

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

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I: Plato's Political Philosophy (0:15 – 14:53)

KRISTOL: Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol. Joining me today is Mark Blitz, professor of political philosophy at Claremont McKenna College, author, recently, of a book, *Plato's Political Philosophy*, and, earlier, of works on Martin Heidegger and on American liberal democracy. Welcome, Mark.

BLITZ: Thank you, Bill.

KRISTOL: Mark, you've been teaching and writing on political philosophy for 40-plus years, I guess?

BLITZ: Forty plus years, indeed. Yes.

KRISTOL: Why political philosophy?

BLITZ: I took the introductory government course at Harvard when I was a freshman. Back then it was called Gov 1A and 1B. It's now inflated. All the numbers inflated up along the way, everything inflates up.

And the section man, as it was called then, teaching assistant, basically – a fellow named Morton Horowitz – indicated that political philosophy was the most important subject and the whole second half of the course was political philosophy. So, that's how I first became interested in it.

Then what happened is sophomore year, Harvard had a system where you have a tutorial that you take connected to the house in which you are living and the tutorial to which I was assigned was on a subject in which I was completely uninterested.

I was walking across Harvard Yard, ran into a friend of mine who had been in Harvey Mansfield's Gov 1B section. I started moaning and whining and complaining to my friend and he said, "Why don't you come on in and see Professor Mansfield?" I did, I told him what I was interested in.

He asked me who my section man was and what my grades had been, and that was all satisfactory. And then I entered his sophomore tutorial, and it's from that point on that I became especially interested in political philosophy. What we did in that tutorial was to read a limited number of books, Plato's *Symposium*, among them. And it was fascinating what he was able to bring out of the text and teach about all sorts of important subjects. So, really from then on I had and developed and continued this interest.

KRISTOL: And any one thinker sort of attracted you from the very beginning, or has that changed over the years?

BLITZ: Yeah, I was interested really in all of them. But as I continued along with my education I became particularly interested in Plato and wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on one of his dialogues called *The Statesman*.

Plato was the originator, and, of course, his teacher/character, Socrates, the originator of political philosophy, of kind, of unbridled thinking about all of the important human questions and that connection between the kind of deepest philosophical questions and the most urgent and immediate human questions, how should I live, how should we govern ourselves, what is justice, what is happiness?

That connection is something you see most powerfully in Plato and then subsequently in Aristotle as well. So, Plato really has been the thinker with whom I've spent the most time during my career.

KRISTOL: Well, let's talk about Plato.

BLITZ: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: So, I mean, there are all these different dialogues. Socrates is a character in most of them, not all of them, should people begin to study Plato, would you recommend to someone in college or not in college who sort of would like to get some sense of what it is to study Plato, how to go about it?

BLITZ: You know usually people begin with in a way his most famous dialogue, *The Republic*. *The Republic* is a difficult dialogue. But it's also not such a bad place to begin because it's so clearly about this decisive question of justice and also about the question of human happiness.

And the other thing that *The Republic* does and is famous for doing is to defend the intellectual or theoretical or the philosophic or the scientific life itself. That life did not always exist. The full use of the human mind in the freest way did not always exist.

So, *The Republic* is a marvelous defense of that and as a defense of that it's one place to begin. Although as with everything else, once you started yourself, it's good to have someone reading it together with you and helping teach it to you.

Other good places to begin are any of the dialogues in which Plato deals with ambitious young men and turns them, or tries to turn them, from some of their craziest wishes to a concern with virtue of character, a concern with philosophic questions, those are very good places to begin.

If one's particularly interested in one of the virtues, courage, moderation, piety, there's a separate dialogue in each one of those and that's another good place to begin. So, the place to begin, in one sense, *The Republic*; in another sense, these dialogues about virtue with ambitious young men.

If you're a father and you're concerned about the plight of your children, there dialogues which begin exactly that way, as well, and those are other places to be in. So, you can begin with any one of these basic dialogues in which Socrates is a major figure.

Another dialogue where people often begin with is the *Apology of Socrates*. Socrates was on trial for his life, found guilty, and is executed, and that's a dialogue to be read carefully, but it's a bit misleading in a sense because the real Socrates as Plato portrays him aggressively questions, aggressively searches for knowledge and understanding. And that's not something that you do when you're on trial for your life.

There's a little section in the *Apology*, which is a version of that, but only a little section. So, the *Apology* is another thing clearly to look at and to study, but in a way not as characteristic as some of the others I've mentioned.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and it does seem like the dialogue – when I first encountered Plato, the dialogue style or form – sure has many things to recommend it, and you should say what they are, why he chose to write dialogue? He could have written treatises like Aristotle and, like, I guess, pre-Socratic writers had done or epigrams or all kinds of things.

BLITZ: Poems. These kind of philosophic poems they write –

KRISTOL: But I do think one obvious reason is that there are these characters and one can identify with and get interested in, not just Socrates, I mean, it is sort of watching life as opposed to doctrine being preached to you.

BLITZ: Yeah, no, that's exactly right and in each – the dialogues enable you to take a subject, courage, for example, and work it through and talk about it, but talk about it not merely in an abstract, though also in an abstract way, but in a manner that is directed to a particular character. All the dialogues have this ad hominem atmosphere and you can really see courage or justice or moderation at work, forming someone's mind, explaining their experiences to them.

So, the dialogues have this dramatic aspect to them that treatises don't. Dialogues also enable you to see people thinking. It's easier to portray the kind of dance of thought, the movement of thought, the ups and down, the hypotheses suggested and then rejected – easier to do that in a dialogue than when you're talking to yourself in a way in a treatise.

Aristotle tries to do some of that in a treatise, and, of course, he's Aristotle so he's successful in doing it, but it's never as dramatic and compelling as Plato's dialogues are.

KRISTOL: And, so the philosophy professor way of reading Plato seems to be to basically ignore the interlocutors who are not as smart as Socrates and just take the Socratic statements and string them together, it's not right?

BLITZ: Yeah, it's a mistake and – the major mistake of current philosophy professors is to take the dialogues and, in fact, take any of the classic works and force them to be about whatever questions contemporary philosophers happen to have on their mind.

So, you look through these books and pick out some sentences, pick out some suggestions, pay no real attention to how seriously they're meant, pay no real attention to their place in the dialogue or in the treatise, and just play around with them.

So, you know, that has its interest but it doesn't teach you enough about the thinkers themselves and these great thinkers such as Plato are superior intellectually to us and we have to remember that. They're there for us to study; we can learn from them.

It's a great mistake to impose on them the limits of one's own intelligence, and that's really, I think, the major difficulty when your contemporary philosophy professor dealing with Plato or any of the ancient texts. Of course, you don't think they're superior to you, not really, whatever you'd say, but the truth is they are superior. And one has to recognize that.

KRISTOL: Why did you choose to write your Ph.D. thesis on the *Symposium*, not the most obvious dialogue to take if you're getting a degree in political science, I suppose?

BLITZ: *The Statesman*.

KRISTOL: I'm sorry, in *The Statesman*.

BLITZ: Well, *The Statesman* was a dialogue that was largely undiscussed, because it's a very difficult dialogue. It's somewhat more abstract than many of the others. And, also, it's one of these dialogues, which does not feature Socrates as the main character. It features a stranger from Elea.

The first reason I chose to write about it is in many ways a central reason that governs everybody's choice of a dissertation: "Is there room for me to say something that someone else hasn't said?" And in *The Statesman* that was certainly the case. And it's the third great political dialogue. *The Republic* is the famous one. There's a long dialogue called *The Laws* where he lays out a somewhat more practicable regime than in *The Republic*. But *The Statesman* is a serious study of political science – what is it actually to know something?

So, I also thought it would be amusing to contrast the knowledge and the political science in Plato's *The Statesman* with political science as it was taught in the Harvard government department by then and everywhere else as well, where the goal seemed to be to ignore all of the important political problems in order to discover this, that, or the other thing.

Whereas Plato's political science is always only about the important political problems: what is virtue, what is excellence, what is happiness, what's the degree of knowledge one could have of political matters, how much do you need to recognize that a successful political community depends on the consent of the governed, who will understand many things, but won't understand the full aspect of political and human things that a political philosopher can uncover?

So, *The Statesman* is about all of those issues. *The Statesman* also gives you a good sense of how Plato as he's moving beyond simply politics to thought generally conducts himself largely by classifying, by dividing, by combining, by reasoning in that way, and *The Statesman* is an excellent introduction to that as well.

KRISTOL: Let's talk about the relation of politics to what's beyond politics. What is striking when it comes to Plato – I remember being struck by this a little bit when I was in college – is, on the one hand, clearly he's interested in human life in general, and not just human life in general, but sort of the whole of things.

