

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

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I. Reason, Politics, and Human Nature (0:15 – 38:02)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol, welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today, again, by Mark Blitz, a professor of political philosophy at Claremont McKenna College. A teacher of mine way back many, many decades ago at Harvard. My first class I took there on Plato and Nietzsche, both of whom will feature, I think, somewhat in our discussion today. Mark has written books on Plato and Heidegger, books on liberal democracy and liberalism, I guess one might say. And they all, in a sense, come together, I think, in your new book [On Reason and Politics: The Nature of Political Phenomena](#). So I thought we could talk about that, and about the book, or about what's discussed in the book, I guess. We don't need to — People of course should go out and buy the book, that goes without saying, but —

BLITZ: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: — they can learn from this discussion even if they've haven't read the book yet. Or even, though it's a horrifying thought, even if they're not planning on reading it in the very near future. [Laughter]. Anyway, thanks Mark for joining me.

BLITZ: My pleasure.

KRISTOL: So this is a very ambitious, dense, but clear at the same time, I'd say, readable, book. It requires no study. *Reason and Politics: The Nature of Political Phenomena*. And so let me just begin with that, what is it? I mean, I guess normally one would think about politics and they're historical, politics as political regimes, or historical phenomena, political developments, and there's a lot one could say about that. And there are patterns maybe. But what does it mean to say that political phenomena have a “nature”? And that somehow that's involved with reason and politics?

BLITZ: Yeah, so I mean, that's right, you think of politics often as quite contingent and dealing with changeable things. So what I wanted to do is really to examine how much you could say that's true, reasonably true, about these basic phenomena such as freedom, and virtue, and rights, what's good, what's common? And nature is kind of the correlative of reason. It's what reason wants to know, the way you might think of the natural laws of physics. So the nature of political phenomena, as I try to look at them is, what's reasonable? And what's the reasonable ground or basis behind all of these phenomena?

And the practical meaning of this, in a way, is that reason is the ground for agreement. At the end of the day, the only true ground for agreement among human beings is reason, what we share, speech, discussion, our fundamental quality. Everything else, ultimately, is contingent, and differentiating.

So the point of the book is really to examine things theoretically, to try to understand what's true about them, but behind it is always that practical connection between what reason can discover and the grounds of agreement. So I thought about those issues a lot as I was working out what I thought was true about these things.

KRISTOL: And I'd say, for a book that is about reason, and politics, and the nature of political phenomena, you don't present it the way one might expect. I think people who write books with "reason" in the title present things, which is sort of rationalist, you might say, argument, deduction of argument, natural laws, moral laws. It looks more like a, I don't know if the right word is phenomenological, but you're looking at political life and sort of beginning with how it appears to us, not with something you're deducing from some scheme or other that reason has told you about.

BLITZ: Yeah, no, that's quite true. And I do it that way because I think that the way in which one begins to think about these matters has to be in relation to the first way you see them and experience them within your own way of life. So that you first see freedom, and free actions, and the good things you strive for in terms of a particular way of life, and a particular context. And I think that is how one has to begin, and then push through from that as far as you can to what's really more general and reasonable about them.

And in doing that I also had in mind all of these views and arguments that we're limited in what we can say is true about things because of the context in which we begin our economic class, our historical period, our identity, and so on. And I wanted to think through, what's true about that? But what's true about that in a way that also can open to up what's more fundamental, and reasonable, and naturally true. So I think it's quite true to say that I begin and develop things in this phenomenological way, because that, I think, is the truth of how things first appear to us and how we first experience everything, really.

KRISTOL: And I think you don't appear to begin with the history of political philosophy, or people — You're a student of Harvey Mansfield, and indirectly, I guess, of Leo Strauss, I don't know, did you ever meet Strauss? I can't remember —

BLITZ: The two times I could have met Strauss didn't happen. One time he was supposed to come to Wellesley but I wanted to go back to New York to see my then girlfriend, now wife. Second time was when I was teaching at University of Pennsylvania, he was coming to a series that Dave Schaefer has at Temple. And we were all set up at lunch, and I was going to sit next to him.

KRISTOL: Wow.

BLITZ: And then at the time he had his fatal heart attack. So —

KRISTOL: Yeah, they gave him the lunch seating and it was Mark Blitz and he thought, "Oh my God."

BLITZ: Yeah, right, right.

KRISTOL: This demands too much.

BLITZ: If it has to be this, I'd rather just leave. So I —

KRISTOL: I guess we shouldn't joke about this, but anyway.

BLITZ: No, we shouldn't. But nonetheless we just have. So I never did meet Strauss. But sure, of course, indirectly a student of Strauss.

KRISTOL: And so he's — One thinks of "ancients and moderns", one thinks of we approach these things through these great thinkers of the past who we take seriously, and read carefully, and treat as if they might've been correct. And there's even fancier kind of "the cave beneath the cave" where we have to kind of go back, and we don't have access, somehow, quite to the natural phenomena, so we have to go back through this history to kind of get the clarity to even begin to think about it. I'm not saying that very well, but something like that. But I wouldn't say your book, it doesn't look like it begins that way. And so say a word about that. I mean —

BLITZ: Yeah, yeah, no, it's true. It doesn't begin that way. I mean, at the very end of the book, right before the conclusion, I go through some of the ways in which the various political philosophers have understood human excellence, or the best life, something a little bit from Plato on through Nietzsche and then on to Heidegger as well. But I don't begin that way, because I think that one can try to look directly at phenomena as long as you understand that your own way of life, and our own way of life, in the United States, is already, in a way, theoretically formed. So that one has to have some sense of the way we understand good things as satisfying desires, as "relieving uneasiness," as John Locke said. The way in which we understand freedom as fundamentally connected to rights. The particular virtues we have.

