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The Cave of Relativism: Liberation from Modern Principles

Our natural science is, quite deliberately, most unnatural, not only in what it enables us to do to one another, but even more in what it teaches us to think about who and what we are.

-Leon Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*

In his essay on *Natural Right and History* Leo Strauss blames the historical school for the degradation of natural rights and explains why the instinct to want to look away from universal principles, is so strong in humans. Strauss guides us through the emergence of the historical school and draws our attention to the reactionary foundations that supported this division of thought. He argues that the insistence on the part of the revolutionaries for maintaining the "traditional order" was so strong that a critique of natural rights was likely not a factor in their decision making at the time which marks a critical time for philosophy and its break from teleological principles. Strauss says that "by denying the significance, if not the existence, of universal norms the historical school destroyed the only solid basis of all efforts to transcend the actual" (15). In *Toward a More Natural Science*, Leon Kass tries to revive this teleological natural science that became lost during the Scientific Revolution and believes that the protection of natural rights remains dependent on the merging of modern science with universal principles.

Kass argues that Darwin's theory of evolution caused the first break from the long-standing teleological conception of humans when it became understood that they were "at least in origin, akin to nature" (251). Thus, humans were blended with nature thereafter, which seemed to diminish any distinctiveness they once possessed. It was this Darwinian framework which led to the "mechanistic account" of nature that is partly to blame for the purposeless existence we find ourselves in, according to Kass who helps to illuminate the "fundamental assumptions" of modern science and why these assumptions are cause for concern. He says that

"According to the founders of modern science, human beings may have purposes or ends or goals, but nature and other natural things do not" (Kass 250) and it is precisely this lack of purpose that is keeping us trapped in the cave of relativism we now find ourselves in. Kass also points out Francis Bacon's influence in the abandonment of teleological natural science and believes that his doctrine in *The Idols of the Tribe* led to a sharp rise in modern empiricism. In this work, Bacon rejects the relationship between final causes and the nature of the universe which "helped" to extinguish Aristotle's philosophy at the time, claiming that final causes can only be understood in relation to the nature of humans. However, Kass suggests that a resurgence of interest regarding the underlying theory of modern science may be brewing as doubts about the adequacy of its fundamental principles continue to increase (251). He says that "now that technology has become a question, the science that supports it is increasingly subject to scrutiny and criticism, reaching in due course to its fundamental principles" (Kass 251). Hence, we see a renewed interest in the lost teleological notions of the past, powered by the enduring desire in humans to find a sense of purpose in their "being" and more importantly, their "being" on earth.

Kass finds the fixation on chance and necessity within Darwin's theory of evolution also culpable in science's historical break from teleology and explains how his two major theses in *The Origins of the Species* threaten our universal principles. He explains the impact Darwin's theory of natural selection had on our understanding of the cosmos which accounts for the purposelessness embedded into the foundations of modern science and the technology which has been inspired by this highly customized science. First, Kass remarks on Darwin's thesis on the transformation of the species saying it assumes that "species are neither eternal nor separately created, but have come into being by descent with modification from pre-existing species" (260). This, of course, challenged the biblical and immutable understanding of species which failed to acknowledge the constant changes occurring in nature in addition to any honest observations about different populations and their chances of successful adaption or extinction (due to poor conditions for adaption). And while Kass admits that the Darwinian theory of evolution does manage to "reconnect [humans] to animals" (252), there is a *mechanistic* element to this natural

science that has paradoxically worked against itself. Kass says that "Darwin was interested in accounting not only for the internal purposiveness of plants and animals, also and especially for the perfection of their structures and for the perfection of their usefulness to each other…he wanted to account for why everything was so perfectly ordered, for why everything appeared to be designed" (261). As a result, inquiries of this nature required an extensive physiological and biological analysis, which explains why a mechanical basis was necessary for his doctrine in *The Origins of The Species*. However, when one explains phenomena *exclusively* by reference to physical and biological causes, all metaphysical causes become lost in these descriptions. Kass believes that by *re*connecting the metaphysics that teleology offers with modern science we would see that matters of chance are always *posterior* to intelligence and nature and that most modern science fails to acknowledge this first cause (Aristotle 247). Consequently, this long-term disconnect has alienated us from our natural rights because our very purpose lies within a first cause that hardly anybody is willing to acknowledge because we have lost the knowledge of its existence.

Next, Kass analyzes Darwin's second major thesis about natural selection which "holds that natural selection has been the major *means* of modification" (260) which also challenges the biblical stories of creation which soon became inferior to Darwin's much more logical understanding of species and their evolution. For Kass, it is the paradoxicality of Darwin's theory which unintentionally undermines teleology because it leaves us with the conclusion that "Purposive and co-adapted beings and races rise and change and fall by processes that are themselves not purposive, out of a nature that is seemingly purposeless and aimless" (262). Regrettably, these deductions *automatically* undermine the teleological conception of nature which supposes a more ordered and purpose-driven account of it.

