

STRAUSS, DARWINISM, AND NATURAL RIGHT¹

Carson Holloway

Social Science, as the study of things human, cannot be based on modern science, although it may judiciously use, in a strictly subordinate fashion, both methods and results of modern science. Social science must rather be taken to contribute to the true universal science into which modern science will have to be integrated eventually. — Leo Strauss, *Social Science and Humanism*

I. The Problem: The Crisis of Natural Right

Can the insights of evolutionary biology resolve some of the deepest problems of political philosophy? Some scholars think so. In recent years, a new Darwinian approach to political science has emerged, advocated by, among others, James Q. Wilson, Larry Arnhart, Roger Masters, Francis Fukuyama, and Robert McShea.² Drawing on contemporary ethology and sociobiology, these scholars point to a wealth of empirical evidence that moral inclinations such as care for kin, sympathy for others, and justice as reciprocity, arise not solely from variable cultural learning but from universal human biology. Moreover, they contend, the natural status of such moral proclivities makes sense in light of modern evolutionary theory: insofar as humans, like many other animals, require each other's assistance to secure their fundamental biological interests in survival and reproduction, it is predictable that natural selection would over time favor those with spontaneous inclinations toward cooperation and sociability.

The proponents of this Darwinian approach most concerned with its implications for political philosophy, Larry Arnhart and Roger Masters,

¹ I wish to express my thanks to the Earhart Foundation for generously supporting the research that led to the preparation of this essay.

² Consider Wilson's *The Moral Sense* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), Arnhart's *Darwinian Natural Right: The Biological Ethics of Human Nature* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), Masters's *The Nature of Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), Fukuyama's *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstruction of Social Order* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), McShea's *Morality and Human Nature: A New Route to Ethical Theory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

present it as the solution to what they, following Leo Strauss, regard as the key difficulty in contemporary political theory and indeed as the predominant moral and intellectual problem of our time: the crisis of natural right. Belief in natural standards of justice that transcend, and thus can guide, human willfulness and passion no longer seems credible. In the absence of natural right, we seem to lack any objective, rational basis on which to reject what strike us as immoral regimes and policies. Hence, Strauss's concern that the "contemporary rejection of natural right" amounts to "nihilism," according to which "everything a man" – or a government – "is willing to dare will be permissible."³ Masters and Arnhart share Strauss's concerns. The former implies that in the absence of natural standards of right, we have no "objective" basis on which to prefer participatory constitutionalism to oppression.⁴ Similarly, the latter argues that without a "natural standard," we have no ground on which to condemn cultural practices, like female circumcision, that harm women.⁵

While such reflections may stimulate a desire for a solution to the problem of natural right, the impediments to such a solution seem daunting, for the loss of natural right's intellectual credibility is, according to Strauss, due to no less an intellectual authority than modern natural science. Arnhart and Masters take as their point of departure Strauss's statement, in *Natural Right and History*, of the cause of the crisis of natural right: "Natural right in its classic form is connected with a teleological view of the universe," according to which man, like all "natural beings," has a "natural end" in light of which reason can discern his good operation; but this "teleological view of the universe, of which the teleological view of man forms a part, would seem to have been destroyed by modern natural science," which has

³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 4-5.

⁴ Masters, *The Nature of Politics*, pp. xiv-xv.

⁵ Arnhart, *The Darwinian Natural Right*, p. 124.

opted, with impressive success, to understand the phenomena under its study in light of a "nonteleological conception of the universe."⁶

II. The Solution: The Immanent Teleology of Darwinian Biology

Taking up the challenge implicit in Strauss's statement of the problem, Arnhart and Masters contend that Darwinian biology can restore natural right's credibility even while embracing modern natural science's denial of the teleological character of the universe. This Darwinian solution to the problem of natural right is possible on the basis of a distinction between, in Arnhart's words, *cosmic* teleology, which is no longer credible, and *immanent* teleology, which is. That is, Darwinism demonstrates how a purposeless cosmos can give rise to purposeful beings, beings with an internal teleology from which we can derive natural standards of right.

While Darwinism, like all modern natural science, rests upon a denial of cosmic teleology,⁷ it nevertheless sustains the notion that living beings possess natural purposes. As Arnhart states, "[A]lthough the evolutionary process does not serve goals, the organisms emerging from that process do."⁸ Without positing even so elementary a teleology as an orientation to survive and reproduce, Darwinism claims to explain the purposive behavior of living beings in all its complexity. It just happens, as a result of necessity, that currently surviving organisms are descended from those possessing inclinations and capacities useful with a view to reproduction of their genes in succeeding generations. Those without such inclinations and capacities of necessity died out. Moreover, these capacities and inclinations come to be experienced by animals as intrinsically good. They emerge and persist because they serve genetic fitness, but they are able to serve

⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 7-8. Also see Arnhart, p. 3 and Masters, "Evolutionary Biology and Natural Right" in *The Crisis of Liberal Democracy: A Straussian Perspective*, ed. Kenneth Deutsch and Walter Soffer (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 49.

⁷ Arnhart, p. 245; Masters, "Evolutionary Biology," p. 63.