And, yet, politics is pretty central to his most famous dialogues, his longest dialogues, really almost all of them in some way or another. As you say in *The Statesman*, it's really central. Why does, sort of – if you're interested in politics, you might think you'd just be interested in politics. If you're interested in beauty or truth or whatever, you'd be interested in those things. What's the relation?

BLITZ: Truth, beauty, the good, justice. Plato's understanding of the most fundamental matters is very much connected to his understanding of political things. Any political community is a kind of whole. It puts together various elements into something which is meant to fit, doesn't fit perfectly, but it's meant to fit.

Governed usually by some understanding of human excellence, happiness, and justice, so that the American regime is governed by ultimately – for the purpose of securing individual natural rights. And everything else, in some way or other, is organized around that.

Plato understands all of the fundamental things to be parts of a whole and one wants to understand each of those parts individually – courage, justice, moderation. But also wants to understand how they fit together. And the political community is a wonderful image or example of that.

Most people have heard of Plato's ideas or forms, and that's also part of the question of how do particular things become connected to what's general. How is what is general what forms particular things? And you see that in the political community, and you see that with the kind of things that Plato thinks about.

Every particular attempt to act courageously ultimately intends to be fully courageous, ultimately has its meaning from what courage is simply, and that connection which is the fundamental connection among things generally also becomes particularly clear when you look at political matters and when you look at matters of human character.

So, I think for Plato the deeper questions and the political questions are in some ways much more connected than they would be for other thinkers. And I think you learn this more and more as you study Plato, what it is you think about Plato.

II: The Ancients and How We Live Now (14:53 – 24:12)

KRISTOL: Staying on the level of politics for a minute, what about the obvious objection that Plato's political science couldn't really capture America, let's say, because America's based on modern doctrines of natural rights and human inequality that Plato didn't know about presumably, or here we are in a modern world that he couldn't have anticipated?

I mean, your claim, I guess, at least in terms of your dissertation on *The Statesman* and also the discussion just now – is Plato's political science is more or less adequate to understanding political things 1,000 or 2,000 years after he lived?

BLITZ: Yeah, between Plato and Aristotle, 90 percent – and I picked that number, I might even think it's a little higher than that, 90 percent of what you need to know you know. Aristotle and Plato worked out the meaning of justice, the alternatives of justice. They worked out the alternatives of political regimes.

If you read Book Eight of Plato's *Republic* you'll see a wonderful discussion of democracy, which is an excellent basis for beginning to consider our own democracy. If you read Plato and Aristotle as well, you'll a full understanding of human happiness. Human happiness understood as dealing properly with all of the goods and passions that we still deal with: fear, desire, wealth, honor, beauty, ambition, and so on.

So, Plato is, as Aristotle is, a fundamental basis in ground for the first, deepest thinking about all of these human questions and concerns, which anyone can recognize are as relevant and important now as they were then.

Plato also has an understanding of liberty. Liberty is connected. Freedom is connected to virtue and ultimately connected to thought, because, at the end of the day, what's freest about us is our reason and the use of our reason.

So, to begin to understand what is different in modern political thought, which centers around this question of individual natural rights, Plato and Aristotle are excellent based to begin to understand the meaning of our liberal democracy as a democracy, as a regime, which is devoted still to a kind of equality. Plato's and Aristotle's understanding of democracy is a fundamental basis.

I don't think there's anything which has happened, which fundamentally changes, or even very much changes, the adequacy of the understanding that Plato and Aristotle have.

KRISTOL: Even though we don't put philosophers to death? And we would at least claim that the tension that's so visible in Plato between philosophy and the city – the Cave and leaving the Cave – the attempt to leave the cave and to educate other people, perhaps, to do so which puts you then in conflict with Athens or whatever city you live in it seems, according to Plato. You think that's not been fundamentally overcome or changed by modern life?

BLITZ: No, I don't think so. I mean, of course, we don't have to put philosophers to death because they're busy killing off their own discipline, which in a way is true of the liberal arts generally. So, you know why bother?

Plato is concerned with this question of the difference between the unbridled search for knowledge and the fact that any political community and even everyday life needs to take many things for granted. But also recognizes, as I said, that you can't have a successful community without recognizing the need and the justice of those governed to consent to the regime.

But the tension nonetheless still exists between those opinions and what you take for granted and the search for knowledge simply. And where you can see that most clearly even today is in the world of religion.

Communities with their serious religious belief, which takes the form of law and is essentially connected to political authority – obviously, you see that in various regimes today dominated by contemporary Islam.

So, the ability to fully exercise the mind, let alone other aspects of human freedom and liberty is constricted in many serious ways by certain kinds of connections between belief and law. That's a phenomenon, which is vital and present for us today.

But it's simply the clearest and starkest example of what's always a difference between thought and what it is one needs to take for granted in a political community.

All that said, it might be argued that for us today, the greatest problem is, as I said, the – in a way the suicide of the intellect rather than the discrepancy between the intellect and everyday life.

KRISTOL: And briefly what accounts for the suicide of the intellect? A big question – since you've raised it – what's –

BLITZ: I think several things, of course. I begin with the fact that not enough guardians of the intellect, professors, academics and so on, truly take seriously the fact that they should be studying those whose understanding is greater and broader than their own.

They don't in that sense really take seriously their own activity. The life of the mind has become a specialist's life and a narrower and narrower specialist life, so the breadth and height of the existence has faded.

And of course, the dominance of modern natural science and its ways of thinking is such that it makes other forms of intellectual activity seem less serious, even though the fundamental ways in which you would think about all of the matters I've discussing, happiness, character, justice, are not matters that are really open to modern natural science as it considers, but too many people think that it does.

So, those are among the internal reasons for the degradation of the intellect and the life of the mind.

KRISTOL: Do you find teaching – that students still, hopefully, have a certain curiosity about these things? How much is the – how much damage are the current academic disciplines doing with the actual education of young men and women?

BLITZ: There's a lot of damage. At one point, it seemed to me that the problem was more missed opportunity than aggressive error so that you have these often wonderful young men and women who attend college, but what they learn is pointless, but it doesn't warp them otherwise. Now, I'm beginning to wonder whether it warps them to some degree. That's one issue.

The other issue is that there's simply less love of books, love of learning, love of the liberal arts. We talked about my interest in political philosophy, but underlying that interest, of course, was a life and a culture in which I grew up, in which attending to the most important books and most important matters was something that you did.

So, that when you came across someone who really began to understand these books and could teach them to you, it was a magical thing. I just don't think it's a magical thing for as many students now as it had been.

And the dominance of their concerns about making a living – a concern, which is always there, of course – is a growing dominance as well, the separation between the liberal arts and the ways you might earn a living is much greater now than it used to be.

It's often the case that people who went into finance or banking or economic – they majored in liberal arts, and then they had some training program and then they went on and did what they did.

Physicians were often pillars of their communities in the arts and music and so on. All of that less so now because there's more of that – more of that division. So, the underlying culture, the underlying regime, that hurts as well.

So, it's stunts the growth and especially stunts the vision of students as they first come in. It's up to us to bring that out again. But it's another step that you need to take in your teaching whereas earlier you could take that more for granted, that interest and love of learning. It's something that you can take for granted more easily than you can now.

III: Character Virtue in Aristotle (24:12 – 43:57)

KRISTOL: You've written primarily and extensively on Plato, but I think when you teach, you teach Aristotle for almost as much time and almost centrally to what you think students need to think about. So, why Aristotle?

BLITZ: Why Aristotle? I teach Aristotle not only in basic political philosophy courses but in something that we have in my school called "Freshmen Humanities Seminar," and I teach Aristotle as well when I teach another course on statesmanship and leadership.

I think the single most important thing in Aristotle to teach is *The Ethics*, *The Nicomachean Ethics*. And the reason is that Aristotle lists and discusses and dissects and goes through a series of virtues of character that any intelligent young man and woman can see are still the dominant virtues of character.

And that if one could somehow have a character that encompasses these virtues, one would have an excellent life, and one would be, as Aristotle says, happy, happy in the sense of using your powers to deal with the goods and the passions that most concern us.

So, if you want to understand what courage is, a very good place to begin to look is Aristotle's *Ethics*. Similarly moderation, similarly generosity or liberality, similarly a virtue of his called magnificence, which

is the way in which you deal properly with large displays of beauty, beautiful activity, something that's more easily available if you're wealthy but it's also the fact that, at least in the old days, which used to be in once in one's life, one's wedding, that would be the time one would display in a magnificent way.

And there's a more beautiful and a less beautiful manner in which to do that, and it's a virtue of character to do that well – a virtue of his called magnanimity, greatness of soul, great pride, the way in which one deals properly with great honors, in particular political honors, believing that you deserve them and actually deserving them unlike many of our politicians – believing they deserve them and not. And therefore showing, among other deficiencies, vanity.

