises of modern thought, one need not necessarily agree that the typically “Straussian” orthodoxy which has developed over the decades is the only legitimate path down which future research must traverse. With this in mind, the argument in the following essay will focus on the work of a lesser-known disciple of Strauss: the Canadian political philosopher George Parkin Grant. An examination of Grant will show that acceptance of certain fundamen-
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tals of Straussian thought need not lock one in the box of contemporary Straussian orthodoxy. It is possible to preserve (and even to advance) the spirit of Strauss’ own creative enterprise—that of restoring political and spiritual order to Western civilization—by breaking some traditional molds.

Much of Strauss’ theoretical concern stems from his disillusionment over the abandonment of an unconditional distinction between right and wrong among modern thinkers. According to Strauss, what is lacking is any substantive conviction concerning natural right, or those permanent moral and ethical principles not of merely human contrivance that can provide us with an intelligible guide toward the proper ordering of our existence. For Strauss, much of the personal and political nihilism of the twentieth century stems from this lack of any standard “independent of positive right and higher than positive right... a standard with reference to which we can judge of the ideals of our own as well as of any other society” (Strauss 1953, 2-3). And why has this abandonment of natural right taken place? For Strauss, the answer has to do with the role of history and historicist thought in the development of nineteenth and twentieth century social science.

Under the influence of an impressive array of historical data and analysis, European intellectual life had become influenced and later dominated by the contention that all human thought is radically contingent. That is, the diversity and bewildering change that was revealed by the historical sciences led many intellectuals to assume that the ideas of the past were bound absolutely by the particular historical limitations of the age, and such limitations can never be overcome by any human effort (Strauss 1953, 21). This historicism, especially in its more radical and nihilistic forms, meant that no ideas—including ideas about natural right—can ever claim any sort of universal validity. Strauss, however, objects wholeheartedly to historicist assumptions. In his mind the conclusions of the historicist do not lead to “enlightenment,” but rather leave the thinker without any rational guidance in ordering his personal or political existence: “A single comprehensive view is imposed on us by fate: the horizon within which all our understanding and orientation take place is produced by the fate of the individual or of his society” (Strauss 1953, 27).

As a result, political philosophy itself becomes impossible. The philosopher is rendered powerless before the practical exigencies of his own historical situation—if it is his fate he may not change it by an appeal to a higher standard or an alternative vision of the good. Natural right and justice, in other words, can no longer be the basis for political order.

Strauss therefore finds himself compelled to posit an alternative to the historicist outlook. He is convinced, of course, that a knowledge of universal principles of right is indeed possible. The question then becomes: precisely how is this knowledge obtained? The key, he says, is to go right to the source—to read, analyze, and study the greatest proponents and articulators of natural right. Strauss is convinced that the greatest thinkers throughout the ages also recognized that a grasp of universals was possible, and that such truths could in fact be communicated to others, despite the pretensions of the surrounding society. The difficulty, however, is this: philosophers in the past have found that such communication will inevitably lead to a clash between themselves (as representatives of universal truth) and the surrounding mass society (as representative of man’s prideful claim to be his own source of truth). As a result the prudent among political philosophers will desire to protect both themselves and society from the disruptive consequences of the encoun-
ter. Therefore the best political minds will often practice the art of telling “noble lies.” According to Strauss, thinkers of rank will refrain from an outright exposition of the raw truth about natural right as they know it; rather, they will employ the “ductus obliquus” as a device to shield the truth from an ill-educated and undisciplined public, while at the same time protecting themselves from the tragedy of the Socratic fate (Strauss 1952).

