

VOLUME XV, NUMBER 1, WINTER 2014/15

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A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$6.95

IN CANADA: \$7.95

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## Harry V. Jaffa: An Appreciation

by Michael Anton

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED HARRY JAFFA'S name on the dust jacket of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. That book was loaned to me by an intellectually sympatico cousin about my age. Unlike me, he knew himself to be a right-winger from the get-go. For me, it took the shock of being plunged into the deep end of the loony-left cauldron that is Berkeley, California, in the fall of 1987. Despite having grown up with hippies all around me, and having attended my fair share of Cal games, I really had no idea what Berkeley was going to be like. It took about six weeks for me to realize, "These people are nuts!" I am thus a reactionary in the strict sense: my politics were formed, at least initially, in opposition to that madness. But they would be fully formed by Harry V. Jaffa and the men he trained and inspired.

Back to that fall of 1987. I devoured the first third of Bloom's book, enjoying in particular his destruction of various left-wing shibboleths (especially affirmative action). Then I got to the middle third, with its deep philosophical reflections, and I was lost. I returned the book only to discover that my cousin hadn't read past that point either.

The following summer, on an Alaska cruise, of all things, I struggled through the whole book (having by then acquired my own copy). That was a life-changing event. I'm not going to say that I fully understood Bloom's argument on that reading; I think around two years later I had digested most of it. But that was when I "woke up" to philosophy and its importance. I had, since a high school A.P. English class, an affinity for "the classics." But until Bloom explained it to me, I could not have explained even to myself why I cared.

A year or so after that, I was at a party at which there was a girl visiting Berkeley from Pomona College, one of the Claremont Colleges. There are five undergraduate colleges in Claremont, plus the graduate school, plus the theology school, which Jaffa later taught my fellow graduate students and me to refer to as the School of Demonology. All the campuses are cheek by jowl and share a central library. Students of one can take classes at the others, and so on. Anything that happens at one of them will be known to everyone at all of them in short order.

Anyway, by that time I was a conservative guerrilla fighter on campus and known to be such, and so the conversation turned

to politics. Apparently, Jaffa was at that moment roiling the whole Claremont community with various provocative statements about homosexuality. This poor girl was so traumatized that, even at a distance of some 400 miles, it was all she could talk about: that awful Jaffa!

Jaffa.... Jaffa.... Now where had I seen that name before? Oh, right! The Bloom dust jacket. I loved Bloom, and Jaffa and Bloom had written a book together (*Shakespeare's Politics*, mentioned on *Closing of the American Mind's* inside flap), so they must be intellectual compatriots, right? (How much I had still to learn!) Hence this Jaffa must also be a great mind. I should seek him out.

Which I did. In writing at first, in person later.

BEING A SUBSCRIBER TO *NATIONAL REVIEW*, the first thing I did was comb through its archives for Jaffa's articles there. Contrary to the opinion of my distraught interlocutor, I found Jaffa's writings to betray not even an inkling of insanity. To the contrary, he seemed more lucid and—yes—moderate than any conservative writer I had ever encountered. Not "moderate" in the Dick Darman sense (a name much on conservative lips in those days) but in the deeper, Aristotelian sense which, at that time, I could only intuit.

I remained obsessed with *The Closing of the American Mind*, that great gateway drug into the pleasures of philosophy. I read everything I could find on it. I would go to the library in those pre-internet days and search the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* for articles on *Closing* and Bloom. I found one by Jaffa—20 densely reasoned pages—titled "Humanizing Certitudes and Impoverishing Doubts," published in the journal *Interpretation*. I will never forget the experience of reading that essay. I was down in Santa Cruz for the weekend, and my parents asked me to stay at the house of one of their friends all day, to let in some contractor and keep an eye on things. I brought a photocopy of Jaffa's piece, over which I pored for hours.

But *quelle horreur!* Jaffa—despite, apparently, being one of Bloom's oldest friends—did not love my beloved book (though he found much in it to love). On the contrary, he was devastatingly critical. This was like Mommy and Daddy fighting—but much worse. Was I going to have to make a choice? I found the

experience of reading that essay exhausting. I resisted its theme and conclusions mightily, but could not refute a single link in the chain of Jaffa's logic.

Mentally, I did not choose but tried to remain on friendly terms with both, like the Bush Administration with India and Pakistan.

A YEAR OR SO AFTER THAT—NOW IN Davis, California, still besotted with the Great Books—I took a course on Aristotle that covered the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*. We read both of these books in class, line by line. The professor, Larry Peterman, brought them alive. Now, Peterman, it turned out, had been trained by Jaffa. This he did not make known, not even to me, until he was certain I could be trusted. I suppose it was just too dangerous to be "out" on a University of California campus.