So, Aristotle's *Ethics* is wonderful because it makes clear the basic grounds of the most fundamental human virtues and also their deficiencies. So you can understand not only courage, but what cowardice is. You can understand not only courage, but what excessive boldness is. And that's true of all of the virtues as well.

So, Aristotle is always, I think, to be taught to understand virtue. Aristotle is also very useful for understanding practical reason. How does one begin to think practically, not merely theoretically?

One place you see that is in the choices you make even if you have a virtuous disposition. What is the courageous act here and now, how do I understand that?

Aristotle really thinks that through and brings that out, also primarily in *The Ethics*. So, that's the first major reason why I think *The Ethics* is a book that everyone should teach actually and everyone should read, or at least those should teach them who have some understanding of it.

KRISTOL: And it's pretty accessible, I think, don't you think, even without a teacher. You can actually read *The Ethics* in a way that, maybe, *The Metaphysics* would be a little difficult.

BLITZ: Sure, absolutely, it's pretty accessible. You can understand his discussion of happiness, you can understand why it is that a life of practical excellence is such a high and beautiful life.

Aristotle also discusses the greater superiority, ultimately, even of intellectual excellence and intellectual virtue, but that's not the core of his discussion in *The Ethics*. *The Ethics* also has a marvelous discussion of virtue – Book Five of *The Ethics* – marvelous discussions of friendship.

So, many of the things which are most fundamental again to human beings and to human life are discussed so thoughtfully in *The Ethics* – that it's a wonderful book – and as you're reading those specific discussions, you can enter those discussions to some large degree on the basis of your own experience. It helps to be taught some, but it's less necessary simply to be taught. And one can find lots of things in *The Ethics* that are both useful and true.

KRISTOL: And obviously you teach *The Politics* too, I suppose, especially in political science courses?

BLITZ: I also teach Aristotle's *Politics*. Aristotle's *Politics*, of course, is another wonderful book. The heart of Aristotle's *Politics* is the notion of the regime or the constitution or the way of life – Aristotle, as well as Plato, understand the heart of politics to be the principle of justice that organizes a community and the good things that the community most strives to attain.

So, unlike the contemporary view that the heart of politics is something like ethnicity or geography or history or material resources, as Aristotle and Plato see it, those are all things that are formed and directed, shaped into a whole. And what shapes them is an understanding of justice, equal to equals, unequal to unequals, in what and for what. Direction towards freedom, direction towards satisfaction of desire, or rather direction towards virtue and excellence.

So, the basic heart of the proper understanding of politics, centering on, not limited to, of course, but centering on this notion of the regime or the constitution is fundamental. Sometimes people will say fundamental but not everything, and Aristotle also agrees, fundamental but not everything.

But very, very important if you think, for instance, of the difference between Nazi Germany and democratic West Germany after the war, in a way it's all the difference in the world. But what is the difference, the difference is the form of government as it sort of organizes and directs the way of life. So, one learns that ground of politics, in both Plato and Aristotle, but in a sense more clearly and directly in Aristotle.

The other marvelous thing in Aristotle is this thorough discussion of practical politics. He ranks the regimes. Some are better than others, some are more devoted to human virtue than others. But you can only go as far as you can go with the material that you have in the place that you have.

So, Aristotle engages in long discussions of varieties of democracy, types of middle-class regimes, how to make them the best they can be, but within the limits that you face.

Both Aristotle and Plato believed that there are standards by which you can judge, but the standards are not unbendingly absolute in our way. They have their meaning and their power in relation to the opportunities that you actually are afforded by the material with which you're working.

So, they're neither relativists, of course, nor absolutists in our notion, but have this practical in-between, the heart of which, of course, has to be the understanding of the standards and what high.

But Aristotle gives you that practical understanding as well in an unmatched way. So, both *The Ethics* and *The Politics* are more than well worth reading.

KRISTOL: And it does seem that both Plato and Aristotle go out of their way to emphasize this human beings, together in what community they're in, can to some degree shape their fate. I mean, the emphasis on the regime as opposed to, maybe, the modern attempt to say we're driven by geography material forces, psychological forces, whatever you know, just history and culture to determine – they seem to really want to, maybe even exaggerate, the degree to which –

BLITZ: That's true. That's certainly true. Politics is ultimately a matter of choice. That's what the arguments are about. These days sometimes vigorous arguments, but always in a way vigorous arguments even if not intemperate, but always vigorous.

Because political choice is choice, a better and worse, right and wrong. It's not choice about which you can have complete understanding because politics deals with changeable matters. It's affected by what people do and how they think. Nonetheless, your choice can be guided by an understanding of better and worse, just and unjust, and that's fundamentally something you can never run away from or – The political life is a life of choosing, from the voting of a citizen to service on a school board or local political communities all the way up to the higher political offices.

And Aristotle makes that clear and makes it clear to anyone that you can't avoid choice and therefore you can't avoid attempting to choose wisely and intelligently.

KRISTOL: Say a word more about Aristotle being neither a relativist – I guess that part is fairly obvious – but not an absolutist as well, because I do think this sort of simple cartoon version of Aristotle has him as something of a – there's right, there's wrong and, you know, that's what Aristotle says and that's it, but that's not the case?

BLITZ: That's true. There's a cartoon version of Aristotle and even of Plato and sometimes that moves students away from them, because students are intelligent and recognize that absolute, immovable – it always must be done this way or it's wrong – is rarely, if ever, correct. And that's not Aristotle.

Aristotle doesn't have unbridgeable laws. What he has is a full understanding of what virtue is. There is a difference between courage and cowardice and excess of boldness. There is a difference between generosity and cheapness and profligacy. You know which one is better.

But within the particular situation that you face, you need to think about the generous action is or what the courageous action is. Similarly, politically, you know what's more and less just. You know that the purpose ultimately of politics is to aid human happiness, which means excellence of character and excellence of judgment, to the degree to which you can.

But what you need to do, here and now, what set of institutions can actually achieve, support, and consent, here and now, that's something you need to think about, you need to judge, you need to choose, so you're guided in your choice, but you're narrowly restricted and directed in your choice. Complete relativism gives you no opportunity to choose and think. Complete absolutism is a way of running away from the responsibility of choice and thought.

So, Aristotle gives you guidance, but not rigidity.

KRISTOL: I always found that metaphor of trying to steer a ship towards a goal, but understanding that you might have to zig and zag somewhat and that different ships would have to be handled in different ways in different oceans and require different – and crews would require different speeds – all these possibilities – kind of a useful metaphor for how you can have goal that's not arbitrary, but you can't have absolutist rules about everything you do. Is that a metaphor from Aristotle?

BLITZ: Aristotle's metaphor, the one that he works through most, is gymnastic training. And he at certain points in *The Politics* compares someone thinking about and recommending action to those organizing and founding political regimes, compares them to gymnastic trainers.

Unless you know the regimen for a possible Olympian, you don't really know what the human body can be, what its true beauty is, how you could bring it about, in general and particular areas.

But it's also the case that the training regimen for a possible Olympian would kill most people – certainly me. And you would achieve much less than you could achieve by thinking about the proper regimen but still having in mind really some version of the full goal.

That's a useful and, I think, true example. You have an understanding of what physical excellence is. That's the model ultimately for the excellence that you want to achieve in a different way. But you have achieve what you can achieve definitely from the way the Olympian achieves it and even the excellence that ultimately is your goal will look not exactly the same, but nonetheless be measured by that height.

So, I think that is an image or analogy that Aristotle uses wisely, because it fits so nicely what one would seek to attempt politically.

KRISTOL: Working in Washington – you worked in Washington, too – that people either instinctively have that sense or some people have studied this, just turn out to have better political judgment than people who either have no thoughts about goals and are just here to react to the day's events and maneuver and advance their very narrow interest, short-term interests, on the one hand, or people who think there's just always going to be – you know, you've got to be for A, B, and C and, you've got to advance A, B, and C at every moment for the same intensity and the same force, regardless of the political situation and the environment you're in.

BLITZ: All those things are foolish. I mean – going back to your ship example, you can't bob pointlessly going nowhere. At least, you can, I suppose, be certain that you won't sink, but that's not enough in most cases, you need to steer in a particular place. But you want to get to the place, you don't just want to go full speed ahead or cut your engines simply all the time, because you won't achieve your goal.

This way of talking can be harmful sometimes because it leads people to forget what their goal really is, and that's something one can't do. It can lead you to forget that much of the time certain courses of action will be better than others, but not all of the time.

So, good judgment, prudence, as one calls it, practical wisdom, combined with a real understanding and holding your understanding in the direction of the goal that you would like to reach, that's the central matter, and I think it is what leads people to be successful in the serious sense in Washington, not just personally successful, but to advance the level of freedom and justice in the country.

KRISTOL: Let me ask one last sort of big question about Plato and Aristotle and, I suppose, all the pagan philosophers, which we can't do justice to here in a few minutes, but I think it would be – people would be interested – I'd be interested in your at least preliminary thoughts and suggestions about this.