Anyone who wishes to study and learn from such authors, therefore, must be aware of the philosopher’s technique. For instance, one must look with skepticism upon the philosopher’s exoteric concessions to cultural and historical norms. According to Strauss any preoccupation with the vicissitudes of history, including the philosopher’s own particular conditions and circumstances, tends to pose as a barrier to receiving the intended message about universals. The task of interpretation is not to understand the thinker in the context of his own time, nor in the context of later historical developments. These are false paths preferred by the philosophical novice; they do not do justice to the strict logical process used by the great minds. Strauss would seem to prefer that one focus almost exclusively on the rational deciphering of the textual arguments at hand, and do so dispassionately as possible, i.e. with a minimum of personal, historical, or cultural prejudice (Strauss 1953, 308-09). The object is to be guided solely by reason, as Strauss understands it—to allow the great thinker to convince us of the transcendent, theoretical truth that he himself has discerned. As Strauss has put it, the student of natural right must make the effort to understand the arguments of a great philosopher “as he himself understood [them].”

As a consequence of this approach, there has emerged within Straussian circles a tendency to emphasize two distinct and almost irreconcilable “poles” or approaches to political thought: the “ancient” or non-historicist approach and the “modern” or historicist approach. At some risk of oversimplification, one may say that the former approach employs a rationalist epistemology that promises to reward the careful reader of a text with an adequate if not comprehensive knowledge of universal truths. As Strauss would interpret it, the latter approach holds that non-rational forces, such as those stemming from uncontrollable human passion or unpredictable accidents and chance events, preclude any access to unchanging universal principles. These two approaches, as the Straussian tradition frequently argues, are in a perennial state of conflict. The former tends to hold that knowledge concerning the best constitution or the most adequate moral philosophy is possible via human reason and classical hermeneutics. The latter tends to deny altogether the usefulness of theories concerning the best polis, and tends to regard with suspicion any claim to be able to teach a knowledge of trans-historical moral norms. Moderns, says Strauss, will tend to “lower their sights” and argue that political order is more certain if statesmen would focus on conquering chance and manipulating passions rather than teaching virtue. For modern man the key to understanding the creation of political order is found in an understanding of the forces of history and nature: accidental causation and the powerful human passion for survival and dominance.

Prior to his first encounter with Strauss in the early 1960s, George Grant already possessed a considerable interest in pre-modern and especially Christian-inspired political and moral thought. Such is evident in a work highly representative of his early career: Philosophy in the Mass Age, which first appeared in 1959.
page of his preface the reader will sense that George Grant is quite uncomfortable with currently fashionable approaches to moral philosophy. He writes with the conviction that the notions of morality which govern much of North American intellectual life are inadequate, and that the time is ripe for some renewed analysis, clarification, and argument. He notes in the first chapter that the current conditions of the West call for “the frankest and most critical look at the principles of right in which we put our trust” (Grant 1959, 14). Generally Grant’s major theoretical concerns throughout Philosophy in the Mass Age stem from the disappearance of “old systems of meaning” together with their replacement with the conditions of mass modern culture. What is gradually being lost in the transformation from traditionalist to mass culture is any rational and theoretically coherent conception of natural law. And as Strauss himself might argue, one of the clearest expressions of this natural law is found in the works of Plato, particularly in the Republic (Grant 1959, 32-33). Grant’s chapter-long discussion of the subject of natural law suggests that the philosopher’s proper response to the moral problems of mass culture must involve some sort of return to the truth of Western society’s classical past.

However, as soon as one recognizes such similarities, important differences between Strauss and the early Grant begin to appear. Such differences exist primarily by virtue of a strong Hegelian influence in Grant’s early works. By his own admission several years later, Grant considered Hegel to have been “the greatest of all philosophers.”6 He was thoroughly impressed with Hegel’s attempt to synthesize the entire Western philosophical tradition—especially his synthesis of classical Greek metaphysics, Christianity, and Enlightenment rationality. One of Grant’s own primary concerns in Philosophy in the Mass Age centers around what he sees as the necessary task of “thinking out” a conception of natural law which does not “deny the truth of our freedom or the truth of progress” (Grant 1959, 111). That is, the early Grant wishes to bring together the moral truth of Platonic metaphysics and the moral truth of modern Prometheanism. He will not accept as simply complete the ancient understanding of human meaning and destiny, one which centers around the spiritual reunification with the divine; nor will he accept as simply complete the modern understanding which centers around the human attempt to master and change the world in order that it may more closely conform to modern man’s utopian imagination. The former would deny to humanity the benefits of man’s modern creative enterprise; the latter refuses to admit of any limit to those creative powers.