So I think you can take a direct look at what we are, but you have to always do that having in mind the way we, in particular, are so theoretically formed. You don't want to only look at the history of political philosophy, because then you'll never really look clearly enough at the phenomena themselves, and that's ultimately what one really wants to do. To look at the phenomena directly.

So I talk about the history of political philosophy some, and I talk about the way one can work backwards to the classical beginning. But it's also the case that you can begin by taking a hard look at rights, and freedom, and virtue, see what we have of them now and see how they open up more broadly. That's, at least, the argument behind my procedure, you might say.

KRISTOL: But you do have to liberate yourself from the perspective which one sort of grows up in, so to speak. But that's doable, I guess, is the argument, and one can then still see the things, as it were. At least the images of the things themselves and not simply interpret text.

BLITZ: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Because, I mean, Strauss himself sat in on some courses that Heidegger gave, studied some with Husserl as well, who was Heidegger's teaching. So starting really with the turn of the 20th century, and certainly after the First World War, there was a major attempt to try to take a look at phenomena directly, precisely recognizing that we have not often a direct look of the things because we're so theoretically formed. But the idea was to try to push away all of that theoretical obfuscation, you might say, and look at the phenomena more directly.

But that's just not something that's just true of our own time. If you look at the beginning of modern political philosophy, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, they try to push away some of what they thought of as religious obfuscation, and the way in which the dominance of religious belief, not just in the mind but concretely politically as well, obscured one's approach to basic phenomena.

So one has to keep in mind the way in which teaching, and learning, and doctrine obscures one's approach. But ultimately, one can do that and try to take a look at the themes themselves, which is really the point, and sort of the formula, you might say, for the goal of Husserl, Heidegger. And then in their own way, students of theirs, such as Leo Strauss, Jacob Klein, and others.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And the book is a very — You begin often, I think maybe even it was each chapter, with a kind of common sense account of what a certain term or concept means, or how it appear to us, and then you go to try to, I guess, unpack what's involved in that, and using the political philosophy but more using the political philosophers to help you understand, as opposed to presenting it, at least, as understanding the political philosophers themselves, which is the more typical — Strauss maybe, he more often seems to do that, though presumably, it's ultimately, I think, the same enterprise, right?

BLITZ: Yeah. Yeah, no, that's true. It's maybe ultimately the same enterprise. But I very much did want to do that. And that is how I begin almost all of the time, with what we say about these things, what our current uses are, what do they mean? And that is, I think, a very useful way to begin, if one really thinks through the limits of what we say, the whole range of things we say, the various points made in what we say.

So if you think about what we mean when we say freedom, or how we understand it, or power, and how we understand it, you can take a large

first step to seeing the phenomena themselves, rather than beginning with what some thinker says.

Even your understanding of what thinkers say is dependent on your own understanding of the phenomena they're talking about. You implicitly have some understanding of what they say. You implicitly have some understanding of the examples they use. You can't help but look at the things themselves, but then you need to really look at the things themselves and not just return to sort of a half-baked understanding of things, which then becomes the ground of your understanding of these thinkers. So that's what I try to do in this book.

KRISTOL: I mean, the chapters are called, just so people get a sense, "The Nature of Practical Action," "The Nature of Freedom of Rights," "The Nature of Power and Property," "The Nature of Virtue," "The Nature of What is Common," "The Nature of Goods," and then the sort of conclusion. I mean, so you do take these things that are very central, obviously, to the common lives, and political life, and try to look at them from different perspectives and see, again, what they have in common.

But I was very struck, also, but how much you don't want to sort of simply reduce everything to one thing or let the common overwhelm what's also separate, problematic, and not simply reducible to sort of one formula, you might say, for each of these —

BLITZ: Yeah, no, that's absolutely so. Because, I mean, part of my view is that the way freedom varies a lot by the kind of regime or way of life one has: a classic aristocracy, a classic or modern democracy, religious ways of life. So the way these phenomena vary a lot. So you have to then try to think through, how can you move from that to what's common? But without what's common becoming some vapid generality or some vapid universality. Because that's not how these phenomena actually have their meaning.

And I also wanted to keep alive the way in which these phenomena are disputed, both theoretically and practically. I mean, you can't really understand what good things are unless you also see why we dispute them so much, and why they appear differently in so many ways. And how limited one is in some of the things that one could know. You want to understand, in a way, what's true, let's say, about equal individual rights, equal individual natural rights, but why it's not the whole or the only truth, why the other truth, in a way, are unequal skills, or abilities, or use of one's freedom. And how you can put those things together. But what the limits are of putting together in a reasonable way some of those differences. So what I wanted to do is simply to look at things as they are, without trying to push them together in some false ways.

KRISTOL: So maybe let's — You mentioned freedom and rights a couple of times, and that's the chapter, I suppose, that's sort of the topic, the subject, that's closest to us naturally, so to speak. It's our regime, kind of. So say a word about that chapter and what you discovered, or what you would argue about freedom and rights. We throw those words around so much, and so I think we have a very common sensical and obvious understanding of them a lot of the time.

BLITZ:

So I wanted just to think through, first, what freedom is, and then how rights are connected to that. And freedom, if you just look at some of the common uses and think them through, it's some combination of being unobstructed, unblocked, unhindered, but also self-movement, right? Self-direction.