One obvious point to say is that they didn't live in a world shaped by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They didn't even – in a way weren't aware of Judaism. I guess, they could have been aware of it a little bit, but they weren't really. And obviously, Christianity didn't exist.

So, I mean how much – when you study the ancients, how much do you have to sort of say, well, wait a second, there's this huge phenomenon of the last 2,000 years that they either – they certainly weren't – they weren't aware of concretely? I suppose the question would be: Were they aware of the possibility of it, or how much is their thought? Does it have to be modified in light of this phenomenon, and so forth?

BLITZ: There are two things, I think, especially one would do in that situation. One is to look at some of the great medieval thinkers. So, if you consider Maimonides, the great Jewish thinker who comes to learn Aristotle. How does he connect Aristotle, how does he connect the life of the mind to Judaism, to the Jewish law as he understands it?

And you see that what Aristotle is arguing still allows the absorption of what highest in Jewish life. So, what's new in the phenomenon would not change if one is to think seriously with Maimonides, and who better understands Judaism than Maimonides? Absorbing his thought within Aristotle does not fundamentally change Aristotle.

The other way one looks at this is by considering carefully both Aristotle and Plato. If you consider the phenomena that surround revelation, but look at them not simply from the point of view of revelation, but as phenomena of piety and holiness and justice, on their own, then you see that Plato's understanding, Aristotle's understanding, enable you to deal with them properly at their highest level.

The meaning of religion politically is something they consider at great length. It's a pagan world, but it's surrounded by gods. So the meaning of religion politically is always on their mind, but also the height that religion represents.

My argument ultimately would therefore be that from a natural or reasonable point of view, what one would say in terms of revealed religion is fundamentally understandable on the basis of Plato and Aristotle, and I say that looking forward from them, but also backwards from thinkers such as Maimonides.

IV: John Locke's America (43:57 – 56:22)

KRISTOL: You've written a whole book on Plato, but you wrote a very good chapter on Locke in your book [*Duty Bound*:] *Responsibility and American Public Life*, and you teach Locke, I think, in the history of political philosophy – political philosophy courses you teach. So why Locke? Why the centrality of Locke? Both in terms of political philosophy – and then we can talk a little bit also about why Locke in terms of America?

BLITZ: Sure, well, I teach Locke in many courses. I think Locke is the most fundamental, comprehensive understanding liberal democracy and therefore the roots of the American regime.

The Declaration of Independence is pretty obviously based on John Locke, and all of the arguments that people sometimes make about other elements behind American democracy – those arguments may be somewhat true, may be somewhat false, but one can't deny the important Lockean basis of the Declaration of Independence, and one can't deny the overwhelming importance of the Declaration for American government.

So Locke has this enormous practical importance for us. Intellectually, as I said, he's a fundamental and comprehensive thinker. It's from Locke that you can most understand why it is that you would seek to base government on natural rights – natural rights meaning the authority of each individual to choose for himself, or choose for herself, your authority for choice, whether or not you are free to act your choices and act on them.

Your authority for choice is clear just by reflecting on yourself. You have this freedom of judgment and freedom of choice, which can't be taken away and which when you look at it is visible. That's important for a number of reasons.

First, Locke was one of those thinkers. He's the emblematic Enlightenment figure who wanted to loosen a bit the choke hold of Christianity, in particular on practical life and practical affairs.

And you might say that a piece of evidence that can help you guide your life, which is as strong, if not stronger, than revealed texts is precisely this individual authority possibility, capability of choice. So, Locke bases government therefore on individual natural rights.

When you base government on individual and natural rights, you begin to connect government to an understanding of happiness as the satisfaction of desire, because the satisfaction of desire is what's most equal among us and obvious among us.

And the way in which you satisfy desire, especially when you consider desires fundamentally to be equal, is to emphasize a certain equality of the means to that satisfaction. That's money and property.

So, Lockean regimes such as ours emphasize wealth and property because of the prior emphasis on the satisfaction of desires, because of the prior emphasis on freedom and justice as the equal authority that each of us has to choose for ourselves.

But it's also the case that in order to secure your rights and to exercise them ably you need a certain kind of excellence of character. You therefore have characteristic modern virtues such as responsibility, industriousness, and, ultimately connected to this as well, religious toleration.

Which together with versions of the classic of the Aristotelian virtues suggest that there's a kind of character, which is also necessary for the defense of individual rights. It's not merely a matter of materialism. It also means you need a government, which tries to restrict itself to the goal of securing rights, so that happiness can be understood.

That government could be large in terms of what it does. It could be small in terms of what it does, but it should be limited to a particular set of ends. One good way of limiting government is separation of powers where government clashes with itself.

So, stemming from Locke you can see a kind of unity of our understanding of happiness, our understanding of justice, our understanding of freedom, our understanding of institutions within our regime.

KRISTOL: And your Locke seems to be a unified Locke or coherent Locke. I guess, a lot of accounts of Locke – the political types stress the *Second Treatise*, and the sort of philosophy professors stress the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and some commentators on Locke say these two are actually in considerable tension with one another or in any case very distinct from one another. But that's not your Locke?

BLITZ: My Locke is a coherent Locke. If a thinker's not coherent, it's not clear to me why you would really study him carefully. Locke is, I think, coherent in every serious way.

The grounding is the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and the political works ultimately fit within that. The key again is this understanding of the operation of the human mind and the operation of human choice and the authority we have to choose, but the ability we also have to suspend choice and rationally consider the most sensible and prudent ways in which to act.

You don't really understand that just looking at the *Second Treatise on Government*, which is what people look at. What you can understand, however, from looking just at those treatises and then further understand by looking at the *Essay*, is the connection of that way of understanding freedom with Locke's concerns about religious dominance.

You see that in the *First Treatise on Government*, you see that in the *Essay* as well. Locke is one of those who begins the attempt to understand religion and, especially now, Christianity in his own terms; *The Reasonableness of Christianity* is one of his great works.

Kant, writing somewhat after Locke – *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* – it's an attempt not to ignore religion, but to show its fundamental connection to human happiness as they might understand it and come to understand it.

So, there's unity in all those levels. There's a particular understanding of pleasure. What is pleasure? Locke understands pleasure as ultimately the relief of unease, which enables him not to have to rank the pleasures, which he doesn't want to do because of this root equality.

That understanding of pleasure is coherent with all the rest of the things that I've mentioned. So, every element of Locke, including his famous understanding that what is central, first of all, are the simple ideas that you have, not the complex compounds that you put together.

Each of the elements in Locke is coherent with the other. They all fit together. They fit together in a theoretical direction and a practical direction, which to me indicates that Locke is really the central thinker to understand if one wants to understand modern liberal democracy and therefore ultimately modern politics as well in all sorts of –

KRISTOL: Listening to your accounts of Locke – I mean, parts of it sounded to me a little bit like Hobbes or what I remember of Hobbes. I guess, there's a big scholarly controversy about how much Locke follows Hobbes and how much he rebels against Hobbes.

From the point of view of political liberty, it's a little uncomfortable to say that Locke is just a Hobbesian, because Hobbes was not a great fan of political liberty, and Locke is the basis of the Declaration of

Independence and so forth, but what about that? I mean, do you teach Hobbes as well as Locke? Hobbes obviously addressed a lot of the same issues.

BLITZ: I teach them in this awful way that there's a central connection between the two. And the times when I'm not teaching Locke, I'll simply teach Hobbes.

What's the heart of the connection? The heart of the connection is individual and natural rights, is the understanding of happiness is the satisfaction of desire, is the attempt to ground government on individual authority, which is something you see in Locke as well as in Hobbes, of course.

And therefore the attempt to understand political life as serving necessities, which occur if you think through the situation that we would all be in if we had no political authority at all, but have the desires and the passions that Locke and Hobbes ascribe to us – the famous state of nature.

In all those ways, they're fundamentally similarly. Hobbes understands government as ultimately representing us in situations where the choice that each of us would make individually would lead to a result none of us would choose; Locke also follows along that path of representative government.

The key difference is that Hobbes prefers a strong monarchy, because he thinks that's necessary to control criminality and therefore to reduce fear. Locke deals with that in a much more clever and complex way, and that clever and complex way involves early versions of separations of powers. But also involves, perhaps, an easier way of seeing the effects of religious toleration in reducing some of the public import of religion and an ability, perhaps, to see how this devotion to property would ultimately being to lead people to direct themselves to a kind of security, which didn't always require what Hobbes thought it required.

But I think it – when compared with other thinkers, the two of them are very close. It's something that Locke disguised and Hobbes didn't have to do – talk about – but nonetheless I think it's true.