At this stage Grant is fully aware of the fact that he is touching upon a problem in political philosophy which admits of no easy solution. But his concern here is not so much to solve the problem as it is to clarify its significance for North Americans in the twentieth century. For the early Grant, the unique aspects of North American philosophy and cultural history provide contemporary thinkers with sufficient grounds for believing that a synthesis of ancient and modern conceptions is indeed possible, if not immanent. To begin with he stresses the fact that North American societies have little or no cultural history which predates the modern age, i.e. the age of utilitarian reason, “free-thinking” rationalism, and material-technical progress. North Americans are in many ways the most intellectually, spiritually, and politically “liberated” of all peoples. They have little in the way of concrete traditions and longstanding fashions of thought and behavior which might act as limits to human creativity. Consequently, the culture of unbounded faith in science and capitalism flourishes in North America,
so much so that the future of universal liberation dreamed of by the earliest moderns may be within sight. In Grant’s words “the world of mass production and its techniques, or standardized consumption and standardized education, or wholesale entertainment, and almost wholesale medicine,” finds its “chief creative center” in the industrial regions of North America (Grant 1959, 14-15).

Grant also notes, however, that such progress has been bought at a price. While he does not resort to any explicitly Marxist terminology or analysis, Grant certainly has eyes to see the human casualties of industrial civilization. Industrial society, he says, “breaks down the old natural forms of human existence in which people traditionally found the meaning in their lives” (Grant 1959, 23). In other words, the needs of the spirit have been overshadowed by an overbearing preoccupation with consumption and pleasure. And such a problem is particularly acute in North America, where the “old natural forms” have been weak since the beginning. So just as our society creates the conditions of mass liberation from poverty and toil, it likewise “creates the conditions of [spiritual] repression” (Grant 1959, 23). For the early Grant, however, the problem in North America is one that carries within itself the means for a possible solution. To be sure, the rationalist and Enlightenment inheritance that belongs uniquely to North America means that North Americans will not have the same access to the ancient and medieval natural law tradition which ruled Europe for centuries. At the same time, however, neither do Americans carry within them the same underlying spirit of revulsion at the excesses of that tradition. If North Americans do not have a tradition of pre-modern ways of thinking, neither do they have the concrete social and political experiences which would lead to the violent and wholesale rejection of such ways. As a consequence, Grant seems to suggest, the life of philosophy or theology for a North American student does not carry with it the same cultural “baggage” as it would for a European student. North Americans, he says, are radically free, so free that they are able to indulge in the perspicacity and excesses of modern society, while at the same time remaining “open to the philosophic life with an intensity worthy of the greatest periods of human thought” (Grant 1959, 24). Grant thus indicates his own predilection for Hegel’s maxim: “the owl of Minerva only takes its flight at twilight.” Indeed, early in Philosophy in the Mass Age Grant expresses a hope that the alienation being experienced by the youth of North America will push them into an unprejudiced reconsideration of pre-modern natural law alternatives. In Philosophy in the Mass Age Grant stops short of saying that a revival of ancient thought looms certainly on the horizon; but his remarks do have an unmistakable tone of hope about them. And he appears convinced that such a revival, if it should take place, will give birth to the thinker or thinkers which will at last reconcile the respective truths of the ancient and
modern worlds.