⁸ Arnhart, p. 245.

genetic fitness because the organism spontaneously pursues them. For example, as our kin share some of our genes, and as cooperation with non-kin is often mutually beneficial, we have natural desires to assist relatives and others generally.

Insofar as these biological capacities and passions are experienced as desirable for their own sake, however, they become natural *teloi*, ends or goals pursued by organisms. Consequently, biologists cannot understand animal behavior without inquiring into its purposes.⁹ To be sure, such purposes are, from a cosmic standpoint, merely contingent and temporary; but from the standpoint of the individual, they are established and enduring natural facts.¹⁰ Hence, we have Arnhart's assertion that "Darwin's biology" can affirm "the immanent teleology displayed in the striving of each living being to fulfill its specific ends."¹¹

Finally, Arnhart and Masters contend that natural right can be derived from these immanent natural ends. The good, Arnhart contends, is that which satisfies our natural desires, including our moral and sociable desires. Thus we can judge as good those behaviors – such as conjugal bonding, parental care, and reciprocal cooperation – that respond to natural desires, and condemn as bad those – such as female circumcision, communal child-rearing, and slavery – that frustrate natural desires.¹² Similarly, Masters holds that humans have evolved a biologically-based repertoire of sociable behaviors – such as "voice" or the ability to exert some influence on the groups to which we belong – and therefore that efforts to deprive us of such behaviors "can clearly be described as 'contrary to nature'" and hence objectionable.¹³ In sum, for Arnhart and Masters, we can establish natural right upon the teleology implicit in human nature, even in the absence of a teleology of the cosmos. Indeed, they suggest that

⁹ Ibid., p. 243; see also Masters "Evolutionary Biology," p. 60.

¹⁰ See Arnhart, pp. 232-36.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 245.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Masters, "Evolutionary Biology," p. 62; see also Masters, *The Nature of Politics*, pp. 213-223.

Darwinian biology, insofar as it establishes the natural status of the moral and sociable desires of human beings, offers a scientific restoration of *classic*, and especially Aristotelian, natural right.¹⁴

III. Strauss, Darwinism, and Classic Natural Right

Because Darwinian natural right is proposed as a solution to a problem identified by Strauss, we wonder whether Strauss would regard the proposed solution as successful. Would he recognize Darwinian natural right as a restoration of classical natural right? Indeed, would he view Darwinian biology as a satisfactory basis for natural right in any form?

There is good reason to doubt that Strauss would regard Darwinian ethical naturalism as a restoration of classical natural right, for the two teachings seem to differ considerably. Most obviously, classical natural right, as understood by Strauss, is guided by a concern with human excellence, a concern all but absent from Darwinian natural right. According to Strauss, "the classics viewed moral and political matters in light of man's perfection," and therefore their political teaching takes its bearings not only from the various legitimate regimes but ultimately from the best regime.¹⁵ Classic natural right, it seems, proceeds on the basis of a distinction between ordinary goodness, on the one hand, and perfection or excellence, on the other, or between the just and the noble.¹⁶

Strauss recognizes the sober realism of the classics.¹⁷ Nevertheless, as a result of its preoccupation with human perfection, classic natural right is characterized by a certain otherworldliness. While the best regime is according to nature, it is perhaps never realized in practice.¹⁸

¹⁴ See Arnhart, *Darwinian Natural Right*, p. 17; and Arnhart, "The Darwinian Biology of Aristotle's Political Animals," *American Journal of Political Science* 38 (2), pp. 465-85, pp. 479-480; and Masters, *The Nature of Politics*, pp. xv, and 225.

¹⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 134, 140 and *What is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 34.

¹⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 140.

¹⁷ See Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, p. 43.

¹⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 139.

Consequently, the notion of “transcendence” is “not a preserve of revealed religion” but is “in a very important sense implied in the original meaning of political philosophy as the quest for the natural or best political order.” This “transcendent” aspect of classical political philosophy, moreover, alienates men – or the best men, those who most earnestly pursue perfection as classic natural right understands it – from their communities and from the world itself. Thus, natural right “tends to make” men “strangers”, and even strangers on the earth.”¹⁹

Darwinian natural right, however, is not guided by the lofty concerns of Strauss’s classic natural right. Expressions such as “nobility,” “excellence,” and “perfection” form no part of Arnhart and Masters’ moral vocabulary, and their political teaching is guided by no conception of the “best regime” as Plato and Aristotle would understand it. They are rather preoccupied with minimal standards of moral decency that are necessary to the ordinary flourishing of any society. Thus, in Arnhart’s *Darwinian Natural Right*, most of the discussion of substantive moral principles concerns such things as justice as reciprocity, conjugal bonding, and parental care. Similarly, in *The Nature of Politics*, Roger Masters admits that his biological “standards of natural justice” are probably more “useful in identifying injustice” than in revealing the contours of a life that is in principle best for human beings as such.²⁰ Thus, Darwinian naturalism appears to be limited to establishing minimal principles of moral obligation.