Struggling with some passage in the *Ethics*, I went to Peterman for help. He offhandedly suggested I take a look at Aquinas's commentary. So I got that from the library and it was, indeed, helpful. Then I read the introduction, by a modern scholar, who referenced a pioneering work on Aristotle by one...Harry V. Jaffa! This turned out to be his dissertation and first book, *Thomism and Aristotelianism*. That little volume instantly made clear to me how closely Peterman's presentation followed Jaffa's.

So I said to Peterman, "You must have read this, right?" He acknowledged that he had. "What else are you holding back from me?" I cried, indignant. He suggested that I look up Jaffa's essay on Aristotle in the original *History of Political Philosophy* edited by Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey. The third and current edition, which I didn't even yet own—I still knew nothing of Strauss—didn't have it because...well, because of Jaffa's orneriness, but that's a story for others to tell. But I found an old edition in the library and read it there. Here was a profound work, about a profound mind, written by a profound mind. I return to this piece every five years or so; my most recent read was about six months ago. I keep diving into it as deeply as I can and have yet to touch the bottom. I may never.

Gradually Peterman revealed to me the extent of his learning from Jaffa and passed me other books and writings. It was at this time that I collected the core of my library—primary sources and scholarly books alike—in which Jaffa's books have pride of place.



Peterman was instrumental in sending me to Claremont in 1994. That summer, I and three others were Publius Fellows of the Claremont Institute. Jaffa had retired five years prior from Claremont McKenna College but was still active with the Institute. He spoke to us many times over the course of our fellowship. The first time, he was wearing what he always wore whenever I saw him (save on ceremonial occasions when he would don a coat and tie): untucked polo shirt, dress slacks, white tennis shoes, and the kind of cheap cap—polyester in front, plastic mesh in back—sold in truck stops for \$2.99. He asked us all who we were, where we had been educated, and by whom. As we told him he realized that all of us were taught, at least in part, by someone he had taught. He said, proudly, “You’re my grandchildren! I’m speaking to my grandchildren!” We didn’t fully realize what that meant at the time, but I never forgot it, and over the years its truth and significance have become clear.

**I** STAYED IN CLAREMONT FOR THREE YEARS. Jaffa was always around. He had been ejected from his office after retiring but still went to work every day. He at some point had commandeered a large room in the basement of the schools’ Honnold Library. This he called his “lair.” He was, apparently, a squatter, and the library administration was unhappy with his occupancy. He cared not a whit.

You could go down there most any day and find him at his desk, reading, writing, or both. No matter what he was doing, he would stop to talk to any student. We used to gripe to one another—and sometimes, gingerly, to him—that the worst thing about his various feuds was that the time he wasted on them could have been better spent on more important projects. For instance, he once harangued Glenn Ellmers about smoking—Professor Jaffa was a health nut, to say the least—and then, not satisfied with the oral chastisement, sent Glenn a long letter, with citations to medical studies, that refuted every point Glenn had tried to make in his defense. To this, Glenn replied with a much shorter letter that stopped just shy of saying outright that if the professor were to spend less time on such endeavors and more on his great work, he might by then have finished *A New Birth of Freedom*. The story’s ending is happy, though: Jaffa did eventually finish *A New Birth of Freedom*, and Glenn later quit smoking.

Of course, we students deserved some of the blame for that lost time. We—especially Tim Caspar, myself, and above all Tom Krannawitter—wasted a great deal of Jaffa’s

time in those days. To us the time was precious, but for such a man as him, there was always something better to do. Though perhaps he didn’t see it that way. I am grateful for every second, but also regretful of the words not written as a consequence.

**J**AFFA KNEW EVERYTHING, OR AT LEAST everything important. Much of what will be written about him in the coming days will focus on Lincoln, American politics, and modern conservatism, which is absolutely fitting. But his mind was a museum stuffed to the rafters with masterworks. Name any “great book” and he knew it cold. Books he hadn’t studied for 50 years he could recall in detail, with total clarity. Montesquieu, Machiavelli, Marsilius—all of it. Wondering about an obscure passage in Shakespeare? Ask Professor Jaffa. First he would quote it in full, from memory, and then spend an hour explaining what it meant, in the context of that play, and in Shakespeare’s corpus. The same could be said for Plato—a philosopher about whom, unless I am very much mistaken, he never published a word beyond a passing reference. And not just the *Republic* and the *Apology*—he knew all of the dialogues. He knew every book of the Bible. And he knew more about American literature than the entire English faculties of some of our elite universities.