And what those things mean when you put them together are connected always to things you're moving towards, or the things you're not being hindered in seeking. So that there are significant differences between seeing good things as objects of nobility, or perfect, and rivalry, in a way one might think of a classic aristocrat or classic aristocracy.

But there are also ways in which one thinks of what one is driving towards and is trying to be unhindered in seeking that are connected to goods, simply understood as what satisfies desire. Differences between freedom is connected to what satisfies desire, and everything can satisfy it equally, and you're just adding up a variety of pleasures. And freedom understood as driving towards and seeking to have, and seeking to possess good things, where the pleasure is connected to them can't all be added up, because they're connected to the things themselves. So the pleasure of food and drink is not the same as the pleasure of seeing something beautiful, or seeing someone beautiful, or understanding.

So I wanted to think through those elements of freedom, but also as connected to these various good things, and ways in which you understand good things, that are at the heart of, basically, the different ways of life. And then I also wanted to connect that to a certain understanding of the human individual, or the human soul. Starting with — When you talk about self-directed and not being hindered or blocked, you have in mind some view of movement and moving. And you can look at that as connected to love, or eros in the platonic sense. Spiritedness is a kind of movement as well. So I wanted to think through the relation of freedom to the human soul and the different ways in which the human soul and its powers express themselves. So I wanted to think all that through as much as I could and describe it at greater length and detail and complexity, then obviously I just did, but along these lines and then see the connection of that to human rights. Where there I wanted to see can one naturally defend the existence of equal individual rights? And then I turned to rights and looked at it.

KRISTOL:

I mean, I guess what struck me is one might expect that one normally sees a kind of, even a sophisticated defense of freedom, which is, "Well, look, freedom is not the only good thing, and our regime prioritizes freedom, if I can put it that way, and others favor other things. But let's talk about freedom, a regime based on freedom." And then you analyze liberal democracy, whatever, and the Declaration of Independence and all that.

But I think what you do that's so — I mean, I think you do justice to that side of the particular character of our regime, but you, I think, want to say, but correct me if I'm wrong, that somehow you can't get away from all these other things that are real, that are natural, I guess, these other goods, these other things one desires, or that show up in politics, let's put it that way, kind of neutrally. And that therefore, even in a regime based on freedom, it's like you can't not discuss, you can't entirely bracket or put

aside or not discuss virtue or inequality. In a regime based on equality, you can't not discuss or think about inequality and so forth. Is that —

BLITZ:

Yeah, I think that's quite true. You've got to think about all these things. So when I turned to rights, I mean, the first question is, can you give a natural defense of the existence of rights? And I think when you look at it, you can see that anyone, if you look at yourself, you can see that you have this ability to will, to choose, to reflect, and that's there. That can't simply be taken away. You can block someone's ability to live that out, but it is there as such. And that's a fundamental truth, I think, about how human beings are. So it gives a ground for a kind of generality or commonality or universality. And it's much more, when you think about it, real and evident than things such as group rights or group identities, which are all somehow, at some level made up and constructed, even if they have some historical truth. But individual rights don't, they have this real truth about them and their way of talking about or thinking through, or understanding freedom because they're connected to this self-direction in particular.

But then they're also kind of equal. I mean, they're the kind of freedom or self-direction, which we all have equally. And therefore the other end of them, they're connected to the kind of good things that we can think of as what we can equally possess. So that fundamentally means things such as what satisfies desire, human pleasure, all of the things that are at the heart of, in a way, liberal democracy. When you think those things through, however, you see that there are other and or full and complete ways of thinking about what's good and of thinking about various ways of life, and of thinking about human freedom. So that there's truth in rights in liberal democracy, but they also open up to something broader and more fundamental.

I also try to argue that individual rights are connected to a certain reverence for oneself grounded in one's pride and spiritedness, right? But grounded also in the things you seek and the things you love. But again, that's a kind of an equal version of what is nonetheless fundamental. And then you also, then when you consider especially a whole community based on equal rights, ultimately, such as ours, you see that you need certain qualities of soul, certain powers, certain abilities to actually exercise your rights. You need certain virtues. So there are certain qualities of character that would fit together with liberal democracy and individual natural rights: toleration, responsibility, industriousness, versions of these classical virtues that Aristotle talks about, courage and so on. So that there's a kind of character which also needs to be developed if you're really going to have a successful liberal democracy.

That also opens up ultimately, maybe to something broader, and broader ways of life as well. But even talking just about liberal democracy, a certain kind of excellence of character, a certain understanding in defense of individual rights goes a long way towards showing what's desirable about our way of life, whatever its limits. So I had all of that in mind.

KRISTOL:

And do you take — Now I'll oversimplify radically, I'm sure — but do you take what seems to be Hobbes's, you know, debunking of all that, a lot of that highfaluting stuff you were just saying and saying, "Oh, forget about all that glory and honor, and, God knows, piety. We have these solidly based rights based on equal fear of death or whatever and our desires."

Do you take that to be polemical, but not quite what is his — would his considered view be closer to what you just articulated? Or is it just a certain, slightly one-sided, if one could put it this way, view, and you're capturing the phenomena better than his maybe intentionally, maybe not intentionally, I don't know what, lopsided, you might say, account or polemical account. Is that it?