Because of its concern with decency instead of perfection, Darwinian natural right appears rather earthbound, in contrast to the aforementioned transcendence of classic natural right which, on Strauss’s account, culminates in a transcendence of not just this or that community, but of the human things themselves, because it culminates in philosophy. “On the basis of the classical hypothesis,” Strauss writes, “philosophy requires radical detachment from human interests: man ought not to feel absolutely at home on earth, but ought to be a citizen of the whole.”²¹ It is true that Arnhart’s contention that “nature” is our

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

²⁰ Masters, *The Nature of Politics*, pp. xv, 225, 232.

²¹ Strauss, *On Tyranny*. Revised and Expanded edition, editors Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (New York: The Free Press, 1991), p. 212.

“home” bears some similarity to Strauss’s contention that the philosopher is a citizen of the whole.²² Arnhart, however, means that we can and should be at home in nature and with our own nature, with the most powerful and common desires that all human beings share. In contrast, the classical philosopher, as Strauss presents him, becomes a citizen of the cosmos by being somewhat alienated from ordinary human nature. The things that animate most people most of the time are of little consequence to him.

These differences arise because the classical and Darwinian teachings derive their principles from radically different understandings of nature. Darwinian naturalism – denying, as we have seen, the existence of a cosmic teleology and hence a cosmic hierarchy of ends – takes its bearings from the biologically-rooted, naturally evolved desires of human beings. Given the variety of these natural desires, however, there is a need to prioritize among them if a coherent account of natural right is to emerge. In the absence of some principle outside of human nature in light of which to rank the various human desires in terms of their dignity or nobility, Darwinian natural right is guided by what it understands to be the most powerful desires. Thus Arnhart, for example, relies repeatedly on the observation that the moral desires are “deeper” or “more enduring” than their contraries.²³ Ultimately, then, Darwinian natural right is guided by a concern with the quantity of pleasure enjoyed in life: the moral life is finally justified because it results in more satisfaction than the alternative.

In contrast, the classics, on Strauss’s account, take their bearings from a hierarchy of human capacities,²⁴ a hierarchy understood implicitly with reference to some principles external to human nature itself. In *Natural Right and History*’s discussion of the classical position, Strauss raises the possibility of something like the Darwinian position, that “moral distinctions” could be based on human nature alone, regardless of the possible moral indifference of the “cosmic order.” To arrive at natural right, however, “we must distinguish between those

²² Arnhart, “Evolutionary Biology,” p. 275.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, pp. 126-127, 162.

human desires and inclinations which are in accordance with human nature and therefore good for man, and those which are destructive of his nature or humanity and therefore bad. We are thus led to the notion of a life, a human life that is good because it is in accordance with nature."²⁵ But how are we to make this distinction? The approach adopted by Darwinian natural right is to regard as most "in accordance with human nature," and therefore "good for man," the naturally most powerful human desires.

This is not, however, how the classics distinguish the better from the worse. Strauss contends that the philosophic tradition associated with Plato and Aristotle holds that "the noble and the just are fundamentally distinguished from the pleasant and are by nature preferable to it."²⁶ Thus Strauss, in explicating classic natural right, denies that we can distinguish a good from a bad life in terms of the amount of pleasure they involve.

We admire excellence without any regard to our pleasures or to our benefits. No one understands by a good man or man of excellence a man who leads a pleasant life. We distinguish between better and worse men. The difference between them is indeed reflected in the kinds of pleasure which they prefer. But one cannot understand this difference in the level of pleasures in terms of pleasure; for that level is determined not by pleasure but by the rank of human beings.²⁷

For the classics, then, there "are things which are admirable, or noble, by nature, intrinsically," and whose nobility cannot be understood in terms of pleasure; thus, it "is characteristic of all or most of them that they contain no reference to one's selfish interests or that they imply a freedom from calculation."²⁸ Strauss elsewhere claims that for Xenophon "the rank of the various kinds of pleasure ultimately depends on the rank of the activities to which the pleasures are related. Neither the quantity nor the purity of the pleasures determines in the

²⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 94-95.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

last resort the rank of human activities.”²⁹ To speak of the rank of various natural human capacities, however, implies the existence of a principle of judgment beyond the capacities themselves and the satisfactions accompanying their exercise. On the classical view, then, natural right is not simply derived from human nature.

Strauss does not leave this to mere implication. In “The Three Waves of Modernity,” he suggests that the classical view is informed by the notion that man “has a definite place within the whole, a very exalted place.”³⁰ This notion would seem to be essential to the classical view that “not the maximum of pleasures but the purest pleasures are desirable.”³¹ That is, man has a composite nature – not all of the elements of his nature are equally related to his lofty position in the cosmos – and it is better for him to prefer the parts that are better as judged in relation to some understanding of the order of the whole. It makes no sense, however, to speak of man’s “exalted place” within the whole unless there is some hierarchical ordering of the whole. Strauss’s account of the classical position thus indicates its reliance on an understanding of a cosmic order or hierarchy that is denied by Darwinian natural right.