Grant’s willingness to look at the particular historical situation of North America in terms of an Hegelian synthesis represents a divergence from Straussian teaching at key points. Strauss was not convinced that the truth about natural right is essentially dependent upon the fateful development of the history of one privileged culture, or will be “revealed” to the philosopher under the pressure of particular historical events. Strauss believed it is incumbent upon the competent philosopher to discern the important truths about politics and human nature quite independent of such developments. For Strauss, the owl of Minerva may and often does take flight at particular historical “twilights.” But the flight path taken does not become a new discovery or a new truth that promises to correct the inevitable deficiencies of all past “flights.” Strauss argues, again, that human beings in any age or culture have access to the requirements of natural law by virtue of their reason. The early Grant suggests that no philosopher has yet been able to grasp the essential truth about human existence; the ancients and moderns both contain merely elements of truth which must be synthesized under the pressure of historical events. Indeed, since the synthesis has yet to occur, we are not in a position to describe its essential teachings or analyze it in any way. So the early Grant understands the concept of universal, trans-historical norms in a way quite different from Strauss. The early Grant appears to lack Strauss’ core conviction that it is essentially human reasoning, logic, and intellectual discipline that bring about enlightenment. Rather, Grant appears much more willing to see these factors as intimately tied to the mysterious, non-rational, and fateful events of history.5

Soon after the publication of Philosophy in the Mass Age, however, Grant began his own study of Strauss’ writings. This attraction to Strauss would seem to be natural for Grant, since it must be remembered that he was quite hesitant to describe himself as a “modern,” to use Straussian language. Indeed, Grant was quite impressed with Strauss’ devastating critique of modern political philosophy in nearly all its forms. This impact on Grant was so strong that it led him to rethink much of what he had argued in Philosophy in the Mass Age.6 As Joan O’Donovan and others have noted, Grant’s writings of the sixties show a clear departure from the underlying hope and optimism of his earlier work (O’Donovan 1984, 58-59). Although other factors (such as the crisis in Vietnam) did play a role, Grant notes in the preface to the 1966 edition of Philosophy in the Mass Age that the prime philosophical catalyst in the change was Leo Strauss, especially his works Thoughts on Machiavelli and What is Political Philosophy?

On the most general level, these works seemed to cast doubt on the idea that the practical and historical success of modern thought were necessarily a barometer of its truth, a truth that somehow must be reconciled with the older truths proclaimed by the ancient world. Under the tutelage of Strauss, Grant came to reject a core assumption of historicism: that the ancient thinkers could not have been simply correct about natural right because subsequent generations of philosophers have rejected their teachings en masse, largely as a result of the massive historical changes such generations have experienced. In rejecting this assumption Grant became increasingly willing to follow Strauss, both in his praise of Platonic thought and in his condemnation of the root premises of modernity. The general thrust of much of Grant’s work in the sixties shows that he became decidedly less impressed with attempts to impose upon the history of political thought an abstract
"meaning" of the whole, especially one that is not contained in the self-understanding of the major political thinkers and actors themselves. He seemed to take to heart the Straussian conviction that the hope and expectation of an historical synthesis tends to obscure the true nature of the natural right problem. More specifically, Grant realized that what he had been missing was the essentially destructive role played by modern thought in the eclipse of natural right. In short, the later Grant began to see modern thought (especially in the form of liberal-technocratic thought) as the root problem, rather than as a party to some future solution or reconciliation. He began to appreciate Strauss' call for contemporary political theorists to make an "excluding choice" between the ancient and the modern.

Such changes in Grant's work become highly visible when one looks at the essays produced in the late sixties and seventies. Absent is the cautious optimism of earlier works, and taking the place of this optimism is an unsettling yet compelling focus on the almost unavoidable tragedy of modern life. Although a number of essays from the period could be used to illustrate this focus, one particularly representative work is English-Speaking Justice. In this work Grant develops the argument that it is impossible for Western civilization to hold together modern progressivism and ancient natural right. As I have noted elsewhere (1990), his argument is developed by way of an analysis of contemporary liberalism, especially as liberalism is related to the awesome technological achievements of North American societies. In his view, liberalism is itself something of an attempt to synthesize the modern with the pre-modern; it was born out of the spirit of political and spiritual liberation espoused by the Reformation and Enlightenment thinkers, and it continues to draw on the pre-modern language of natural right in an attempt to prevent the extremes of manipulation and control suggested by the more radical proponents of a Promethean "scientific socialism."