BLITZ: I'd hope his considered view would be closer to mine because that would make my view stronger or based and better grounded. Yeah. I've always thought —

KRISTOL: I guess what I mean by the question is, I mean, so many— When you study the history of political philosophy, at least at some level, maybe this would fade away a little bit or be complex, obviously more complex, the more carefully one-sided these thinkers were. But they seem to be fighting each other about what you're sort of putting together. They seem to have some interest in saying that we can't quite put these things together and sort of, we need to defeat “this” to set up “that.” [Inaudible] and Hobbes needed to defeat, obviously what happened before them, what was in the universities and so forth, to set up the liberal state and all that. So anyway, just —

BLITZ: Yeah, no, those are good points. And so I'll say a couple of things about that. There's certainly an attempt to substitute natural, individual self-direction — or natural, individual authority, because ultimately a right is an authority to act and to choose. And as I said, you can see it's grounded in your individual will and choice and assertion. So there's an attempt to substitute that naturally grounded individual authority for religious authority or for priestly authority. I think that's clearly so.

And it's also the case that when you talk about equal authority and equal movement, you begin to move towards the goods and the pleasures that are more likely to be shared equally, therefore material comforts and satisfaction. So I think all of that's so. But I also think that there is a strong element of pride and assertion and spiritedness in liberal democracy, which sometimes gets overlooked. And precisely one reason is because of the way in which Hobbes discusses and develops his argument in the *Leviathan* and in other works as well.

There's a liberating or an attempt to liberate individual spirit and a kind of individual spiritedness in liberal democracy as well. The entrepreneur and entrepreneurialism and one's own self-direction and self-movement, and one's own protection of oneself and defense of oneself. I think that element of spiritedness — but again, a more equal spiritedness — is a very important part of liberal democracy. It's not just low but solid in the arguments that sometimes people make, but it also captures the rights, and through freedom, this element of spiritedness of reverence for yourself of in a certain sense, trying to live up to what you consider to be best in yourself, limited as those arguments might be. And that's part of the strength of liberal democracy.

I think that's an extremely important element of it. Maybe you see it more clearly in Machiavelli, maybe you see it a little more clearly in John Locke when you look, maybe you don't. But I would say that that's a really vital part of understanding freedom and equal rights and therefore what's high and worthwhile in liberal democracy. And you see it when you really think

hard about what freedom is and what rights are and think about them conceptually and intellectually, and really try to discover the truth about them.

KRISTOL: And it seems to be, again, what's distinctive about your work as you try to think it through conceptually, but based on a sense, looking at real existing human beings and real existing citizens in more or less real existing regimes and nations. And so in that respect, it's both more, I mean, I think you don't — I've always thought it was sort of a mistake for people to read whatever political thoughts for what they want to say was key at the founding, and then just say, "Well, that's therefore what this actual country or set of nations even, or the last 200 years of history is therefore explained."

There's something just a little ridiculous about that when you, I think, when you think about it, honestly. I mean, it exaggerates how much one will conform everything in one way or another. Unless human beings really could just be reformed by a thinker and don't have any — I guess this is the point though, right, you're making? That they're not so easily simply reformed because they have a certain nature. And therefore these certain things can rise or fall or be suppressed or be exaggerated, enabled and exaggerated, but they're all sort of there and they take different forms in different eras. Is that a fair way of saying it?

BLITZ: Yeah. And you could also say, we begin always from a certain kind of meaning or meaningfulness, a certain set of ends or goods and ways in which we understand good things. Again, let's say the satisfaction of desire or things as beautiful and complete. And we begin from a certain set of ways in which we seek those things and can approach those things. Who can do what, and what you need to do. We begin from a certain context and the deepest context usually is a regime or a way of life. But the concrete meaning of that changes over time. How we today understand liberty is not exactly the way in which we understood it at the founding. How we understand who can do what is obviously not the same as literally it existed at the founding, given the question and the presence of slavery, given the opening of civic and other rights and activities for women and so on.

So you've got to look at those things. You've got to look at the ground of the way of life, but then what the way of life actually means now.

So I talk a little bit about what culture actually means, and that's what I think it ultimately means. Really the heart of a culture is the changing ways —still on the ground of kind of a founding principles —but the changing ways in which those are actually interpreted and the changing ways in which who is allowed to do what and how one gets things done happen. I mean, day-to-day life has a lot to do with the implicit ways in which you expect things to happen, not to happen, the explicit ways in which you trust or don't trust the people you're dealing with all of the time. That's grounded, ultimately, I think in the broader views of what's just and what's good, but in the ways I mentioned it, it changes as well.

So I also talk a bit about patriotism and the difference between a particular country and a regime and a regime broadly speaking, how that enters into the way in which you have to understand things, without however, that being so dominant —"the body" and "what's changeable" —

that one loses the basic sense in which the heart of political phenomena is what you can understand about them reasonably and through reason. And that ultimately points to the connection and interconnection among these different ways of life, and among these different activities and their connection ultimately to what's permanent. The permanent truths about political life or human life are there, but they have their meaning and effect and presence in all of these subtle ways, I think, which one needs to understand if one really wants to understand a basic political phenomena or even ultimately concrete everyday life here and now.

KRISTOL: I mean, you say at different times, I think that there's sort of two traps one can fall into, as it were: kind of homogenizing of everything, materialism might be the most obvious example, maybe not the only one of that sort of reduction, to try to reduce everything to certain laws that don't change at all and that are, kind of can be ultimately simplified, I guess you'd say, on the one hand. And then kind of the opposite, the sort of: a thousand flowers have bloomed throughout history, but they had nothing in common with one another and they're just kind of interesting, fantastic flowers each in their own right. But there's nothing to be said that cuts across them if I can. I mean, that's not the best way to put it.