For Strauss, it is precisely this reliance on a cosmic hierarchy that fundamentally distinguishes classical from modern political philosophy. “The first characteristic feature of modern thought,” he contends, “is its anthropocentric character,” which he contrasts “with the cosmocentric character of classical thought.” The “underlying idea” of modern thought “is that all truths or all meaning, all order, all beauty, originate in the thinking subject, in human thought, in man.” This represents a radical departure from the approach of the ancients, who “took it for granted that man is subject to something higher than

²⁹ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, p. 204.

³⁰ Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, editor Hilail Gilden (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 85.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

himself, e.g., the whole cosmic order, and that man is not the origin of all meaning."³²

On Strauss's account, then, Darwinian natural right is clearly modern, despite its proponents' claims to have restored classic natural right. Arnhart expressly denies that nature has any value apart from human desires. "All judgments of value are 'anthropocentric' in the sense that whatever we believe to be good must ultimately be good for *human beings* as satisfying *human desires*."³³ Masters tries to avoid this conclusion. "Naturalism," he argues, "directly challenges" the view that meaning derives only from human thought by suggesting that the basis of meaning is present in other animals as well. "Individual self-consciousness, intentionality, laughter, deceit, pity, murder and warfare have now all been observed among chimpanzees. If these phenomena are at the root of meaning, then surely humans cannot pretend that meaning itself is absent from the animate world."³⁴ Strauss's account, however, implies that cosmic nature has a meaning that is discernible to reason, not merely that living nature has a meaning posited by the desires. In any case, Masters' example establishes not so much that animate nature has meaning, but that mammalian nature has meaning. That is, nature has meaning precisely to the extent to which it shares the qualities of human nature. Such a position seems hardly distinguishable from modern anthropocentrism.

One manifestation of modernity's derivation of all meaning from man himself is its derivation of morality from the human desires, or rather from the most powerful human desires. "Connected with" modernity's "anthropocentric character is a radical change of moral orientation:" "the emergence of the concept of rights," and more specifically the notion that "the basic right coincides with a passion."³⁵ According to Strauss, this modern understanding was first articulated

³² Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought* by Leo Strauss, editor Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 102.

³³ Arnhart, *Darwinian Natural Right*, p. 237; emphasis in original.

³⁴ Masters, *The Nature of Politics*, p. 247.

³⁵ Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, p. 103.

by Hobbes, who held that "the good is fundamentally identical with the pleasant" and that natural right must be based on the most powerful of human desires, the desire for self-preservation.³⁶

This characteristically modern approach, however, is also as we have seen, the approach of Darwinian natural right. This is not to say that Darwinian natural right and modern natural right are identical. They differ in important ways. Most notably, Darwinism arguably offers a more complete account of the natural human desires than does modern, and especially Hobbesian, natural right. That is, while the former recognizes our natural sociable desires, Hobbes denies them. Thus, it is reasonable for Darwinian naturalists like Arnhart and Masters to present their account as in some sense refuting modern political philosophy and possessing some kinship with classical political philosophy, which also presents human beings as naturally sociable and moral.

Nevertheless, such considerations should not obscure the more fundamental kinship between modernity and Darwinian natural right, a kinship that sets both apart from classic natural right. Both Darwinian and modern natural right, denying the possibility of a cosmic hierarchy in light of which to evaluate the nobility of the natural desires, must seek to be guided by the most ordinary and powerful natural desires. Classic natural right, in contrast, recognizes the possibility of principles of right existing in cosmic nature itself, in the light of which it can seek to identify and be guided by the most dignified or lofty of human desires. Put another way, both Darwinism and modernity take their bearings from the aspirations of normal human beings, while classic natural right ultimately takes its bearings from the aspirations of the best human beings. Thus, Darwinian natural right participates in the lowering of the standard of political life characteristic of modernity.³⁷

³⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 169, 181, 227.

³⁷ See Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, p. 84.

IV. Strauss, Modernity, and the Failure of Darwinian Natural Right

It seems, then, that Strauss would not regard Darwinian naturalism as a restoration of classic natural right. Nevertheless, while he might object to its inability to sustain a commitment to the highest human possibilities, he might at the same time appreciate its effort to establish a natural basis at least for common decency. We are thus led to our second question: Would Strauss regard Darwinian naturalism as an adequate basis for natural right of any kind, even a morally minimalistic, modern natural right?

The assertion that he would is met by immediate difficulties, for Strauss seems to have been aware in principle of the possibility of such a project and to have rejected it as unworkable. In *Natural Right and History's* description of the contemporary crisis of natural right, Strauss notes that the "majority among the learned who still adhere to the principles of the Declaration of Independence interpret these principles not as expressions of natural right but as an ideal, if not as an ideology or a myth. Present day American social science, as far as it is not Roman Catholic social science, is dedicated to the proposition that all men are endowed by the evolutionary process or by a mysterious fate with many kinds of urges and aspirations, but certainly with no natural right."³⁸ Strauss was certainly not aware of sociobiology or the later efforts to derive an ethical theory from it. Nevertheless, this passage indicates that he was aware, in principle, of the possibility of such an undertaking, for Darwinian natural right is an effort to derive principles of right from the "urges and aspirations" by which "all men" are "endowed" by "the evolutionary process." Strauss, however, apparently regards such an undertaking as fundamentally different from "natural right," and in fact presents the embrace of the "evolutionary" alternative as related to the crisis of natural right. It would seem that the effort to derive moral principles from "aspirations" arising from an "evolutionary process" that can be viewed as a "mysterious fate" – that is, an evolutionary process governed by chance and necessity, which is how Darwinism views it – is

³⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 2.

inadequate. Strauss exempts Catholic social science from this difficulty, presumably because it posits a cosmic hierarchy in light of which these various "urges and aspirations" can be evaluated and a cosmic teleology in light of which they can be seen as products of an evolutionary process guided by a benevolent cosmic intelligence. Darwinian naturalism, however, rejects such notions and is therefore left with only the (seemingly inadequate) fact of these various aspirations and their unintelligent origins.