I could tell the following story about any number of books, but I will confine myself to two. I had been obsessed with *Moby Dick* in my senior year of high school and freshman year of college. I found all the scholarly interpretations unsatisfying. Somehow, one day in the lair, that book came up. Jaffa launched into a lengthy—it must have been at least 90 minutes—interpretation of the whole work: its design, its symbols and themes, everything. It all came together as he spoke. *Of course* that’s what that means! When he was done I said, “So, Professor Jaffa, you’ve written that up—can you tell me in what journal so I can get a copy?” No, he hadn’t written it up. It would have taken ten lifetimes to write out all he knew. We later had the same conversation about *Huckleberry Finn*. It remains a source of profound regret that I didn’t immediately try to put down in notes as much as I could remember of what he told me.

My own philosophic obsession—then as now, Machiavelli—Jaffa hadn’t studied with care since Strauss’s 1950 course at Chicago on the *Discourses on Livy*. But I could—and did—ask him any question about Old Nick and he always knew the answer. And, funny thing, Jaffa in his lair was slightly different from Jaffa above ground. Down there, he

would tell you things. Esoteric things. Not that anything he said in any way contradicted or undermined his public presentation. It’s just that he showed a little more leg—more than enough to demolish conclusively the caricature of Jaffa as nothing more than a grim moralist, the Cato the Elder of the Straussians. Speaking of whom, Jaffa also loved to tell stories about Strauss and the Straussians, a topic on which I at least could never hear enough.

**E**VEN JAFFA’S MORALISM WAS MORE TEMPERED than many realize. He once consented to attend a small party at the home of then-Claremont Institute fundraiser David DesRosiers and his wife, Fabiana, despite suffering from the misapprehension that they were cohabiting. Slightly ill at ease, he groped for the right noun to describe Fabiana, finally settling on “your...er...lady-friend.” To which David replied, “You mean my wife?” Jaffa’s face immediately lit up. “Oh!” he exclaimed. “That’s much better!”

Jaffa was an Aristotelian to his core, so it is perhaps not surprising that for humility—pointedly not among the moral virtues analyzed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*—he had little use. He once was detailing for me the myriad hints that Strauss had laced throughout his works that pointed to his (Strauss’s) judgment of America. (This theme Jaffa spells out in detail in the autobiographical introduction to his last book, *Crisis of the Strauss Divided*.) Now, the question of the extent to which Strauss agreed or disagreed with Jaffa’s interpretation of American principles gets to the very heart of the so-called East-West divide among Straussians, which has narrowed somewhat in recent years, but back then was a yawning chasm. Still not quite accepting Jaffa’s insistence that there was no daylight between his and Strauss’s views, I asked him why Strauss had not done any of his own scholarly work on America but left only hints. Jaffa replied, “He left that for me to do.” Another time, he was inveighing against a former student who had gone on to study with a scholar Jaffa considered dissolute and—worse—wrong about the most important things. I said that the man had done some good work and mildly asked what was the harm in being exposed to different points of view. Jaffa shot back, with an impish grin: “The Lord thy God is a jealous God!”

But I don’t want to leave the impression that Professor Jaffa wished to be worshiped uncritically. He sought students, not sycophants. He liked to be challenged and was energized by a good fight with us no less than with his



many eminent sparring partners. Certainly, he wanted you to end up in full agreement, but he preferred to win you over after a long struggle, like a sport-fisherman finally landing that thrashing marlin. It was more satisfying for him that way.

**R**EGARDING JAFFA'S LEGENDARY QUERULOUSNESS, others have tried to interpret it and put it into context—some to explain, some to justify, others to condemn. Since I can offer no fresh insights, I present instead two stories, one merely amusing, the other momentous.

At one of those early meetings in the summer of 1994, I casually remarked to the other Publius Fellows, "Maybe Jaffa will be denouncing us one day!" Ed Erler, a professor at a nearby university and a Jaffa student, was there—since all of Jaffa's students, at whatever stage of their careers, would seize every opportunity they could to hear him speak. So there was Professor Erler, in the middle of his summer break, well established in his career, sitting in a seminar room to listen to his old teacher give a talk pitched to 20-somethings. When you reside that close to a living Socrates, you avail yourself of his wisdom whenever you can—I learned from the example Ed set that day. Anyway, to my (I thought) clever remark, Erler retorted, "Don't flatter yourselves."

Ouch! But my prediction would come true within two years.