BLITZ: Yeah, no, those are two of the basic ways in which I think one can be wrong in thinking about things, to try to reduce everything to some simple universal uniformity, let's say material laws would be one version or a kind of historical or economic determinism might be another version of that difficulty.

KRISTOL: Would a kind of moral law be a version of that too, kind of a Kantian, you know —

BLITZ: Yeah. So I argue in the book against that, because I don't think that that properly understands human virtue and human character and human choice. It looks at morality in a too universalistic and equal and law-like way to really capture the phenomenon. So, yeah, I think one mistake is this kind of washed out universalism, you might say. Another mistake is the one you pointed to. Everything is too different to say anything similar about things. And that's certainly not true when you really think things through. But it's also true that you can't very easily inflate things to some fancy notion of the good or justice with all those capital letters, without really thinking that through and working your way down to see how those are operational, how they actually work in real choices and real life and real virtue and real regimes. You don't want to make understanding things too easy for yourself. You really have to look at things the way they are.

KRISTOL: Yeah, no, that's one of the great virtues of this book, I think is that it reminds one, as one works — as it works through it and tries to grasp a lot of the complexities of it is that there's that temptation to make it easy. Do you take one or another of those traps or tendencies as more characteristic of our time, more of a trap for students these days? they're kind of universalizing on the one hand or the homogenizing, or the, I don't know what the — What were other —

BLITZ: It's interesting for us now that it's both. I mean, the first thing you want to say is we kind of universalize by making everything to some approach that broadly speaking, natural science knows the truth of. Or these other

versions of it, where you reduce everything simply to class or an historical period. So there's still an awful lot of that, I think.

But on the other hand, you also have this tendency in which everybody thinks that their own identity and ultimately their own individuality, literally so, is so unique and so different that everybody needs to dance to everybody else's tunes all of the time, and ultimately that there's nothing in common. And you see that direction, obviously, in people's hypersensitivity, in their excessive concern with their own unique identity and their excessive concern with what serves them individually.

So, we have both those tendencies in a serious way, rather than trying to think hard about what genuinely is common on the one hand and what isn't common and working that through.

I think that the attempt to ignore the truth of natural rights in our founding is maybe the single most immediate difficulty. Because it moves away from a proper understanding, I think, of what individuals are and what individuality is and what we can share. But the greater danger changes all the time a little bit, but I think we have some of both now.

II: From Heidegger to Plato (38:02 – 1:08:39)

KRISTOL: Yeah, let's say a word about now though, since you do mention that in passing in the book. I'd say that it's harder at certain times to appreciate certain things. I mean, in an egalitarian age, probably harder to appreciate the arguments for any various forms of inequality and that they are not going away and that they will always manifest themselves in certain ways and so forth. And so you talk a little bit about that and about, if you call it political correctness, but a kind of unwillingness to look at things as they are because of current desires not to offend people.

You also mention very interestingly, we might be entering a kind of post human moment with technology and bio genetics and so forth. But even so, or especially so, when asked to understand therefore what's common and reasonable about a political phenomenon and human phenomena. So that's all a big set of questions, as well. Say a word about the current moment as it strikes you.

BLITZ: Sure. I think we're grounded still on egalitarian principles, either when they're truly understood, or even if they're not fully enough understood but [as] this kind of hypersensitivity that each individual has, that the way they are is simply unique. And that works against really understanding excellence. But there is excellence in art. There is excellence in thought. There is — And what does that mean? It means the full use of human abilities. And the full use of human abilities is connected to a fuller freedom and a fuller self-direction and a fuller understanding of what's good. It's difficult to make those arguments, both because of people's hypersensitivity, but also because we're grounded in a kind of egalitarianism, as well.

So, that's one thing. So it becomes more difficult for people really to think hard about making the best of themselves, but even what making the best of themselves actually means. That's one great difficulty and it makes it difficult to really think through and talk about these issues.

But it's also the case, having mentioned talking about these issues, that when you're in a world where it's more difficult to say things or where you are attacked more, not just for what you say, but for the way you say it, and the fact that you might bother someone because of the way you say it, or they may choose to allow themselves to be bothered, or they might pretend to be bothered or any of the rest of that. It's much more difficult to discuss important matters publicly and clearly.

And it's very hard to think clearly, if you can't speak clearly, because there's only so much you can do on your own. You have to have all of the options and possibilities and ways of truly understanding freedom and justice and human happiness. You have to have them discussed. You have to have them presented. You have to have them argued out unless you miraculously can come across all of this yourself, without the aid of anyone else. And no one is like that, even Plato. So those are great difficulties, I think, in truly thinking things through.

Well, what you have to do therefore, is make the case for, when you have the opportunity, the possibility of real excellence. You have to be willing to talk about things in reasonable ways when you're discussing important matters of education and politics. You have to speak the truth as you see it, prudently sometimes of course, but nonetheless speak the truth as you see it. So I think all those things are important.

Questions such as artificial intelligence or all the ways in which we can change our characteristics put, you might say, an extra premium on thinking through what we really are, and what's good about us. Otherwise you run the risk of ending it permanently or almost permanently by not understanding the qualities that really matter and the conditions connected to what really matters. And not really understanding what's fully excellent.

So I think about that, some, in the book and talk about human height and excellence, and the ways in which we could change ourselves don't fundamentally change what is excellent and what it means, but could change our ability to really understand it and live up to it in various ways. And I talk about, and think through, the limits of physical, or as we would call them maybe materialistic understandings of how things are and how the full human things have their own independence, since I think it's important to really grasp that.