Similarly, later in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss, this time more clearly speaking in his own name, again indicates his awareness and rejection of such a solution as Arnhart and Masters offer. One possible conclusion from the loss of the teleological conception of the universe, Strauss contends, is a "non-teleological conception of human life." This "'naturalistic' solution," however, "is exposed to grave difficulties: it seems to be impossible to give an adequate account of human ends by conceiving of them merely as posited by desires or impulses." Consequently, Strauss presents the crisis of classic natural right as a crisis of natural right simply. He suggests that the loss of the teleological conception of the universe is corrosive not only of classic natural right, but also of natural right in any form. For Strauss, "all modern men" - whether they are "liberals," on the one hand, or "disciples of Thomas Aquinas," on the other - are "in the grip of the same difficulty," which is the apparent refutation, by modern natural science, of the "teleological view of the universe" with which classic natural right is connected.³⁹

Aware of these difficulties, Masters tries to surmount them by suggesting that Strauss engages in a kind of esotericism in the "Introduction" to *Natural Right and History*. On this view, Strauss does not really regard the teleological conception of the universe as essential to natural right. That is, he does not regard the rise of the mechanistic account of the universe, characteristic of modern natural science, as necessarily destructive of natural right, as his remarks appear to contend. According to Masters, for Strauss the real threat to natural right is not the mechanistic physics of such as Newton and Galileo but instead the chance-dominated physics of the 20th century.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 7-8.

For Strauss, then, neither natural right generally, nor classic or Aristotelian natural right specifically, requires belief in the teleological conception of the universe, only belief in certain regularities of movement from which we can derive ends as posited by the passions.

Masters contends that the Aristotelian passages to which he refers in support of his analysis actually point to an understanding of the problem of natural right different from that sketched by Strauss on the surface of his account. Strauss argues that modern natural science has adopted a mechanistic or non-teleological account of the motion of the heavenly bodies, but that for Aristotle the manner in which this question is resolved is decisive for the issue between the "mechanical and the teleological conception of the universe" as a whole.⁴⁰ That is, a mechanistic (or non-teleological) conception of the heavens compels a mechanistic understanding of the cosmos, and this renders classic natural right, and any natural right, impossible. Strauss cites the *Physics*, 196a25 ff. and 1999a3-5, as evidence of Aristotle's view of the decisiveness of the account of the heavens. According to Masters, however, these passages deal not with the problem of a mechanistic and non-teleological account of the cosmos, but instead with the problem of regarding the cosmos as governed by "spontaneity" or "chance." Why, Masters asks, "does Strauss speak of a 'mechanical conception of the universe' (a phrase that brings to mind the physics of Galileo and Newton), while citing passages in Aristotle that refer to 'chance' or 'spontaneity' (phenomena that call to mind the physics of Bohr and Heisenberg)?" The answer, he suggests, is that Strauss "intended to direct our attention to quantum mechanics rather than to Newtonian mechanics." For "[d]espite appearances" that the crisis of natural right "is due to a non-teleological view of physics like that of the seventeenth century (laws of nature exist, but do not provide a natural ground for human purpose since they establish mere regularities of motion)," it is actually "caused by the twentieth century's non-teleological view of physics (laws of nature are man-made creations, imposed on a chaotic and meaningless process of chance and spontaneity)."⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴¹ Masters, "Evolutionary Biology," pp. 51-52.

Indeed, Masters contends that Strauss's understanding of modern natural science's hostility to natural right is only intelligible if that science is understood as chance-based rather than merely mechanistic or non-teleological. "Without the challenge of twentieth century physics," Masters argues, "Strauss's characterization of the 'modern predicament' makes no sense. A non-teleological but mechanistic physics, like that of Galileo, is readily consistent with a modern conception of natural right like that in Hobbes, Locke, or Spinoza." Masters notes Strauss's aforementioned objection to this approach, his assertion of the seeming impossibility of adequately accounting for "human ends by conceiving them merely as posited by desires or impulses." Masters retorts, however, as follows: "[H]ow do we know that the political teaching of Hobbes, Locke, and Spinoza is not an 'adequate account'?" Aristotle's remarks on chance are "insufficient evidence" for rejecting the modern understanding, and neither Hobbes nor his followers "have admitted that it is 'impossible to give an adequate account of human ends by conceiving them merely as posited by desires or impulses.'"⁴² If it makes no sense to present a mechanistic and non-teleological account of the universe as inconsistent with natural right, Strauss must be understood as referring to a more modern and more radical science that treats the cosmos as a chaos and therefore renders all so-called "laws" of nature utterly arbitrary human constructs.