KRISTOL: Certainly, when one reads the *Leviathan*, one's struck that Hobbes wants to make you as the reader, sort of, fearful, and Locke in a certain way wants to – especially if you live in a Lockean regime – reassure you that property is solid, a sort of, your property rights are important, and you could use that as a basis for moving ahead with your – other things you want to do with your life and the pursuit of happiness. There's a difference – I suppose that's more of, you might say, a tactical difference or a political difference, not a theoretical difference – understanding what politics is about or what human desire is about?

BLITZ: Yeah, that's what I'd say. I mean, Hobbes is concerned with what he calls “commodious living” as well as with preservation, but the emphasis is on preservation and, therefore, the emphasis is on fear.

Locke is more concerned with how can we turn the abilities of people with talent – what he calls “the rational and industrious few” in the *Second Treatise on Government* – how can we turn their powers and abilities in a direction that serves the common good, that enhances the comfort and preservation of all?

And the key to that, of course, is stable property and the use of one's industry and responsibility and other characteristics and intelligence, of course, to do that. Ultimately, this also becomes aligned with these great technological discoveries and the use of modern science to overcome natural limits as well.

So, Locke's eye is a little bit more on those kinds of things than Hobbes' eyes is on them directly, but nonetheless there's that fundamental and more than fundamental – but something you can see in many particular areas – similarity between the two.

V: Hegel and Marx (56:22 – 1:05:38)

KRISTOL: And you mentioned Kant in connection with Locke, so let's get to the Germans who are difficult and challenging in their way.

But I'm struck that you – you discuss and study Locke in a very serious way and take him very seriously, but you've also spend a lot of time on the Germans from Kant all the way through Heidegger, and that's maybe not-so-common among some political philosophy professors.

Philosophers take, obviously, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger very seriously. Say a word about the relationship. But then also why Kant – especially why Hegel – whom I know you have a high opinion of?

BLITZ: Who I've written a couple of articles on. Well, one great thing about political philosophy is that if you make the time as you should, you can study with some care each of the great thinkers. You don't have to spend all that much time studying the rest of political science. You don't have to spend all that much time involving yourself in these narrow controversies that some philosophy professors do.

So, there's no particular reason why one should not study, if one can, Plato and Aristotle and Locke and Kant – maybe all of them is a little bit ambitious, but very many of them. So, why would one take away from one's self the pleasure of studying these great minds? That's the main reason, I think, one would do it.

Hegel is the most powerful thinker of the 19th century – one of the most powerful thinkers ever. For us, talking about political philosophy and thinking now in terms of Plato and Aristotle and of Locke, Hegel attempts to bring them all together.

He grounds his work on the understanding of the individual and the individual personality and the abstract individual, which is a version of what we've been discussing with Locke. But he also believes that one could integrate into this an understanding of the kind of abstract morality that you see in Kant and also integrate into this an understanding of concrete political institutions, why they ought to be chosen and how they can allow a certain height of virtue and character.

His great political work, *The Philosophy of Right*, begins in this Lockean way, goes on in this Kantian way, and then discusses the family, civil and economic society, and the political community in a manner, which attempts again to incorporate, at least at some level, what you see in Plato and Aristotle.

On the other hand, whereas in both Plato and Aristotle there is this division between the philosophic life and the political life at some fundamental level – because the unbridled search for understanding disagrees at some point with what you need to take for granted politically.

In Hegel, that difference ultimately ends. Hence, the famous "End of History" that can be attributed to Hegel. Hegel's concern with Kant is that Kantian morality is abstract. Kant is one of those examples of "It must be so if you were to act morally, and it could never be otherwise."

Hegel takes from Kant a sense that moral intention, the intention to act correctly simply because it is morally correct, and the self-understanding that you can have of yourself as acting that way.

But ultimately you would like that intention morally to form actual institutions. So that your actual life and enjoyment of goods and dealing with others could be as it were moralized, and that's what Hegel attempts to do in this third part of *The Philosophy of Right*.

So, of course, he respects Kant enormously, but politically that's the limit as Hegel understands it. There are other philosophic differences, of course, but that's really the central moral and political question.

KRISTOL: You begin studying Hegel, which is a somewhat daunting thought. Do you think *The Philosophy of Right* – is that – *The Philosophy of History* –

BLITZ: I prefer *The Philosophy of Right* to start because it's so – it's close to what we more or less know and understand politically and close to what we more or less know and understand about the individual and individuality, and because it's such a wonderful work filled with notes and examples some of which Hegel supplied in the text, lots of which he supplied just in lectures, which, however, fortunately for us students have left to us.

So, you can really understand in *The Philosophy of Right* what he's getting often and his difficult language can become more concrete. And it's about – *The Philosophy of Right* is about phenomena that you can understand, so you can look at them yourself a bit and look at them directly.

Whereas even *The Philosophy of History*, which is kind of about things you know, isn't really about things you know. You don't have really your own opinion about Rome or Greece. You have someone else's opinion about Rome and Greece that you're playing off against Hegel's.

I certainly recommend *The Philosophy of History*, but even more *The Philosophy of Right*. *The Philosophy of Right* also has the advantage of being one of the few works that Hegel himself published during his lifetime. So, it's not merely a compilation of lectures, but it also, as I said includes some of these notes, which make it somewhat easier.

KRISTOL: I suppose in the 20th century an awful lot of people have come to Hegel through Marx – certainly a lot of Marxists did. Marx was a student of Hegel's. Is Marx simply – I don't know – what's your attitude towards Marx as a thinker, not as a person who might be responsible indirectly for a lot of very bad political regimes?

BLITZ: You used to have to teach Marx, of course, and one of the things that first attracted me to political philosophy in the way in which I study it is coming to understand that one might be able to defend in a reasonable manner our focus on individual natural rights and capitalism as well from the great threat from Marxism in the Soviet Union.

This was an extremely important impetus for lots of people, and it played its part in my understanding as well. So, there are limits to Marx intellectually as well as these visible horrors for which he is to some significant degree responsible.

What's the problem with Marx? Well, there are many. But from the standpoint of Hegel, the difficulty is that he attempts to take what Hegel discusses and base it on the material way in which you meet your basic necessities and make a living and satisfy your needs.

Hegel's understanding is opposite, it's based on the use of the mind. Hegel attempts to see how far you can go in showing the rational meaning of the institutions that we have around us. And when Hegel does that, he also always shows the limits of any particular institution and how it has to push itself forward to the next institution, until finally you have this complete end-point he has in mind. That's his dialectic, his famous dialectic.

As Hegel works that out intellectually, it's powerful and there's much truth in much of what he says. When Marx talks that way materially, it's much less powerful and much more false. So, that's a great difficulty as well.

Similarly, when Hegel works out what he thinks is the best community that one could have, towards which reason is driving, it's a plausible community with lots of individual freedom, lots of individual choice – less than we have, but nonetheless. The few things Marx indicates about the end-point towards which he is driving are implausible and impossible, and often the attempt to secure something implausible and impossible leads to the horrors to which Marxism has led.

So, in those ways and others, though he's a considerable thinker, he's inferior to Hegel, for sure.

VI: On Liberal Democracy (1:05:38 – 1:18:13)

KRISTOL: I do think for our generation – the generation ahead of us and probably almost the whole generation after us – the confrontation of the Soviet Union and communism – world communism which was a real thing – I mean, did – was a spur to thought and, actually, to political philosophy, because that regime is so evidently founded on their own claims to – philosophic claims to truth and to a whole account of history and of, as you say, material things. And our regime, conversely, was found on a different claim.

And I haven't thought about – I mean, how much that – now it could presumably block one from studying if one becomes just too fanatically loyal to one's own regime and doesn't want to think about – that there might be an alternative.

But my sense is a lot of people, sort of, more or less, our age did kind of come to political philosophy through an interest in politics, and the Cold War was, in a way, helpful to getting people to think more seriously.

BLITZ: Yes, I think that's right. The question is, how can you show, or can you show, that our regime is just, that there's a height to its freedom, that its institutions make sense, that it's connected to human happiness, human excellence and so on?

And to show that one really had to think about the grounds of the regime. What is the meaning and justification for individual natural rights? And then one could step further beyond that and see what are these other understandings of human excellence and human happiness and the human height that you begin to see in Aristotle and Plato?

And then still further how practically could one put them together? How could one have a regime based on individual choice and individual rights, which didn't become too low and too flat and too vulgar?

One necessity for that is understanding what is high, what is excellent, politically and intellectually. Can one choose, privately at least, what is superior, can one understand what is superior, can one understand why in a practical sense our regime is a way of life – allows much that's high, while itself as a form of government is high, also?

That's what one found to be true. There's a tendency in our regime, as I said, to flatten and therefore to make more difficult, I think, the experience of what is high and truly choice-worthy. Nonetheless, it's there, and it's allowed, and it's possible that one could think about it.

So, as one thought these issues through in all of these ways, one saw that there was a ground intellectually for choosing us rather than the Marxists, that it wasn't merely patriotism, it wasn't accident, it didn't require complete absolutism, but it was nonetheless true that from the standpoint of justice and freedom and excellence and happiness, we were clearly the superior choice.