So, there are a lot of dangers out there now in terms of understanding what is excellence, in terms of speaking about things truly, in terms of what we can do with ourselves, and not understand what we really should be doing. That's one of the reasons I thought it would be useful to think about the things I think about and write about them in a certain way in this book.

KRISTOL:

I mean, on that last point, that's very helpful, I think, for me at least. On that last point, that gets me to a question that I had reading the book, and I hope I can put it somewhat intelligently and intelligibly, which is, and one could argue, I'll just put it this way and this is a standard conservative argument. "Human beings don't change and it's these progressives who think people get nicer. That's ridiculous." So the human character has a certain character, the human body and the human psyche, or whatever term you want and that what you're doing here, therefore, is thinking

through all these different ways in which human beings can assemble themselves in politics, in different permutations, with different emphasis on certain characteristics and virtues and stuff.

But it seems to me, you want to say a little more than that. I mean, it's not just a kind of, "Well, gee, for whatever random reason, the psyche is structured this way and so I'm going to now deduce interesting things about it from it being structured this way." That somehow it is — there's more of a nature to it than just the accidental way that human nature is or came to be. However it came to be really, it doesn't matter in this argument, I think.

Or another way of saying it, I've often thought of the music you and I both like: classical music. I mean, the musical analogy is Mozart is great because I guess our brains are set up in some way that we resonate to, we appreciate the way in which all kinds of things happen in music. That, even if you haven't studied music, you have some sense of "this is an appropriate ending to or resolution to a certain key" and all that kind of thing. Is that simply because our brains are that way? Or is it because somehow that's based on a natural shape of things that goes a little bit beyond just the way human beings happen to be?

BLITZ:

I would say that it's both together. It's not simply ever our brains and it's not simply the outside things. It's the way in which things are intelligible to us or have meaning to us. The way they have meaning to us is not simply in our own control. And on the other hand, we couldn't simply invent all of the ways in which things have meaning to us. So, it seems to me that the better way to think about these issues than merely human consciousness separate out there structured in a certain way, and things being what they are simply having nothing whatsoever to do with the way we think about them, is that it's really in a way the interconnection. And that really is the heart of meaning and intelligibility.

So I think Mozart's music is beautiful and you can discuss what beauty means and make clear how it's beautiful. But on the other hand, it's also the case that much of the development and working through of that beauty and experiencing of that beauty, has to do with us and our being there. And has to do of course, with Mozart himself and Mozart's being there.

So I'd say you can't really understand some fixity in human beings without seeing the whole political community. The way in which we experience our freedom, the way in which we experience what is good, the way we develop those differences. I think that, how we begin — What is your understanding of children? What is the way in which children are educated? What is your understanding of the relation between men and women? What is the family, as you actually experience it? That has a lot to do with how fully you can actually develop your skills and talents and understand things.

So all of those differences, I think, are very important and they're not simply reflections of some universal truth which exists, you might say, nowhere, and in a way in which you don't see it any place in particular. The human things have a generality but they also necessarily have a particularity. And I would say it's, in a way, both of those things together.

Fundamental, ultimately, is what you can talk about as more general and universal.

Maybe still another way to say this is that one could argue, and I do argue, that there's a certain peak for human excellence. And two versions of it are the philosophical life as the classics see it, and ethical or practical virtue as the classics see it. Other human activities and ways, are in a certain sense, declensions, you might say, from that. But even to talk in terms of those peaks and the way in which they use the mind and the way in which they deal with all of the good things we seek and passions we seek, you can't understand that without talking specific ways you're thinking, specific forms of government, specific political activities. Otherwise, I think they don't have that kind of political and human meaning.

So in a way, it's both of those things together, the general and the specific, you might say.

KRISTOL: But I suppose I'm — Strauss says somewhere that you might think that thinking things through, being philosophic could be Sisyphean, if there were nothing more to be discovered than somehow random chance. Somehow there is something about the nature of nature that supports or enables, though not directly I mean, that allows for, I guess, a certain kind of human understanding and grasping, right? I mean somehow that's — I think you imply that in the book.

BLITZ: Sure. I mean, look, you can't — There are lots of things you can say about what's truly good and what a high human life is. I think there are lots of things that you can say that are correct about all those things. To really understand them, you have to look at them at play in certain ways of life and in certain activities. But nonetheless, you can basically and fundamentally understand them. You can see something of what beauty is by looking at, let's say one of Mozart's last symphonies. So obviously, there's a connection between human understanding and what's there to be understood. It's not simply an imposition by us and it's not simply the things are meaningless.

We always begin in some realm of meaning, where things are intelligible to us in some way or other. That's how things are. That's part of what I mean by saying there's a connection between the things that we're not and what we are. Because we begin always with some sense of meaning and intelligibility and a view of ourselves and what we see. But those things differ in various ways of life, but they're there. And one can work from that to a fuller and broader understanding, even though there are certain issues or questions which are hard to resolve fully.

One political example, maybe it's not possible, fully, to resolve in a political community, these two truths of equal natural rights. The way in which we are equal and have a pride or spiritedness, something deserving of reverence, each of us, all of us, one thing. But also this different degree of excellence, these different ways of life, this different level of powers we have. This different level of abilities we have. I think both of those things are true, but what is the political order that could put them together perfectly?