As Grant sees it, such attempts are tragically doomed to fail. The oft-described nightmares of social control that lay behind advances in technology will eventually become reality, because the advances themselves did not emerge in a theoretical vacuum, as merely new techniques. From its earliest beginnings in the Enlightenment, the creative process of "relieving man's estate" called for the intelligent manipulation of nature (including human nature) so that its deficiencies might be overcome for the sake of our collective material security. And a necessary part of this attempt to conquer nature was a conscious act of rebellion against the traditional moral standards given in classical and Christian metaphysics, especially insofar as those standards acted as limits to the creative powers of man. That is, any contemporary attempt to employ science and technology only for "good" purposes will meet with the futile task of employing an objective moral standard in a civilization that is increasingly making it a point of intellectual pride to refuse to be bound by such "absolutist" notions. With modern science and technology comes modern justice; both are part of the same civilizational destiny born out of the philosophical rejection of the ancient view of man and his relationship to the rest of the creation. In short, one does not become a leader in the technical mastery of the world without also holding ideas about morality and justice which are inherently incompatible with the principles of classic natural right.

While the power of technology continues to expand, the capacity to use that power in the true interests of humanity necessarily continues to diminish. As long as the passion to control and re-create exists, so too will exist the resolute refusal to be bound by...
a sense of justice which belongs to a completely antithetical philosophical outlook. Modern mass society cannot hope to reverse the momentum toward nihilism from within the philosophical premises of its own progressivist ethos. This loss of hope for modern man, in turn, would likely compel a Strauss-inspired thinker like Grant to begin calling for a return to the contemplative life, according to the model established by the ancient Greek philosophers. As Strauss has argued, the philosopher who truly desires to see the true principles of justice become a reality must refuse to place his trust in the reform of any one particular society. He must attempt, as best he can, to overcome such unseemly attachments and begin the process of developing justice within his own soul, and directing the pursuit of classical wisdom within the souls of others who seek it. For Strauss the study of history and historical phenomena can distort the philosopher's true mission. Far too often a preoccupation with the actualities of history means that one is engaged in the typically modern refusal to recognize the reality of unchanging, transcendent norms, accessible by reason, which sit in judgment of all that has come to be. It would be reasonable, therefore, to expect Grant to attack modernity root and branch by pursuing the theoretical life according to the typically Straussian model. One might expect him to participate, as so many followers of Strauss have done, in a collective effort to revive the original principles of classic natural right, relying heavily on the great texts and arguments of Greek antiquity. The vicissitudes of history do not alter the fundamental principles; they are accessible to all who would detach themselves from the wayward conventions and rituals of modernity and follow the dictates of sound classical reasoning.

However, the later Grant does not fit the traditional Straussian mold. Certainly, he became convinced beyond a doubt that the ancient thinkers were superior to the moderns in their understanding of justice, and that an historicism which denied the reality of unchanging moral norms was unacceptable. However, at the same time, he was unwilling to abandon his conviction that historical circumstances can and will have a crucial role to play in the teaching and learning of natural right. For Grant the recognition of the almost complete tragedy of modern life, “the finality of becoming,” does not compel him to seek personal refuge in the un tarnished wisdom of antiquity. Rather, this recognition of the tragedy which has befallen the modern experiment becomes a genuine source of wisdom in itself.

In order to understand the full significance of Grant's modification of both Straussianism and historicism it is necessary to turn to his fascinating work entitled Time as History (1969). The title of this relatively short book refers to Grant's description of the philosophical heart of modernity, a description which borrows heavily from Nietzsche. In the book's first two chapters Grant explains that the self-understanding of modern technological man centers around the belief in the future as the most fascinating reality. Our civilizational efforts, especially in North America, have become completely oriented toward some future world, one that must bear the mark of our own creative freedom. Our destiny has become bound up with the will to change the world (to “make history”) through the expansion of scientific learning. What we have made actual the dream of the philosophes — to conquer an indifferent nature and harness it for purposes limited only by the human imagination. In the process we have learned to subordinate the past and the present to the future, so much so that the very meaning of human existence is bound up with what is yet to be. What is and what has been find their significance only in their relationship
to the future; for modern man time has become history, and history means the progressive fulfillment of man's quest for innerworldly mastery and perfection.