KRISTOL: Plus, I think, as you suggested, and you can elaborate on this a little bit, the challenge to mere bourgeois, you know, democracy and material – pursuit of material well-being which came from the Left mostly, in sort of, after World War II – did also – a little bit of impetus to go back beyond Locke, and Hobbes and Locke perhaps, and say, was there other grounds or can one sort of bring in other justifications or ways to elevate liberal democracy? And I think that did help open up the sort of study of Plato and Aristotle, also.

BLITZ: Right. That's quite true as well. So that at one and the same time one needed to see how our way of life in the regime could be defended without being silly and Pollyannaish and thinking that every

element of bourgeois materialism was good, that there was nothing wrong with corporate America, that the level of equality of rights was sufficient as it clearly was not. The difficulty of blacks in America was on people's minds for sure and that's somewhat later – the situation with women and men.

So, one didn't have and didn't need to have this silly view of a perfect way of life that deserved no objection whatsoever. One didn't need that in order to understand it's great political superiority at the same time that one was open to the ways in which one could not only improve the regime, but especially, of course, improve on its own soul and use one's mind in the fullest way and recognize that using one's mind in the fullest way is not identical to a life of bourgeois materialism, at least for most people.

For some people, done right and with the proper leisure and the proper ways of thinking about how to spend the money you earn, for some people, that can really be a high, and that's not to be sneered at either. It's not the highest of heights.

KRISTOL: I suppose it gets back to the question of teaching young people today – we were talking about whether it was a little more difficult. I do wonder how – it just seems the alternative today, I guess – of course, the one real big alternative is Islam as a sort of ideological movement. There are alternatives to liberal democracy, China or whatever, but they don't see much of a – that just seems to me, "We think authoritarianism works better in our case, you know."

BLITZ: So, there you have sort of authoritarianism, plus all the things you used to condemn, with bourgeois materialism. You know, you have this odd – doesn't mean it will always be like that, but that's a concern.

KRISTOL: And I think Islam – some people might have – obviously they succeed in winning – Islam succeeds in winning converts, and maybe it is ultimately a real challenge, but most American college students presumably aren't very tempted by that, so I think it is harder maybe to get young people today to think about the philosophic basis of the regime, like this is what it is, this is what the 20th century is going to be like – some form of liberal democracy – so we can tinker according to our prejudices and be a little more liberal and tolerant or be a little I don't know – have more economic growth. But somehow maybe it's not quite as easy to get people to go beyond the kind of surface questions of the day.

BLITZ: Yeah, I think that's true. They don't think enough about the pleasures of the mind, the use of the mind, or the things that the mind can do. Again, we had in my generation a basis and a background, which opened us to that as well. They have that less, less political reason often to think about their justification of their way of life or their regime and often less individual basis to think about that as well, because their course is set more directly in a kind of economic and technological fashion.

None of that changes the fact however that the fullest use of the mind intellectually is a philosophic use, is a certain kind of scientific and mathematical use as well, of course, and a certain kind of poetic use. They think about that less and they're taught it less, and they're showed it less. But when they are shown it many of them can see it as well.

Part of the attraction of Islam is, of course, some sense of virtue and purity. The issue there is two-fold, the truth of virtue and purity, which is not that and the connection of virtue and purity to true intellectual openness – the kinds of issues among others faced by and dealt with by Maimonides, by Al-Farabi, by Averroes, in the Middle Ages – are central issues still.

So, from that point of view Islam doesn't have that much attraction for our students, because they're not so attracted to virtue and purity. Were they, one would then have to teach other things in other ways.

KRISTOL: And it seems to me the other question one could ask is – you make it sound that most students ultimately still can be opened up to these fundamental possibilities that Plato and Aristotle – let's

say, their account of these possibilities remains basically adequate and more than adequate, sort of educational for people?

I guess the other fear has always been – the Aldous Huxley kind of – et al, you know – the fear of modern science, genetics, genetic engineering, all that, brain science, nano science – all that – is going to fundamentally change things so much that we're all going to be – if people look back a few years from now and think, all those people – it's cute that they studied Plato and Aristotle, political philosophy, but of course, everything serious now is being determined by modern science, and both determined in the sense of intellectually explained and also determined in the sense of essentially running our lives.

BLITZ: Yeah, cute people or cute action – maybe some cages or museums or films of, you know, the way it used – the way we were – the way it used to be.

You know, modern science is necessarily limited by what it can produce. It can't make two plus two equal five. It can't make the just unjust. It can't make the free unfree, it can't make the true false. It can't make the faithless faithful.

The limit to what can be produced either by modern science or anything else is what exists at the realm of the ends and the goals and the forms that can be produced.

So, however powerful modern science is, it's limited by the kinds of things that one thinks about primarily not through the mode and mechanism of modern science. That's, I think, the central fact.

It does, of course, have to be the case that the concrete things modern science will do will change many things. It will change to some degree our understanding of equality as people become more and more alike, conceivably at a higher level, although one doesn't know how this will go. It will change life spans. It will change, as it's continuing to change birth as well as death.

It runs a risk, of course, of forgetting the deep inviolability of every human being. One of the beauties of individual natural rights is to try to recapture that again so that your own freedom is never completely subject to someone else's judgment about better use for you and others.

You run those risks, but nonetheless it's also the fact that modern science can't change what is the case ultimately about the better and the worse and the meaning of those kinds of possibilities and choices.

So, with that at one end and with the power of modern science at the other end, we'll have a world of some sort, 50 or 100 years from now, which will look, I'm sure, in many ways surprisingly like our own and in some ways – in some important ways different.

KRISTOL: Do you think ultimately the human things don't fundamentally get transformed by the scientific enterprise?

BLITZ: They can't be transformed. They can be ignored. They can be downplayed, they can be forgotten. The energy and the effort and discipline required to understand can also be ignored, downplayed, or forgotten. That can happen.

But that there is a – in those cases – a lowering and a forgetting and ignoring of something good, that is also the case. And then there's certain fundamental facts that you will deal with all the time that can't be changed and will always be among us – some of the basic mathematical and scientific facts among them.

But also I would say some of the basic facts of human freedom and happiness and excellence – again you can't –

KRISTOL: Human limitation.

BLITZ: Yeah, the limits of things that human beings can do and limits of things in the world are not limits that any material change can simply overcome. And the fact that we are in an age of extraordinary, powerful possibilities and material change, nonetheless we'll necessarily run up against those limits.

VII: The Allure of Nietzsche (1:18:13 – 1:24:18)

KRISTOL: I was surprised to hear you say before that Hegel was the great thinker of the 19th century since I studied Nietzsche with you as – my year at Harvard – you taught a small seminar, Plato's *Republic* and Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*.

And I loved *The Republic*, but I've got to say I was totally entranced by Nietzsche and *Beyond Good and Evil* so, why are you slighting Nietzsche in this way? And many other students have had my experience, I would say. Nietzsche has a real, you know, following there, doesn't he?

BLITZ: In your case, it was because it taught to you so well.

KRISTOL: A good point, right, right.

BLITZ: That's the reason. No, it's a wonderful book. It's the clearest, I think, comprehensive work of Nietzsche's where you can see everything that Nietzsche's after and everything that he's about in a reasonably accessible way.

But Hegel is superior to Nietzsche nonetheless because it's not clear how far Nietzsche went in really thinking things through at a philosophical and intellectual level. And he's much more dependent on Hegel and Kant's understanding of the human will and how the will works than he himself, I think, means to let on or does let on. But he's a fundamental figure. He returns our sight to certain aristocratic heights. He attempts to return our sight to the height of the philosophic life itself in a way – not the same obviously as Plato's, but nonetheless that's real.

But he also has a kind of grandfather or one might say step-grandfather's responsibility for fascism and that can't be ignored. And as a fundamental difficulty I think with Nietzsche – what in Nietzsche leads one to enjoy reading Nietzsche and even attempt to follow Nietzsche down harmful paths, paths of excessive, unearned inequality and paths of a kind of violence and viciousness that Nietzsche might not have approved of, but which nonetheless are connected to Nietzsche's own thoughts.

There's that political difficulty, and I think there are those intellectual difficulties as well. That said, you might think of Nietzsche as the source of much that became dominant in 20th-century thought. Would there be Freud and Freudianism without Nietzsche? Unlikely, because Nietzsche has this wonderful understanding of the unconscious and of the drives beneath that, in his notion, are responsible for what we think is above us, a version later of Freud's kind of sublimation as an academicized or scientized version of Nietzsche.

Nietzsche is connected as well to Existentialism, this kind of excessive, goalless freedom, ultimately a kind of authenticity. Nietzsche is very much a source of that as well as it develops, especially after Heidegger, but also through the medium of Heidegger.