Masters' attribution of such an esoteric intention to Strauss suffers from three problems. First, he does not even hint at the reasons Strauss might have had to veil his teaching. What possible incentive could Strauss have for shielding 20th century physics from the obvious charge that it is incompatible with natural right, while deceptively directing his criticism toward the earlier mechanistic conception of the universe? Second, Masters ignores Strauss' understanding of the classical account of the relationship between chance and a non-teleological or mechanistic physics. In *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Strauss contends that from "the point of view of Aristotle, or of Plato, every doctrine which understands the world as the work of soulless bodies

⁴² Ibid., p. 53; emphasis in original.

not tending toward ends in fact identifies nature and chance.”⁴³ On Strauss’s understanding of Aristotle, it is, contrary to Masters’ argument, impossible to distinguish a mechanistic account of the whole from one that attributes everything to chance.

The third difficulty requires more elaboration. Masters doubts the earnestness of Strauss’s claim that non-teleological natural science destroys the basis for natural right because such science is the ground of the modern natural right teachings of Hobbes and his successors, who claim to understand human ends as merely posited by the passions, and who have not admitted the inadequacy of their approach. It does not follow, however, that just because some thinkers have tried, on the basis of a non-teleological science, to derive ends from passions, and have not acknowledged their failure, that Strauss is not serious in his rejection of such an approach. Masters presents Strauss as ignoring, deliberately and for some esoteric purpose, modern natural right; but this presentation is only possible because Masters ignores, deliberately or not, Strauss’s many remarks in his other writings indicating, without evident irony, the inadequacy of modern natural right. What Masters sees as an ironic overlooking of modern natural right is rather a subtle criticism of modern natural right. Masters is compelled to misread Strauss in this way because to read him properly – to take him seriously when he contends that a non-teleological natural science destroys natural right because one cannot give an adequate account of human ends by treating them as merely posited by desires – would be to admit that Strauss had, in principle if not in detail, foreseen and rejected Darwinian natural right, which Masters wants to present as a solution to the problem of natural right identified by Strauss.

Most instructive in this regard is the “Introduction” to *The City and Man*. There Strauss asserts that “the core of the contemporary crisis of the West” can be found in the fact that “modern political philosophy. . . has been replaced by ideology: what originally was a political philosophy has turned into an ideology.” This seems to be another statement of the crisis of natural right described in the “Introduction” to *Natural Right and History*. What was once a political philosophy or

⁴³ Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 222.

natural right, knowledge of right based upon nature, has turned into an ideology, the groundless assertion of certain ideals. Here in *The City and Man*, however, it is clear that modern political philosophy's transformation into mere ideology is related to its commitment to modern science's non-teleological understanding of the whole. "Modern political philosophy," Strauss writes, "presupposes Nature as understood by modern natural science and History as understood by the modern historical awareness. Eventually these presuppositions prove to be incompatible with modern political philosophy."⁴⁴ The modern natural science to which Strauss here refers must be understood, moreover, as the mechanistic and non-teleological account of the 17th century and not as the chance-dominated version of the 20th century, as Masters wishes to claim. For only the former, and not the latter, could be said to be a presupposition of modern political philosophy.

What, on Strauss's view, is the difficulty with modern natural right, and hence with Darwinian natural right – both of which present themselves as efforts to derive moral standards from human desires in the absence of a cosmic hierarchy in light of which to evaluate the various human desires? While the complete answer to this large question is beyond the scope of this paper, it is possible to suggest two possible beginnings to a full answer.

First, one cannot derive reliable standards of right from the natural human desires alone because those desires are various and contradictory. This understanding is implied by Strauss's initial statement of the crisis of natural right mentioned before:

Present day American social science, as far as it is not Roman Catholic social science, is dedicated to the proposition that all men are endowed by the evolutionary process or by a mysterious fate with many kinds of urges and aspirations, but certainly with no natural right.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 1.

⁴⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 2.

One cannot successfully derive natural right solely from the “urges and aspirations” of “all men” because those urges and aspirations are of “many kinds.” Again, as Strauss’ exception of Catholic social science suggests, the manifold character of human desire is not an impediment to natural right when one claims to possess knowledge of some cosmic hierarchy in light of which to evaluate the nobility of the various desires. In the absence of such knowledge, however, it seems impossible to reduce the variety of natural human desires to a reliable standard of natural right.

The difficulty posed by the variety of natural desires undermines Darwinian natural right, as the following example demonstrates. Arnhart devotes the longest chapter of *Darwinian Natural Right* to a moral critique of slavery. His argument necessarily takes the following form: slavery is contrary to natural right because it is contrary to certain natural desires. Arnhart’s argument fails, however, because he cannot escape the contradictory nature of human desire, which points simultaneously to different moral conclusions.