It is only fair to note however, that this was likely not Darwin's intention according to Kass who shares a quote from one of Darwin's friends and colleagues at the time, Asa Gray, who acknowledges Darwin's contributions to science saying "Let us recognize Darwin's great service to Natural Science in bringing back to it teleology; so that, instead of Morphology *versus*

Teleology, we shall have Morphology *wedded* to Teleology" (252). Curiously, Darwin's response to this comment goes as follows "What you say about teleology pleases me especially, and I do not think anyone else ever noticed the point" (Kass 252). When we realize that Darwin himself had not intended for his theory of evolution to alienate teleological notions from natural science, not only does it allow us to consider re-establishing the connection between morphology and teleology and remarry these two doctrines but it also invites us to look more critically at the individuals who publicly critiqued Darwin's work and the various ways in which his ideas in *The Origins of the Species* have been manipulated for the purpose of "legitimizing" modern scientific endeavors since its publication in 1859.

Lastly, Kass takes a critical look at Darwin's hierarchy of the species and his thoughts about some animals being "higher" than others in nature. And though some of Darwin's comments do seem to suggest high levels of respect for his fellow naturalists and their research, he does not seem to need their verification before developing his own taxonomy and hierarchy of the species. In *Toward a More Natural Science* Kass shares a quote that could bring us some insight into what exactly Darwin meant when he used the word "higher" in his theory and what problems this perspective has caused for our species since then:

> I will not here enter on this subject, for naturalists have not yet defined to each other's satisfaction that is meant by high and low forms. But in one particular sense the more recent forms must, on my theory, be higher than the more ancient; for each new species is formed by having had some advantage in the struggle for life over other and preceding forms. (Kass 269)

Kass helpfully explains how the word "higher" can also be linked to the human soul and consequently the "*higher grades of soul*" (270) and uses this argument to link us back to teleology, or rather, the need for teleological notions within modern science. And while it is unclear whether Kass agrees with Darwin's hierarchy of the species or not, he does seem to believe that "a notion of soul might be necessary in order to understand the aliveness of all living things, down to the very simplest" (271). This means that both knowledge of the soul *and*

personal ***ac***knowledgment of the *existence* of the soul within each of us may be a critical element in understanding our individual "aliveness" and the meaning of our existence.

And what brings humans a greater understanding of their soul and the soul of all other living things? Why teleology of course. Regardless of how this intersectional argument is approached, every path will eventually lead us back to Aristotle's *Physics* and the need for finding purpose in our existence which can be found within the following quote:

> Spontaneity and chance are causes of effects which though they might result from intelligence or nature, have in fact been caused by something incidentally. Now since nothing which is incidental is prior to a cause per se, it is clear that no incidental cause be prior to a cause per se. Spontaneity and chance, therefore, are posterior to intelligence and nature. Hence, however true it may be that the heavens are due to spontaneity, it will still be true that intelligence and nature will be prior causes of this All of many things in it besides. (Aristotle 247)

Alas, these assumptions work in opposition to Darwin's theories about evolution which contributed to the defilement of universal principles during the scientific revolution and any philosophy that supported such principles, such as Aristotle's philosophy and his theory on causality. Consequently, we now live in a realm that has been moulded by modern science, which itself, has been built off *presupposed* assumptions about our nature which lack a likely *vital* element, that being, the purposiveness of our existence. If Plato were alive today, he might even observe that our species has become trapped in a cave *within* a cave which only makes liberation from this imprisonment that much harder, especially for those experiencing a general, yet gloomy sense of dissatisfaction or an unexplainable disconnect within themselves and/or their relationship to nature. One might even argue that we are regularly absorbing *third-hand* knowledge about our political landscape which is only working to reaffirm our doubts about a purposeful existence and the soulful wisdom offered to us by ancient philosophers like Aristotle, whose theories are, now, much more likely to be mistaken for mere "ideology" rather than being

accepted as legitimate knowledge or helpful truths that we can look to for answers.

Leo Strauss believes that one of the biggest barriers preventing "modern [humans]" from gaining a true conception of classical philosophy is their failure to take classical philosophy seriously. He says that "only if the study of classical philosophy were accompanied by constant and relentless reflection on modern principles, and hence by liberation of the naive acceptance of those principles, could there be any prospect of an adequate understanding of classical philosophy by modern [humans]" (Strauss 100). Moreover, Heidegger believed that "the foundations of modern philosophy were laid down in an explicit and conscious opposition" (99) to ancient and classical philosophy and the dialectical reasoning that guided these methods of philosophical examination. Therefore, to understand modern philosophy, one *must* first understand ancient and classical philosophy so that one may understand what our modern philosophy is in opposition *to* according to his argument. It is only when we know this, that we can begin to make *reasonable* judgements which are grounded in truth because we will not be limiting ourselves to historicist arguments that keep us trapped in the anxious and unsatisfiable cave, we now call 'relativism'. Simply put, we need to understand the *whole* if we are to ascend from the cave of relativism and modern principles are only *part* of the whole.

The desertion of natural right has left our species in a vulnerable state. As our ability to control nature steadily increases, so do our chances of being controlled as a species since *we are nature*. Indeed, we are now so far removed from our natural rights that to claim that these rights are "self-evident" is no longer an accurate statement. Luckily however, much of the moral and philosophical knowledge that we need to solve this problem already exists, we simply need to gain the courage to *acknowledge* its existence. If modern science can acknowledge the need for the "immutable principles of justice" (9) which Strauss believes can liberate us from the historicist views that keep us trapped in the cave of relativism we now find ourselves in, there is a *chance* that we can avoid the *even darker* cave of nihilism that would only take us further away from our natural rights.

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