It is with the next two chapters of *Time as History*, however, that one begins to see more clearly the points of departure from typical Straussianism. These points of departure seem to stem principally from Grant's willingness to take several significant aspects of Nietzsche's analysis of Western civilization quite seriously. Drawing on Nietzsche, for instance, Grant recognizes the concept of time as history as a secularization of Christian doctrine. Modernity appears as not so much an emancipation from Christianity as it is a transmutation of the Christian belief that history is but the gradual unfolding of the divine plan, the culmination of which will be a state of perfect peace and happiness for the righteous. But as noted previously, Grant argues (again following Nietzsche) that we have absolutely no assurance that the unfolding of future events will yield perfection or even progress; the "net of inevitable progress is a shallow secular form of the belief in God," and "just as the historical sense has killed god, it kills the secular descendants of that belief" (Grant 1969, 36).

As a result, two distinct character types will emerge in the modern world: Nietzsche's "last men" and "nihilists." The last men are those who will continue to understand their existence simply in terms of the shallow and petty pleasures of life, and will understand politics in terms of mass democracy and the continued social quest for material progress. Such individuals will, in turn, make up the mass or ordinary individuals in modern technical society. Then nihilists, on the other hand, are those relatively few individuals who, under the influence of scientific rationalism, recognize that all values, especially the trivial values of the last men, are all relative and contrived. They will be the ones to seethrough the contradiction at the heart of contemporary liberalism, even to the point of undermining rationalism itself. And it is from these individuals, the true heirs of Western rationalism, that Western civilization has the most to fear. Such men, says Nietzsche, are strong-willed, yet have no content for their willing, not even reason itself. This means that "they will be resolute in their will to mastery, but they cannot know what that mastery is for" (Grant 1969, 34). The violence which is precipitated by the nihilists will therefore be unlike any experienced in past ages; and like many other contemporary thinkers, Grant points to the rise of Nazism as a prime example of Nietzschean prophecy fulfilled.

Compounding the problem, Nietzsche continues; the tremendously volatile spirit of revenge, or the will to power, which accompanies the rise of nihilism. The passion to will nothing— to will mastery and con-
control for its own sake—is a function of the nihilist’s desperate fight against “the fact that they cannot live with joy in the world” (Grant 1969, 40). An abyss of meaninglessness always lies before the nihilist, and he must avenge what has been done to him by engaging in a restless and violent attempt to dominate those around him. The question Nietzsche proposes, and which Grant makes an effort to ponder at length, is whether there can be men who transcend the unacceptable alternatives of the pitiful “last men” and the vengeful nihilists. Can we conceive of men who know that they are the creators of their own values; who know that reason itself is but one value among many, but do so in such a way as to create joy rather than chaos and destruction? That is, is there an alternative which allows modern man to become master of the earth, but deservedly so?

Nietzsche’s own response is captured in his notion of the *ubermensch*—those superior individuals who have succeeded in overcoming the powerful human impulse for revenge. If man is to become nobler than in any period in the past, to become deserving of his own powers of creation, then it is essential that he succeed in casting aside his hatred of existence. Indeed, it is incumbent upon the true ubermensch to learn to love his fate (*amor fati*). The ubermensch are to be the deserved masters of the world for they have achieved a new height of greatness in the act of *amor fati*, especially insofar as that act is done outside any comforting “horizon” of timeless eternity.

Grant’s purpose in *Time as History* is not to offer a defense of Nietzsche. Indeed, in the final chapter Grant explicitly rejects Nietzsche’s notion of time as history, and again questions the very assumptions of the modern ethos. In a sense Grant wishes to reject Nietzsche and turn away from modernity; one would certainly expect as much from a student of Strauss. But Grant is not content with a simple rejection. He wishes to bring certain aspects of Nietzsche to the full light of day, especially for North Americans of the twentieth century. In Nietzsche’s supremely “accurate and explicit” unfolding of the modern crisis, says Grant, Nietzsche allows us “to understand the situation of which we are the inheritors” (Grant 1969, 25). As Larry Schmidt remarks, Grant’s purpose “is to let men know where they are” (Schmidt 130).