Slavery, Arnhart points out, contradicts the natural desire of slaves to be free from exploitation and the natural desire of masters to engage in reciprocal cooperation.⁴⁶ Therefore, it is a violation of Darwinian natural right. This easy conclusion, however, quickly runs up against Arnhart’s admission that, in addition to these natural desires that support freedom, there is also a natural desire to exploit others that points in the direction of slavery.⁴⁷ In the absence of some principle beyond the natural human passions, Arnhart cannot explain convincingly why the desires for freedom and reciprocity should take precedence over the desire to exploit. He can observe correctly that slavery is problematic because its contradiction of important desires makes it unstable,⁴⁸ but this alone does not explain why masters should not seek to overcome or at least manage that instability through force, especially in view of the great rewards slavery may offer for oneself and for one’s kin. Put simply, slavery is not contrary to nature as

⁴⁶ Arnhart, *Darwinian Natural Right*, p. 162.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 207-08.

Darwinism understands it, but is rather ambiguously natural. Thus, Darwinian natural right cannot offer a convincing condemnation of it.

As this example indicates, Darwinian natural right can give only ambiguous support to what we commonly understand as morality. Arnhart and Masters claim to have solved the problem of natural right by demonstrating that human beings have natural moral proclivities. While they do in fact succeed in demonstrating the natural status of our moral proclivities, that alone is not sufficient to show that human beings are naturally moral. Thus, Arnhart and Masters fail to provide us with natural right, when it is evident that human beings also possess other natural desires that are amoral or immoral. And Strauss was aware of this problem, as is clear from the following statement of Machiavelli's position: "Man is not by nature directed toward virtue. If he were, pangs of conscience would be the greatest evil for him; but in fact we find that the pangs of disappointment are at least as strong as the pangs of guilt."⁴⁹ That is, one cannot derive natural right from human nature alone when that nature includes not only moral desires but also opposed desires that are no less natural and just as strong as the moral desires.

On Strauss's view, then, Darwinian natural right, which is based on modern, non-teleological natural science, appears no more consistent than modern natural science itself. That science, Strauss contends, continues, due to the survival of certain utilitarian habits of thought, to take for granted certain decent aspirations like health, long life, and prosperity. On the non-teleological view of modern science, however, "these ends can no longer claim the evidence they once possessed" because "they appear now" only "to be posited by certain desires which are not 'objectively' superior to the opposite desires." As a result, modern science is "unable to justify the ends for which it seeks the means," and it consequently "is in practice compelled to satisfy the ends which are sought by its customers, by the society to which the individual scientist happens to belong."⁵⁰ That is, in the absence of

⁴⁹ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, p. 42.

⁵⁰ Strauss, *Liberalism, Ancient and Modern*. (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 22-23.

teleological principles independent of, and not just derived from the natural desires, modern natural science is reduced to relativism. As the preceding discussion suggests, Strauss regarded this as a very real difficulty, and he therefore appears to be in earnest, Masters to the contrary notwithstanding, when he suggests, in the "Introduction" to *Natural Right and History*, that "it seems to be impossible to give an adequate account of human ends by conceiving of them merely as posited by desires or impulses."⁵¹

To this difficulty, the complexity of the natural human desires, Darwinian natural right adds a second: the impermanence of human nature itself. Even if the natural human desires, taken in the absence of any external principle, were sufficiently coherent to generate coherent standards, those standards would still prove illusory because Darwinism contends that human nature is subject to historical change. As Arnhart observes, Darwinism holds that "species are not eternally fixed since they have evolved into their present form and will continue to change in the future."⁵² Standards derived from a changing nature are necessarily changeable standards, yet Strauss contends that "[i]t is granted on all sides that there cannot be natural right if the principles of right are not unchangeable."⁵³ The Darwinian account is essentially the same as that of Rousseau, who held, according to Strauss, that human nature is the product of a historical process "which is not teleological," or that our humanity is the product of accidental causation. On this account, however, human nature becomes radically problematic as a standard: now arguments "taken from man's nature" are "no longer of importance" because "what is called man's nature is merely the result of man's development hitherto."⁵⁴

There are two possible solutions to the difficulty posed by the accidental and impermanent status of human nature. We might, like Kant, try to take our bearings from an abstract reason that somehow transcends human nature. The Darwinian naturalists, however,

⁵¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 8.

⁵² Arnhart, *Darwinian Natural Right*, p. 233.

⁵³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 97.

⁵⁴ Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, pp. 90, 92.

forthrightly repudiate this as “dualistic.” Alternatively, one might seek guidance from this historical process by positing its rationality.⁵⁵ This Hegelian solution is likewise unavailable to the Darwinians, who insist that evolution is not directed toward any particular outcome. Here Darwinian natural right resembles historicism, which, according to Strauss failed to find reliable standards in history because those standards turned out to have been merely “thrown up by” a “meaningless process” and therefore “could no longer claim to be hallowed by sacred powers behind that process.”⁵⁶

V. Conclusion

While Arnhart and Masters offer their Darwinian ethical naturalism as a solution to the crisis of natural right identified by Strauss, the preceding argument suggests that Strauss would have to regard that proposed solution as a failure. This conclusion, however, seems at first glance to render the crisis of natural right even more intractable than Strauss initially suggested. Strauss’s own writings indicate the unworkability of the Darwinian effort to establish natural right in the absence of cosmic teleology, yet Strauss himself seems to speak as if modern natural science has destroyed the possibility of belief in cosmic teleology. Does the Straussian critique of Darwinian natural right then terminate in nihilism?