Shortly after the *Weekly Standard* launched, I published a small, light-hearted piece entitled "Conservative Bohemia." The idea, such as it was, was that conservative arts and letters were in a sad state because we lacked incubating neighborhoods akin to Bloomsbury, Montmartre, Greenwich Village, or North Beach. Much to my surprise, Professor Jaffa read it. Less surprising, he tore it to shreds. He told tales of the restaurant and saloon his father had operated on MacDougal Street, in the heart of the Village, before World War II, when the area was still genuinely bohemian. There was nothing admirable about these people, he insisted. Beyond that, he carefully traced the concept of "bohemianism" back to its roots in Rousseau and dissected and autopsied it right then and there. He said all this without rancor or insult. While he never hesitated to tell us students, bluntly, when he thought we were wrong, he also never made us feel stupid or small. His purpose was always to free us from error and guide us to the truth. Yet once again, I resisted his conclusion but could refute no single link in his logic.

Jaffa's debates with his peers, alas, were rarely so free of acrimony—which brings me to what was undoubtedly the most exciting

thing I or any of my fellow students witnessed during our time in graduate school.

**I**N 1996, CHARLES KESLER—JAFFA'S SUCCESSOR in Claremont in so many ways, and my principal teacher—was hosting a conference. Charles, who had studied with Harvey Mansfield, had secured Mansfield as a speaker for the conference. It so happens that I have had a small number of intellectual heroes. Jaffa was one. Harvey Mansfield is another. I thus lobbied hard for the honor of picking Mansfield up at the Ontario Airport and won it. My car was the worst vehicle in Southern California at that time (and perhaps of all time). I cleaned it as best I could but was still so ashamed of it that I irritated the great man on the ride. Famously taciturn, he finally said to me, sharply, "Stop apologizing!"

Now, shortly before this conference, Mansfield had published, in the *New Criterion*, a review of the Library of America's two-volume *Debate on the Constitution*, a collection of the writings for and against ratification. In that review, Mansfield used the phrase "self-evident half-truth" in the course of summarizing Aristotle's teaching on class conflict.

We mere grad students (some of us, at least) thought this was witty. Jaffa was incensed. To call the central truth of the American political creed a "half-truth," even as a joke, was to dismiss the whole enterprise, he insisted. We asserted that Mansfield intended no denigration of America. Rather, he was making a point with which Jaffa, a supreme interpreter of Aristotle, did not disagree. But Jaffa would give not an inch. He penned a blistering attack on Mansfield's review, focusing on the offending phrase. Once again, while his conclusion seemed perverse, no link could be refuted. Would we have to choose? Many did choose. Lines were drawn and friendships shaken.

Then the conference. It all went very smoothly. We students listened attentively to panel after panel, speaker after speaker—including the sprightly, grave, and brilliant Milton Friedman. Jaffa spoke last. The conference was in a classroom with theater-style seating. I was in, if not the uppermost back row, well toward it. Mansfield—who had given a talk on manliness but was now in the audience—was a few rows in front of me.

When Jaffa finished his criticism of the "Calhounites" (after John C. Calhoun, the defender of Southern slavery) in the contemporary conservative movement, the field was opened to questions. Mansfield, who was one of those just indicted, launched a vigorous rebuttal. He said that Jaffa and himself and their many colleagues and friends were

engaged in a war—and then accused Jaffa of standing behind the lines firing into his compatriots' backs. He also implored Jaffa to stop referring to his friends and ex-friends as "Calhounites." Jaffa responded, no less passionately. He categorically denied, not the specifics of the allegations, but the interpretation of them. I fall far short of doing justice to Mansfield's and Jaffa's careful but heartfelt remarks. The Claremont Institute has a transcript, I believe.

**T**HE REST OF US WATCHED AND LISTENED, mesmerized. Henry Kissinger's dictum about the pettiness of academic disputes notwithstanding, the stakes appeared to us to be the very highest—the fate of conservatism, of the country, of the good itself. Professor Harry Neumann, who was also in the room, would later dub this incident "the Ten-Minute War." It was discussed, debated, analyzed, scrutinized, and obsessed over for all my remaining days in Claremont. Sort of the way Bilbo's disappearance from his 111th birthday party was the talk of the Shire for years afterward.

Milton Friedman, who had no background in these controversies, was appalled. Carrying great authority that towered above his 4'11" frame, he tried to calm the waters. "Gentlemen! Gentlemen! We're all friends here!"

Little did he know.

Mansfield's father, Harvey, Sr., got Jaffa his career-making job at Ohio State. It was Jaffa who introduced Harvey, Jr., to Strauss. But this, too, is a story best left for others to tell.