So, Nietzsche is someone I also still teach. I'm not sure that Nietzsche is as delightful to students now as he was in your generation.

KRISTOL: Just my personal, you know, distorted soul.

BLITZ: That's right. They may not be diseased enough now to –

KRISTOL: I think – don't you think, though, the – just the psychological insights and sort of blinding flashes of brilliance both about human beings, but also about epochs of history and the genealogy of morals. I mean, it just seems – I think that is – and it's written in that incredible style. I should think Nietzsche would be very attractive to people, but maybe not so much anymore.

BLITZ: He does write in this wonderful style, and the psychological insights are great. They're greater still I would say in, let's say, Plato, but they're great in Nietzsche.

I don't know how much students these days take the risk of really looking into the soul so that you can have psychological insights and say, at least, to yourself the things that you need to say to really understand.

Yes, he has great historical insight as well, but so, of course, does Hegel and some of Nietzsche is, I think, actually based on Hegel although Nietzsche himself might not want to say that.

KRISTOL: It may be a little easier to get to than Hegel?

BLITZ: And wonderful understanding of guilt, of reverence, of fundamental phenomena. So, Nietzsche is, of course, an extremely important figure and well worth reading and studying, too. In fact, the first article I ever wrote was on Nietzsche so I put my money where my mouth is, sort of.

KRISTOL: I remember being so struck by the sentence and then the discussion of the sentence in class of "Supposing truth were a woman – what then?" May be you can't have that discussion anywhere today, because it's so politically incorrect about what Nietzsche meant by, but it is such a striking thought and provocative thought.

BLITZ: Sure, you have to begin by excusing yourself. But once you've done that you can then go ahead and talk about what it might mean, both in the general sense of Nietzsche's – supposing – now, lots of Nietzsche's suppositional are experimental – and then, of course, what it might mean to suppose that truth is a woman, as opposed eternal unchanging, somehow beckoning.

Of course, Nietzsche also has a series of views of women. One interesting experiment as to as it were to substitute *truth* each time you see that, it's an experiment –

KRISTOL: Each time you see the word *woman*?

BLITZ: Right.

KRISTOL: Or the epigrams about women are also somehow about truth.

BLITZ: That's right, so that's an interesting experiment. It doesn't work 100 percent, but it works a lot – all of these epigrams about women and statements about women in *Beyond Good and Evil* itself.

VIII: Studying with Harvey Mansfield (1:24:18 – 1:30:48)

KRISTOL: When I met you, you were just a professor at Harvard, but you had been an undergraduate and a graduate student primarily under Harvey Mansfield, but not only –

BLITZ: Yeah, primarily Harvey Mansfield.

KRISTOL: So say word about that. You were one of his, not maybe first students, but earlier students. I was a somewhat later student, and he had generations of students after both of us.

BLITZ: I was in his first generation of undergraduates, there were a couple of graduate students there, the late Anne Kohler, Glen Thurow, and so on. But I was in his first group of undergraduate students, and we had the wonderful experience of going to his house – junior year, senior year, some of sophomore year – and reading texts together with him.

Well, what impressed me and I think the rest of us about Harvey was, first of all, the fact he seemed to be the most intelligent person at Harvard, which is saying something. And that was important.

And second this wonderful way in which he read these books that we were all taught one ought to pay serious attention to, all the things he brought out from those books. Some of it obviously connected to what he himself had learned studying Leo Strauss' work, but, of course, lots of it his own as well.

So, this great intellectual excitement combined with, you know, great intellectual depth and understanding – and that in addition to that Harvey has this excellent political sense actually. So, that one could come to understand what one really was believing politically, how to understand it, where to go with it, what to do with it.

So, it's all of that kind of combination. And it was also just great fun. Using the mind is great fun. So, Harvey is the one with whom I studied with primarily as an undergraduate and also as a graduate student. I did some work as a graduate student with Judith Shklar, the late Judith Shklar, in particular. But it's really essentially Harvey who formed the way I think about things.

KRISTOL: What did you read in his reading groups? Do you recall? I'm sure you do.

BLITZ: We read – in between the reading groups and sophomore and other tutorials – *Gulliver's Travels*.

KRISTOL: Not the usual political science department fare.

BLITZ: Not usually political science department fare, though in a certain way the daily activities of the academic probably had something to do with what you were reading in *Gulliver's Travels*.

Dialogues by Plato, works by Rousseau, *The Discourses*; Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, among others. So, Harvey had a very good sense of what might attract young men, what we would be interested in, though mostly I'd say it was his way of working through the book, which was really the charm.

KRISTOL: Yeah, for me too, I'd say, just seeing some read a text so thoughtfully and intelligently and boldly – I mean, it's the boldness, too.

BLITZ: And you learned there were things you didn't know. You know couldn't fake this, you couldn't imagine, "Well, I could have easily enough" – you knew you couldn't have easily enough discovered those things. You knew there were things to be seen that you hadn't seen and what I'm likely to have seen. There was a world that you were not engaging with until you – you learn from him.

So, you know, honesty about one's own place and limits as you are trying to learn is important, and it's easier to have that honesty when you're really exposed to people who know things that you don't.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I do. You find – always know some things that you don't, that's somewhat – that's a humbling experience, but it's useful.

BLITZ: You know thinking is – requires courage and confidence and not to be overawed – but it also requires proper humility. It needs both of those things. You need to be honest about what you lack and what limits you have, but you need also to do what you can to overcome limits, which are overcome-able and not to be afraid of that either. So neither overbold nor cowardly is necessary.

KRISTOL: And for me, I think, with Mansfield – maybe I was a little more political – to the degree to which he could look at a controversy on the horizon – college and the first year of grad school. It was the imperial presidency, Nixon – how strong should the president be vis-à-vis Congress, etc., and sort of seeing through that contemporary debate while doing justice to it and seeing its theoretical roots in various thinkers and what's going on in that debate or in debates about representation or even in just elections.

I mean, that's one of the things that Mansfield has been able to do that very few – even very good students of political philosophy could do – I think really sort of X-ray down to the – what's you know the institutional bases of liberal democracy, and see deeper what's more – what's going on in these current controversies?

BLITZ: And he did a lot of that especially back then when he worked on the the real roots of representation – contemporary representation in figures such as Hobbes – but also his first book, *Statesmanship and Party Government*, where he, I think, is the first really to have pointed out the connection between this fundamental institution, party government, as we have it, and the changes in regime and understanding and happiness and the place of religion brought by modern political thought.

So, one of the themes of Harvey's work has been to understand institutions, the executive party government representation in that way. I don't think anyone did that then, few people do it now, no one does it nearly as well, and it's not something that you saw even among Leo Strauss's other students, this was really something that Harvey saw, and it's extremely powerful. When I teach elementary government and talk about parties and the meaning of parties, I rely on that work.

IX: Teaching and Practicing Politics (1:30:48 – 1:45:13)

KRISTOL: Let's talk about your career a little bit. Not quite the usual academic career. You taught political philosophy for about a decade at Harvard and then Penn and then came to Washington for about a decade – little over a decade of – in government and public life, I'd say, and then back to Claremont to go back to the academy.

So, I guess what – I'm just curious if you can remember back then. What surprised, you haven't taught – thought a lot about politics and clearly American politics for a long time. You came to Washington. What sort of surprised you about that and then at the end going back to the academy, were you different as a teacher as a teacher at all because – or as a thinker about politics because of your experience in political life?

BLITZ: People used to ask me would – when I came to Washington – and then I'd go back and talk to them – “What did you learn from Heidegger?” because I just published a book on Heidegger that helped me in Washington. Of course, the answer is nothing. So, there's no connection.

What I learned was first of all it was easier than I thought, this is to begin with. I started as assistant director of a now defunct agency. I have been at agencies which are now defunct. That's my career. I had an article –

KRISTOL: The correlation is not –

BLITZ: I had an article in the final edition of *The Public Interest* so, this is sort of – if we had gotten to the point where I need to be involved – maybe it's time to pack it in – at this agency called Action.

And you know what I realized is one of the things that you read about – but you read about so many things – is that if you had two or three things that you wanted and stuck to them, you could achieve them and it was also the basis on which you could judge all of these things other people are saying to you and telling you to do.

Because that's part of the difficult part. There are a lot of forces pressing themselves on you so you need some standpoint that you hold while adjusting as necessary.

So, I discovered that though I'd half known it and discovered that it wasn't that difficult. That's the first thing I discovered. The Action Agency was a small agency but it was – because it was a small agency the political appointees had lots of control over it. We had an excellent group of political appointees there.

KRISTOL: And it had been a very controversial agency. It was – I guess Jimmy Carter had set it up or shaped it in a certain way, and Reagan wanted to take it in a very different direction.