And the answer is there's no political order that can put them together perfectly. You can just do the best you can. And we've done pretty well, a high version, at least, of liberal democracy with true virtues of responsibility and a real openness at least, to the possibilities of excellence, is a reasonable, practical solution. But I don't think you can put together exactly those two truths in a kind of political perfection. So that's not Sisyphean, practically, but it shows a limit and there are certain things intellectually, I think, of that sort, also.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it seems on the intellectual, or I guess, I don't know, epistemological side, or however you'd want to say it, we're not simply imposing as you say, nor are we simply downloading, I guess, would be the opposite, right? Sort of a substance out there, we just kind of discover it and then it's all resolved. And somehow that true understanding is neither simply human assertion or — Sort of two plus two equals four and that's the pattern for everything, right?

BLITZ: Yeah. I think that's so, because things have to have a meaning and an intelligibility for you even to begin to think about them. And you begin with a certain meaning or intelligibility of things. That's the openness, maybe, to how things are truly intelligible and truly have their meaning. But it's not simply a downloading in that simple sense.

Another thing to say is that things reveal lots of their true powers, only once you've done something with them. Like with plants, but you don't discover their medicinal powers until you try to do something with them medicinally, until you look at them in a certain way, until they have a certain meaning and intelligibility.

So, most things, you're not inventing that, but on the other hand, they come to life, you might say, only together with human effort. And there all sorts of concrete powers of things, concrete properties of things, which really are brought out and come to light and are experienced only together with human beings. So we don't invent them, but they also don't have their full meaning and effect and power without us. I think that's true of all sorts of things in fact. So it's neither the downloading nor the made up imposition. But again, there's a world of meaning and intelligibility, but much of that is really brought out and allowed to have its power only together with us, with —

KRISTOL: That's helpful to me. And then it's brought out, and allowed to have its power in different ways and different regimes. So that further complexifies.

BLITZ: Yeah. Exactly so. That further complexifies things, so that to take the example of plants and certain kinds of regimes: certain trees are there only to be looked at by the aristocrat on the aristocrat's estate. Not so in our regime. And that's true of all sorts of things, because of questions of human equality, questions of property, what can be bought, what can be sold, what can be —

KRISTOL: Technology.

BLITZ: Technology. What can be worked on, questions of religion and the proper way in which you do things, whatever the result. Right? So that makes things even more complex. But that complexity is part of the way things

are. But nonetheless, you can work from that complexity to see ultimately in a way, the truer things that the way of life reflects, and the ground of human powers and abilities. In a way that's part of the argument or the procedure in this book.

KRISTOL:

Let me close, or almost close by asking you about maybe, well, two things in particular. Plato and Heidegger, on both of whom you wrote books. Both of them were pretty prominent, I'd say in this book. I mean, they seem to, maybe more than almost every other thinker, inform the argument, and you cite them many times obviously, but even when you don't cite them. And you have this wonderful account of the History of Political Philosophy in a very brief sort of synopsis, you might say in terms of how many of the major thinkers view excellence. But, so I'm just curious about Plato and I mean, is the book somehow — Do Plato and Heidegger have a special status in your mind, at least in terms of what you've learned? And do they simply, and what about the confrontation between them and so forth?

BLITZ:

Yeah. So thanks for what you said about that part near the end of the book. Yeah. To me an important question is, how can one somehow account for what seems to be true in Heidegger, but on the grounds, fundamentally of a platonic understanding? The danger of difficulty of Heidegger, everyone knows now is the association with the Nazis, which is not an accident, but which is somehow connected to his thought. And yet there's so many fundamental things about how human beings are what we are, about what other thinkers know and understand. So much in Heidegger that one would like to see if it's possible to recapture some of that in a platonic or natural understanding. So that's something that I also had in mind.

When I think of everything is beginning in a certain context of intelligibility, that's very much connected you could say to some of Heidegger's understanding of things having their meaning within what he calls, a certain world. And human beings as fundamentally having characteristics in terms of our openness to meaning and therefore to being. But then when you look at Plato and Aristotle, you see that in a way, the fundamental concrete ground of meaning and intelligibility in action, is the way of life or the regime or the political regime. So one of the questions I asked myself, is there a way in which you can understand what Heidegger sees in terms of meaning and intelligibility, and this interconnection between human beings and how we are situated. So that it's neither something which is, as you would say, downloaded or simply imposed.

Is there a way in which one could understand that, but working from the platonic, an Aristotelian understanding of the political order as the heart really of fundamental meaning? And then the way that opens up to virtue, and the way that opens up to philosophical reflection, even beyond itself. So in a way that was an intellectual task that I always had in mind. If it didn't happen, it didn't happen. And it's certainly possible for someone to read the book and say that it hasn't happened, but that was very much something that I wanted to think through. Could one capture what's true in Heidegger, but on grounds, which are not Heidegger's grounds?

KRISTOL:

I mean, you investigate that in an open-minded way, or you wanted to reassure yourself that Heidegger couldn't quite be — That there was no

fundamental breakthrough by Heidegger, because that would then be unnerving given his politics?

BLITZ: No, I try to investigate it in a completely, in a completely open-minded way.

KRISTOL: Just to make that clear, you're not —

BLITZ: Yeah. Yeah. No, sure. Thank you.

KRISTOL: Politics doesn't mean that he couldn't be right about a million, about a lot of things.

BLITZ: Of course. Just as the fact that one would like to show that there is some basic truth about equal natural rights, doesn't mean that one is able to show those things. So having all those kinds of issues in the back of one's mind, you need to make sure that they don't skew your understanding so that you don't see things as they actually are. So yeah, I would not let, or tried hard not to let the way I wanted things to be, to confuse that with the way things actually are. That's important. But I also had a variety of these things in the back of my mind, and that is helpful in attempting to see things the way they genuinely are.