For my part, Charles had arranged to feed all 37 conference attendees at his house. His wife, Sally Pipes, and I were to cook the whole dinner ourselves, which we did—three courses. At one point we ran out of stove space at Charles's, and I had to run back to the house where I lived and cook the *haricots verts* there—but we pulled it off.

After the dinner, triumphant and flush with wine, I resolved to conduct a little "shuttle diplomacy" and patch things up between Mansfield and Jaffa. After all, I had by that point known Jaffa for more than a year and Mansfield for about 30 hours. Who better? So I went back and forth between their tables and exhorted them to come to terms. Mansfield was game. Jaffa was defiant. "If Harvey can't see that what he said was wrong, then there's no basis for friendship." "He's quarreled with everyone he's ever loved," Mansfield said to me, sadly.

But this story, too, has a happy ending. Charles told me many years later that they did patch things up, possibly because by then I had butted out. I am in any event grateful that I never had to choose.



**R**EGARDING JAFFA'S MOST FAMOUS PUBLIC act—he contributed the “extremism in the defense of liberty” and “moderation in the pursuit of justice” lines to Barry Goldwater’s 1964 acceptance speech—I can say only this. I worked part-time at the Institute the whole time I studied in Claremont. One day we received a letter addressed to Professor Jaffa. It was from Senator Goldwater. I don’t recall it word for word, but I can give you the sense of it very quickly. The senator said that he didn’t care what anyone thought, he didn’t regret a single line in his 1964 acceptance speech, least of all its two most famous lines, and if he could, he would repeat that speech three times a day for the rest of his life. Larry Arnn, at that time president of the Institute, framed the letter and put it on the Institute’s wall.

After I left Claremont in 1997, I saw Jaffa once, by chance, in the lobby of the Yale Club in New York. David DesRosiers and I were headed to the bar—Jaffa would drink only on Churchill’s birthday, and then only to make a toast with one small sip of brandy—and there he was, in town to give a talk somewhere. Had I known about it, I surely would have contrived to attend. But in that case, I didn’t need to—he delivered the substance of his remarks to us right then and there in the lobby. We never made it to the bar.

I didn’t see him for another decade or so, until the Institute started inviting me every summer to spend a few days with the Pub-

lius Fellows, by now relocated to Newport Beach. Jaffa would come down at least once to talk to each fresh contingent of grandchildren—and by now some great-grandchildren. I didn’t always make it to every single session during those summers—it was Newport Beach, after all—but remembering Erler’s example, I never missed one of Jaffa’s. I was also pleased that he told the Pubes many of my favorite stories. Then two summers ago he wasn’t there; I was informed he was too frail to give seminars. Last summer, I told Institute president Brian Kennedy I wanted to go to Claremont to see Jaffa, and he promised to take me, but I didn’t follow through. Another regret.

**P**ERHAPS THE BEST YARDSTICKS BY which to measure Professor Jaffa’s life and legacy are the charges leveled against Socrates and, through him, against philosophy itself. So far was Jaffa from disbelieving in the God of his city that, if it is possible for a man to rescue from oblivion and resuscitate God, then Harry Jaffa did it. Far from undermining belief, he made it his life’s work to convert unbelievers, convince doubters, fortify waverers, and hold firm the believers. Or, to be more precise, to persuade—and, when necessary, bludgeon—the ignorant and misguided into knowledge.

As for his influence on the young, to be formed in one’s formative years by Professor Jaffa was an unalloyed blessing. No better use

could be made of one’s life than to live it in strict adherence to his teachings, and all who have done so have prospered in body and soul. Yet ever insistent on the indissoluble union between virtue and happiness, he was also too wise and too generous to mislead us with bromides. Fortune will have her say, he well knew, and he taught us in part by illuminating Aristotle’s enigmatic remark on King Priam. While it is possible to live virtuously and end unhappily, as Priam did, it is impossible to live viciously and be truly happy. Jaffa demonstrated, in speech and deed, that it is better to deserve genuine happiness, whatever the outcome, than undeservedly to enjoy some facsimile.

Before I discovered Claremont and what it stands for, I had no faith and few friends, in the highest sense of souls sharing a love of the good. Because of Claremont—because of Harry V. Jaffa and the people he taught, inspired, and influenced—I have had both in abundance for 20 years and counting.

Jaffa liked to quote Lincoln’s remark that the idea of equality enshrined in the Declaration of Independence is the “father of all moral principle” among us. For us Claremonsters—always happy, no longer quite so few—the love of wisdom animating Harry Jaffa’s soul was, remains, and will always be the father of all intellectual principle among us.

Thank you, Professor Jaffa.

*Michael Anton is a writer living in New York.*

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