BLITZ: It was originally set up by Nixon – Richard Nixon put it together – VISTA, the Peace Corps, and other programs he didn't like – and he gave it this name, Action – I think because – I'm not sure –

KRISTOL: Kind of a Heideggerian –

BLITZ: It was a choice, act or passion, which should it be. I think he chose Action – at least it's the story we used to tell ourselves – he was friendly a fellow named Clement Stone who was an insurance magnet who had this big wax moustache. He looked sort of like the villain in a silent movie.

And he would begin each of his meetings by smacking the table and saying, "Action."

KRISTOL: Is that right?

BLITZ: So, that's what we thought – it wasn't an acronym, you know, most of these things are acronyms you could make up, but it wasn't an acronym.

And it was a small enough agency that our good group of political appointees was able to shape and direct it. I was in charge of policy and planning, which included the budget and planning and evaluation and policy development, so I learned lots about federal budgeting because the small agencies are more or less identical in the way in which they operate, in that format sense, to the large agencies. So, I learned a lot about that. But beyond that it was really being a part of the Reagan Administration and what we attempted to do.

I left Action to become a senior staff member of the Foreign Relations Committee when one of our colleagues, Jeff Bergner from the University of Pennsylvania, who worked for Richard Lugar, became the staff director of that committee.

I probably learned the most about politics in that job, because Congress is so political. What matters is who's for something, who's against it, who'll vote in which ways. People actually do lobby you even on the Foreign Relations Committee, even in the tasks that I had.

So, I learned something about how things work when you look at things so politically which is not, of course, how it works in most of the executive branches that I at least have served in. So, that was very interesting.

But I left that position to return to the US Information Agency – actually between Action and the Foreign Relations Committee staff, I moved to the US Information Agency which is again now defunct – which is the agency of –

KRISTOL: Luckily, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee still exists. But Richard Lugar – you ultimately jinxed him. Three decades later he got defeated for re-election.

BLITZ: It's my own way of making government smaller and more manageable.

When I went to USIA I was in charge of a small office there. But I wanted to be involved in foreign affairs. The US Information Agency was the agency in charge of Voice of America, information programs, kind of propaganda programs and educational and cultural affairs. And I was in an office in Educational and Cultural Affairs.

I went to the Foreign Relations Committee staff, but about – a little bit over a year into that the fellow who was associate director, meaning in charge of all of Educational and Cultural Affairs, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, left and I was asked to be – take that position.

So, my own committee confirmed me, which makes life much easier. Maybe one of the reasons they asked me. And I ran that agency for three years. And that was a big agency, the Fulbright program, visitors programs, books and libraries abroad, the kind of thing you would expect an academic perhaps to do, because it's got something to do with American principles. But it was also in the midst of the Cold, as the Cold War was being successfully prosecuted by Ronald Reagan. So, it was a wonderful time to be there. I think we did some useful things.

But what I'd learned at the Action Agency – stood me in good stead when I was back running that bureau – had in mind two or three – maybe four things that you want to do – do them – listen to everybody's else's suggestions in that light and try to achieve what you want to achieve successfully.

I was fortunate because what I wanted to do, obviously, was in consonance with what the Administration wanted to do and also because though it was a reasonably senior position, no one else cared about it very much. So I had much more freedom of action.

That's now back in the State Department – Assistant Secretary of State, but you have much less freedom when it's in the State Department because you have all of these other people you need to go through.

So, I learned something about government, but largely it was an opportunity to do useful things. I mean, the Reagan Administration was a time when one could actually do useful things, so it was wonderful to be a part of it. But it's not ultimately what I'm ultimately most interested in and therefore I was fortunate to be able finally to return to the academy and think about the things we have been talking about.

KRISTOL: I'd forgotten you worked in Congress and I never have. And I've always thought – spent time there and dealt with it enough that I feel that I have some feel for it. But I'm very conscious that I don't have a real feel for it the way one does if one works as a staffer. I always tell young people that it's – it can be the most annoying job to have in many ways, but you've – it does not – it's not Civil Service, no real procedure or process, you're very dependent on your boss.

BLITZ: It's a slavish –

KRISTOL: You have a great boss, it could be great. If you have a not-so-great boss, it can be either unsatisfying or miserable. But there is something about just the political – everything coming together in Congress, which after all does appropriate all the money and passes all the laws and where – there's no Civil Service, so you could be directly lobbied by everyone.

BLITZ: It gives you a different view of things. It – I was fortunate in having as my direct boss, my friend – colleague – Jeff Bergner, but as my ultimate boss, Richard Lugar, who is a very reasonable, thoughtful man.

And – but even Lugar, of course, was very political. Anybody there is very political and that's one thing you need to know. So you just have to begin to think that way. People lobby you directly. It's a much more contentious atmosphere.

It's hard I think to do it for very long if there are other things on your mind. If they're not, you can more or less settle in, but otherwise it can become difficult. But it also gives you a different view of the proper powers of Congress.

I was in charge of State Department appropriations, among other things, and the authorization of the appropriations. And it becomes annoying to you to give all this money to some bureaucrat to spend. You do – you have a different view of what they now call earmarking all the time. But why if you're appropriating a billion dollars that a little bit of shouldn't go back to this state or that state? And occasionally I'd even have Senators call me up, asking for this, that or the other thing.

You have a different view about what's reasonable and unreasonable about that. You have a different view of the enormous number of things that you can achieve actually in Congress, even if you think you're not going to because of the way you can write the bills.

All of that said, you do see that at the end of the day the executive basically runs things, basically governs things, basically spends the money as they seek to spend the money. And that most of the serious and responsible people in Congress, especially, of course, if they are members of the President's party want to work with him. And that usually means to do what he's interested in doing.

KRISTOL: Or shape or help persuade him to do something different –

BLITZ: Yeah, sure you can persuade him to do something slightly different, but it's on his turf usually. You're doing the persuading in terms of the outlines that he's set up.

When I went back to teach, I started teaching Introduction to American Government, among other things I've taught. When I was at Penn, I used to teach overall introduction to political science, which has some introduction of American government.

I would say having been in Washington made me somewhat more credible in saying the things that I said, but I really didn't say anything that was all that different from what I would have said otherwise.

I had a few more examples. As I said, I could sound more believable. I could certainly sound more authoritative on foreign affairs. So my opinions had a heavier weight of authority behind them. But I probably would have said pretty much all of the same things any way and taught in the same ways.

KRISTOL: I taught the *Federalist* – guest professor somewhere, shortly after my seven years or so in government and the executive branch – and I taught the sections on the Congress – 52 to whatever – to 67 and then 66 – I can't remember now. How bad I am, how rusty I am on that – and then the ten papers – 11 papers on the executive. And the – I was struck how much *The Federalist* remains a pretty good guide to the character of Congress and the character of –

BLITZ: And that's still how I basically teach American government. I begin with *The Federalist* and then when I talk about the current institutions it's in terms of how has it changed and why, recognize that that still is still the fundamental frame in terms of which things happen.

So, I think it would be impossible to teach American government intelligently without a serious look at *The Federalist*. Though one also should look obviously at the Constitution when dealing with *The Federalist*, but at the Declaration of Independence so one can remind one's self of the principles and purpose, which are not simply altogether encapsulated in the Constitution, at least until you interpret it backwards also to the Declaration.

But *The Federalist Papers* remain – remain indispensable. They're also at such a wonderfully high level – one of the goods things about them is that they can humble students. I mean, you tell them that these are papers that were meant to be read by people.

KRISTOL: And two a week.

BLITZ: And two a week.

KRISTOL: And what they didn't –

BLITZ: Published in newspapers.

KRISTOL: Yeah, written by people who were busy doing other things. It wasn't as if they were sitting around for four months to produce *Federalist* 10 –

BLITZ: And meant to persuade. So, this, if nothing else, should give them more respect for their Founders.

KRISTOL: And you do teach *The Federalist Papers*. Do you think it's important to teach the whole book, or can you teach excerpts?

BLITZ: I don't teach the whole book, you could give – I would need a whole semester to do the whole book. I do selected papers on the institutions and on the principles. I do some of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* when I teach basic American Government as well. I do some material on current institutions, and then I like to do public policy.

I spend some time before teaching and after government at the Hudson Institute – is a public policy institution so, I've got interests in public policy as well and I like to expose the students to that. And they're often very interested in thinking about particular matters in public policy, because they can think intelligently, at least about some of them, without having some great degree of expertise.

KRISTOL: I taught a little public policy, and I think it's not that hard to get people to see that if you think through a public policy dispute you get pretty quickly to disputes about the regime, if you want to call it that.

BLITZ: Equality and inequality, freedom – absolutely correct.

KRISTOL: Mark, thanks for joining us today.

BLITZ: You're welcome, my pleasure.

KRISTOL: This was a great conversation, I think. Now, you can go back to teaching real students.

BLITZ: It was a wonderful opportunity.

KRISTOL: You had to say that. That was good. And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]