There is reason to think that for Strauss the situation is not in fact so grave. To begin with, Strauss would not concede that modern natural science has destroyed the possibility of belief in cosmic teleology. Although Strauss speaks often of the triumph of modern, non-teleological natural science, this seems to be more a victory in gaining public acceptance than an irrefutable philosophic advance. Strauss concedes that modern science “is the only authority in our age” that “enjoys universal recognition.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, he uses more cautious language when discussing modern science’s substantive merits. For example, he states that the “proof” for the “untenable

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 17-18.

⁵⁷ Strauss, *Liberalism, Ancient and Modern*, p. 22.

character of teleological natural science. . . was supplied, or was thought to be supplied, by the new natural science of the 17th century."⁵⁸ Similarly, he elsewhere equates "modern natural science" with "what we believe to know of nature."⁵⁹ Thus, in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss is careful to frame the crisis of natural right as follows: "The teleological view of the universe, of which the teleological view of man forms a part, would seem to have been destroyed by modern natural science."⁶⁰

Indeed, for Strauss modern natural science has not refuted, but merely turned away from investigating, the possibility of cosmic teleology. On his view, Socratic or Platonic political philosophy, which seeks knowledge of the whole despite its imperfect availability, "differs radically from a typically modern conclusion according to which the unavailability of knowledge of the whole demands that the question regarding the whole be abandoned and replaced by questions of another kind, for instance by questions characteristic of modern natural science."⁶¹ Similarly, Strauss elsewhere suggests that "the questions raised by a Thomist, or an Aristotelian, physics" might "retain their full significance regardless of any progress that modern science has achieved by raising questions of an entirely different type."⁶² For Strauss, then, modernity's rejection of the possibility of cosmic teleology is not obviously more reasonable than the classics' pursuit of it.

Moreover, while the particular cosmologies of the ancient philosophers may be discredited, Strauss contends that classical political philosophy depends not on any specific cosmological account but only on "the quest for cosmology."⁶³ And this openness to cosmic teleology remains eminently reasonable, according to Strauss's understanding. We are in fact compelled to such openness by the

⁵⁸ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, p. 47; my emphasis.

⁵⁹ Strauss, *The City and Man*, pp. 1-2; my emphasis.

⁶⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 7-8; my emphasis.

⁶¹ Strauss, *The City and Man*, p. 20-21.

⁶² Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, p. 286.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

evident inadequacy of the alternative accounts of the human situation that try to dispense with cosmic teleology. Strauss at one point speaks of the possibility of "humanism," that is, of knowledge of moral principles based solely on knowledge of our humanity, without reference to the "divine." Humanism holds out the hope that by growing in "awareness of what is common to all human beings. . . and of the goals toward which all human beings are directed by the fact that they are human beings," we may come to some understanding of "man's distinctive completeness, purpose, or duty." Strauss concludes, however, that "humanism is not enough," that man "cannot be understood in his own light." Thus, man must be understood in light of the whole to which he belongs, which is "either subhuman or superhuman."⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Strauss elsewhere concludes that in light of the subhuman "man as man is wholly unintelligible."⁶⁵

The argument of the preceding sections of this paper indicates why such alternatives are insufficient. On the basis of human nature alone, man is unintelligible, or his completion and purpose are unclear, because human nature is made up of a variety of competing desires pulling him in different directions. Nor can these desires be prioritized, and man thus rendered intelligible, on the basis of knowledge of their subhuman – that is, unintelligent and immediate material and efficient – causes. The only remaining alternative is for man to seek guidance from the "superhuman," which requires an openness to the notion that man is not "an accidental product of a blind evolution" but the result of a "process leading to man, culminating in man," and "directed toward man."⁶⁶ Strauss, of course, suffers from no dogmatic delusions about the easy availability of knowledge of the teleology of the universe. He notes that philosophy, the quest for "knowledge of the whole," might "appear as Sisyphean or ugly, when one contrasts its achievement with its goal." Nevertheless, the pursuit of such knowledge appears not only as our only way to approach knowledge of our true end, but also as responsive to a natural and noble longing of the human soul. Thus,

⁶⁴ Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, selected and introduced by Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 7.

⁶⁵ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, p. 38.

⁶⁶ Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, p. 7.

Strauss concludes that this quest is, despite its imperfect fulfillment, "necessarily accompanied, sustained, and elevated by *eros*. It is graced by nature's grace."⁶⁷

Strauss is, then, both less sanguine and more hopeful than the proponents of Darwinian natural right. On the one hand, because of the failure of the Darwinian attempt to establish moral standards in the absence of cosmic teleology, for Strauss the problem of natural right remains. On the other hand, despite the Darwinian denial of cosmic teleology, for Strauss the full restoration of natural right based on cosmic teleology remains an open possibility.

⁶⁷ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, p. 40.