KRISTOL: A variety of different thinkers, you mean?

BLITZ: I had a variety of different thinkers, and I had a variety of different questions. What is the relation between equal and natural rights and unequal excellence? What can one say about physical or material explanations? And what are the limits of those things? How can you understand the different thinkers in their different understanding? How can you understand the different forms that freedom takes, that human movement, eros and spiritedness take? How can you understand all those things? So I had a lot of those questions in mind as I was looking at these phenomena. And I think if you have enough of those questions and issues in mind, maybe it helps not having things come out the way you want them to come out. Basically I had no way in which I wanted them to come out fundamentally, but of course, to begin with, I had a few things that I would prefer, such as what we just discussed with Plato and Heidegger.

KRISTOL: And I just, this is somewhat irrelevant, I suppose, but how did you, I can understand how you got so interested in Plato, but how did Heidegger — Just curious as an actual biographical matter, so to speak, how did you encounter Heidegger? He's been so much in your mind since I met you certainly. And you were working on *Being and Time*, which became your first book. And was that a course? Was it just your own reading? What was it?

BLITZ: It goes back to what we were saying about Leo Strauss. It sort of became clear from looking at Strauss that Heidegger was the most important contemporary thinker, the most central thinker, and the one who posed the greatest challenge and set of questions to classical thought, or even to liberal thought. So I thought that if I really were to try to understand things, I had to come to grips with Heidegger. So it was simply for that reason, there wasn't any course. And few people looked at Heidegger in terms of the kinds of questions I was asking at that point, there'd always

been an up and a down in terms of how people understood his association with the Nazis, but very few people understood the thought as somehow connected to it. And I thought that might be the case.

BLITZ: So that's the reason why I looked seriously at Heidegger. And once one does that, you see all these things that you do, you do learn from him. But that was the cause of it biographically. And I think it was, as it turned out, worthwhile to say the least intellectually to really come to grips with him. I'd written my dissertation on Plato, Plato's *Statesman*. So I had thought through a lot of the *Statesman* as well. And interestingly enough, or I didn't really know this at the time, there's some real connections between Plato's *Statesman* and some of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, that I noticed as I was working through *Being and Time*.

KRISTOL: Well, this is great. The book is a great accomplishment. I hope this conversation will lead people to read it and study it and think about it, and challenge it if they wish. But it seems like almost such a summum. You're healthy and young by our standards now. So, do you know what's next, or you're going to —

BLITZ: Yeah. I've got two things in mind. I wrote a book, as you said, on Plato, *Plato's Political Philosophy*. And it's occurred to me that maybe a general book on Aristotle might be useful. There are wonderful books on the *Ethics*, on the *Politics*, good things on the *Rhetoric* as well, but perhaps a general book on Aristotle would be useful. So that's one thing I'm thinking about and working on. Also, a more general book on German thinking from Kant to Heidegger. I think more likely that could be a real hard look at Hegel, another thinker of supreme gifts and supreme importance. So those two things, as it stands right now, would be the major projects. And then together —

KRISTOL: That would be good. That would be good. I have not studied any of these people seriously. I can give a super amateur opinion that Aristotle and Hegel always seemed to me to have the appearance of being clearer than let's say, Plato and Heidegger. They're the obvious examples. But actually to be more mystifying when you really think about them, especially Aristotle, which is such a, I think, a fake clarity. If I could put it that way.

BLITZ: Yeah. No, that's true. He's he has this great common sense, but also this immense difficulty when you really think it through in how he develops himself. And Hegel looks difficult to people, but in fact, there's a certain immediacy and clarity there as well, though ultimately of course, very mystifying. So, yeah.

KRISTOL: Good. Okay. Well —

BLITZ: Maybe I could do some good if I actually do at least one of those things —

KRISTOL: I encourage you to do that, and we can have another conversation even before you finish your work on Aristotle or Hegel.

BLITZ: Yes. Thank you.

KRISTOL: I [Inaudible] your books on liberal democracy, one of which is I think a collection of essays. The other more of a book —

BLITZ: Yeah, they're both — The responsibility book, *Duty Bound: Responsibility and American Life*. All of the chapters that are connected to it, I wrote having the book in mind, but some of them are separately presented. So I really wrote it with a unity in mind, rather than as a loose collection of essays. And that's really my book on liberalism you might say, practically. And then it ends with a chapter on John Locke, who I think is the central thinker behind liberal democracy. And then I wrote a small book, *Conserving Liberty*, which is more political in a way.

KRISTOL: Right. But I think *the Duty Bound* book really has a — People would benefit a lot from that, if I haven't looked at it, because it does seem to me to do justice to certain aspects of liberal democracy that are often overlooked, by our friends in particular, perhaps. But on the other hand, does justice in a serious way, not in a sort of edifying or wishful way, which is also a bit of a tendency of some of our friends, perhaps.

BLITZ: Yeah. One works, one wants not to be edifying. No, as one says, sometimes there's something necessarily edifying about some of this work. But you don't want to let the wish to consciously edify, dominate the way you think. And even to some degree the way you write.

KRISTOL: That's a very good note to end on. So Mark, thank you for taking the time today, and I really appreciate your work obviously and your teaching over the years. But I appreciate your joining me for this conversation.

BLITZ: Thank you, Bill. My pleasure.

KRISTOL: And t hank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]