Part of the “unfolding” which Grant wishes to emphasize is Nietzsche’s own response to the crisis: his notion of *amor fati*. Grant is able to recognize some understanding of *amor fati* as a possible avenue by which nihilism might be overcome. He sympathizes with Nietzsche when he says that the love of fate, or the love of all the “injustices and alienations and exploitations of time” can be a good or rightly ordered love. This is because Nietzsche’s *amor fati* is not passive, merely accepting all that is, but is actually a call to “dynamic political doing.” What Nietzsche is saying is that the building of the potential height in modern society can only be achieved by those who have overcome revenge, so that what they accomplish comes forth from a positive love of the earth, and not simply from hatred of what presently is” (Grant 1969, 46). Grant and Nietzsche are in agreement that any will to reform and restore society which has not overcome the spirit of Promethean revenge will “always have the marks of hysteria and hatred within it” (Grant 1969, 46). Both thinkers recognize that their common goal—the rescuing of a debased and corrupt modern culture—is threatened at its core by revolutionaries who simply cannot bear the thought of living in a world in which senseless violence and torture are suffered to exist. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, both seem to recognize that the refusal on the part of contemporary thinkers to explain why one should not hate the
world as it seems to lend credence to the belief that human suffering is entirely senseless. Such a situation would likely pave the way for the triumph of a destructive Prometheanism.

However, Grant is unable to see how it is possible to love one's fate without resorting to a conception of transcendent or otherworldly justice. Nietzsche thought such a love was possible through his well-known principle of the “eternal recurrence of the identical.” But given that history is replete with the screams of the innocent, Grant finds it impossible to understand how anyone could love fate, unless “within the details of our fates there could appear, however rarely, intimations...of perfection in which our desires for good find their rest and their fulfillment” (Grant 1969, 46). So for Grant some conception of the eternal justice of the creation, along the lines of classical and Christian thought, is necessary in order to affirm a love of fate. One can manage to accept the torturing of innocent persons only if the face of Christ is revealed in such persons. Grant therefore parts company with Nietzsche on the subject of otherworldly religion, especially Christianity. Such a belief in the saving power of God is necessary in order to make sense out of an otherwise senseless world, and through this belief Grant affirms the role of amor fati in responding to the modern crisis.

Toward the end of *Time as History*, however, Grant notes that such a conclusion involves a paradoxical “turn of the screw.” The paradox is that any “love of fate” must necessarily involve a love of our fate as moderns, the very fate which Grant has recognized as being tragically destructive of the classical and Christian view of man. How is it possible, he asks, to love being moderns, when to do so means to love that which destroys us? The paradox, Grant admits, would be easily dissolved by refusing to call ourselves “moderns,” by taking refuge in a “past which inoculates us from the present,” as many in the Straussian mold are tempted to do. But in so doing, he suggests, we engage in an act of cowardice, one that is “trivializing and at worst despairing” (Grant 1969, 48). In what could easily be interpreted as a criticism of typical Straussian orthodoxy, Grant suggests the possibility that a man’s return to the principles of classic natural right might be precipitated by a mysterious act of “love and remembrance,” rather than by any explicit act of thought or reasoning. On the level of thought and reason, he argues, the paradox cannot be adequately addressed; and one may never be able to defeat Nietzsche in an intellectual debate. But, Grant continues, it is possible to refuse to accept Nietzsche, not out of blind faith, but because human beings are capable of recollecting, deep within their souls, a pre-articulate revulsion at the notion of time as history (Grant 1969, 49-50).

This process of remembrance, in turn, flows out of the particular historical conditions of modern life. Those conditions, Grant suggests, may in themselves reveal to men a knowledge of the good, independent of what is being said by the theoretical proponents of modernity. When Grant focuses on the love of fate as an essential component in the recognition of truth, he seems to be suggesting that the tragedy of modern life is itself capable of stirring in the souls of its victims an intimation of eternal justice. He carries with his analysis and critique a belief that the historical development of modernity does not, in the end, represent the complete “obliteration of eternity,” despite the fact that modernity may mean the end of reason itself.

Grant thus rejects the simple distinction between ancients and moderns, or between historicists and non-historicists. He retains some of the animating spirit of Philosophy in the Mass Age, particularly insofar as he continues to see the hand of Providence in...
the workings of history, and insofar as he refuses to concede that all hope is lost when man succeeds in obscuring one instrument (reason) by which natural right is known. Grant certainly does not disavow arguments in favor of classic natural right, and it would be misleading to suggest that Grant has abandoned Strauss. On the contrary, Grant’s later writings show that he is clearly convinced by the Platonic account of justice, and remains sympathetic to the animating spirit of the Straussian critique of historicism. However, he recognizes the possibility of redemption for modern man that does not necessarily begin with a restoration of abstract classical arguments. In fact, the continued relevance of the Straussian project may in the end depend upon a spiritual awakening of sorts, one that dissolves modern man’s enchantment with the will to power. We are only to be receptive to classical arguments about natural right when our souls become prepared to listen to them, and such preparation may come only from the particularities of our own suffering in history. Indeed, for Grant a retention of some sort of theory of revelation is necessary in order for contemporary political theory to deal adequately with the problem of natural right. This conviction, of course, clearly implies that the evolution of Straussianism is in order. Strauss’ return to the insights of the ancients and his critique of historicism must be refined to allow for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between history and universal norms.11

In conclusion, Grant holds on to the possibility that a rejection of modernity may take place in the very historical act of living in it and through it. Unlike doctrinaire followers of Straussian orthodoxy, Grant holds out the possibility of loving the very darkness of modernity, because it may very well be the means by which divine Providence itself is working to cast a light back on the truth of the past. For this reason his writings do not rely heavily on a rationalist appeal through dialectics; they involve an almost obsessive probing of the tragedy and darkness of the modern “cave.” As a Christian, Grant is able to see in the mysterious, unplanned workings of history a revelatory force capable of drawing man back into God, a force that (ironically) becomes present at the moment when modernity has reached its apex.

Notes
2. The sharp distinction between ancients and moderns is found throughout Strauss’ writings. See, for instance, the strongly comparative approach governing chapters IV (“Classic Natural right”) and V (“Modern Natural Right”) in Natural Right and History, as well as within chapter VI itself (“The Crisis of Modern Natural Right”).
3. Joan O’Donovan has described this work as “drawing together the various strands of his early thinking” and becoming the “culminating effort” of this period in his career (28).
5. In her excellent monograph on Grant, Joan E. O’Donovan has noted this core difference as well (50-51).
6. This is evident when one reads the revised preface to the 1966 edition of this work. Therein Grant explicitly repudiates some of his earlier Hegelianism.
7. This work originated in 1974 when Grant participated in the Josiah Wood Lectures at Mount Allison University, New Brunswick. These lectures were later published, with very few changes from the original, in 1978, and later reprinted by Notre Dame University Press in 1985.
8. Grant makes a similar
point in Time as History, 22. Cf. p. 28. His authority for this understanding of modernity is, of course, Nietzsche. 10. This understanding of Grant as holding a discernible conception of history would differ slightly from Schmidt’s conclusions (Schmidt 136). Schmidt, in my estimation, tends to make a false distinction between Grant and the conception of history posited by Eric Voegelin. There would seem to be a great deal of similarity between the two thinkers, especially when one compares Grant’s movement away from Strauss with the Voegelin-Strauss correspondence. 11. This conclusion is similar to the one reached by Claes Ryn in “Universality and History: The Concrete as Normative,” Humanitas vol. 6, no. 1 (Fall 1992): 10-39.

Works Cited


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