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Leo Strauss's Life and Work

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I. Life

Leo Strauss (1899-1973) was a German-born American political philosopher of Jewish heritage who revived the study of political philosophy in the 20th century. His complex philosophical reflections exercise a quietly growing, deep influence in America, Europe, and Asia.

Strauss was born in the rural town of Kirchhain in Hesse-Nassau, Prussia, on September 20, 1899, to Hugo and Jenny David Strauss. He attended Kirchhain's *Volksschule* and the *Rektoratsschule* before enrolling, in 1912, at the *Gymnasium Philippinum* in Marburg, graduating in 1917. The adolescent Strauss was immersed in Hermann Cohen's neo-Kantianism, the most progressive German-Jewish thinking. "Cohen," Strauss states, "was the center of attraction for philosophically minded Jews who were devoted to Judaism." After serving in the German army for a year and a half, Strauss began attending the University at Marburg, where he met Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacob Klein. In 1921 he went to Hamburg, where he wrote his doctoral thesis under Ernst Cassirer. In 1922, Strauss went to the University of Freiburg-im-Breisgau for a post-doctoral year, in order to see and hear Edmund Husserl, but he also attended lecture courses given by Martin Heidegger. He participated in Franz Rosenzweig's *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt-am-Main, and published articles in *Der Jude* and the *Jüdische Rundschau*. One of these articles, on Cohen's analysis of Spinoza, brought Strauss to the attention of Julius Guttmann, who in 1925 offered him a position researching Jewish Philosophy at the *Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin. There Strauss wrote his first book, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion as the Foundation of his Science of the Bible, Investigations into Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise* (published in 1930), and was part of the editorial team for the jubilee edition of Mendelssohn's writings. The work

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introduced him to various German Jewish intellectuals, such as Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin. Others whom he met at the time and with whom he latter carried on vigorous epistolatory exchanges were Karl Löwith, Gerhard Krüger, Gershom Scholem, Hans Jonas, Emil Fackenheim, and Paul Kraus—who married Strauss's sister Bettina. Many of these exchanges are published in the *Gesammelte Schriften* (Collected Writings) edited by Heinrich Meier. Strauss was also engaged in a critical discourse with Carl Schmitt, who was instrumental in Strauss's receiving a Rockefeller Fellowship, through which he was able to leave Germany before the ascent of Nazism. In 1932, he left for Paris. (He returned to Germany only once, for a few days in 1952; he had made arrangements to return permanently in 1965, but poor health made it impossible.) In Paris he married Miriam Bernsohn, a widow with a young son, Thomas, whom he adopted. He later adopted Bettina's daughter, Jenny, after the deaths of Bettina and Paul Kraus. In Paris Strauss became friends with the Marxist Hegelian Alexandre Kojève, and was also on friendly terms with Raymond Aron and Alexandre Koyré. He moved to England in 1934, and in 1935, relocated to Cambridge, where he was associated with the Sidney Sussex College, University of Cambridge. He received access to Hobbes' early papers at Devonshire, and met R. H. Tawney, with whom he became a close friend, and Ernest Barker. He immigrated to New York in 1937, and, after a research fellowship at Columbia University, was a visiting lecturer at Hamilton College, Union College, Middlebury College, Amherst College, Wesleyan University, and the New School for Social Research. In 1949 he joined the political science faculty at the University of Chicago, where he was named Robert Maynard Hutchins Distinguished Service Professor in 1959, teaching there until 1967. (He took a year's absence to teach at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1954-55.) He then spent three semesters at Claremont Men's College, and four years at St. John's College, Annapolis. He died in 1973, having published 15 books and numerous articles in scholarly journals.

Most of Strauss's writings are careful explications of works by political philosophers that make considerable demands on the mind and heart of the reader. His later writings in particular are written in a dense style that has the appearance of offering no more than summaries of the argument of texts; they have been aptly described as a gift to those of his students who have succeeded in understanding his earlier work and the work of political philosophers taken up in them. Nonetheless, five clear themes are discernable in his writings: the theological-political problem, esoteric writing, the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, historicism, and the crisis of our time.

II. The Theological-Political Problem

Strauss followed Goethe in seeing "the struggle between belief and unbelief," or the question of the source of the obligations by which we guide our lives, as "'the deepest theme of all world and human history." As a morally serious young man he was gripped by the apparently irreconcilable conflict between nobility-inducing faith, on one hand, and the claims of science, on the other, which he referred to as "the theological-political predicament." In a manner helpful to others, he presented (in his 1965 Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*) the arguments by which he wrested himself free from modern presuppositions and the remnants of the biblical and classical tradition that had been transformed by those presuppositions, so that the issue of faith versus reason could present itself in full clarity. He made clear that he was assisted in this effort by the work of Heidegger.

Strauss stressed that his writings were appearing at a time when the possibility of philosophy, understood as reason's search for enduring truth, so far from being taken for granted, had been radically called into question by the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Partly as a result of that questioning, the West had come to be characterized by a protracted collapse of confidence in the possibility of discovering, through reason, a genuine, universal understanding of the world, one by which we can and should take our bearings. Through his life's work as a teacher and a scholar, Strauss faced and led others to face that situation squarely, and guided the way both to a recovery of the original ground for the rational life in Socratic political philosophy and to a respectful, painstakingly careful account of the developments in modern political philosophy that have led to our current situation. Attempting to learn something of importance *from* earlier thinkers, he emphasized, and not merely *about* them, "places an obligation on the interpreter to pay attention with the greatest care not to interject into [a thinker's] teaching opinions that prevail or insist on prevailing today."

III. Ancients

After his early work on Spinoza, Strauss was led, through a study of Maimonides and his predecessors among the Islamic *falasifa*, to the works of Plato. He came to realize that a crisis of reason similar to the one we are witnessing in our time had occurred at the time of Socrates, who became aware that permanent limits to what is genuinely knowable by science or philosophy opened up a remarkable possibility: that the world, far from having the kind of intelligible necessities that reason seeks to uncover in its search for causes, could instead—as adherents of divine revelation had always claimed—be the work

of mysterious, creative gods or god, whose powers would render reason's search for causes futile and possibly fatal. Socrates' grasp of this problem, Strauss realized, led him to a "second sailing," i.e., to an unprecedented attempt to ground the life of reason not (as the pre-Socratics had attempted) through science itself but instead by means of a preliminary investigation of the political-moral questions of the sort that one sees him and other Socratics investigating. It led him, that is, to found political philosophy, as a "preliminary" to philosophy proper—the priority of which to political philosophy was never abandoned by Socratics.

Strauss carefully and prudently explained how pre-modern, Socratic political philosophy, i.e., the dialectical investigation of justice and of law that one finds in the Platonic dialogues and in the works of later thinkers who read them carefully, provides a sufficient answer to the question of how one can know that the life led according to reason is the right life for a human being. By his attention to this central question, Strauss helped his readers to undertake the study of political philosophy neither as an antiquarian venture nor with a politicized spirit, but instead as an activity vital to their own lives and the lives of those with whom they live. At the same time he neither allowed his readers to overlook the peculiar difficulties attending the recovery of reason in our age, nor obscured the profoundly agonizing self-transformation that is required of students of Socratic philosophy in any age. And these in turn made him keenly aware of the measures taken by political philosophers to write with a view to the various needs and capacities of their many readers, or with what he called "esoteric writing."

In presenting dialectical examination of the problem of justice as the Socratic answer to the theologico-political problem, Strauss emphasized that such dialectic, far from being philosophical or scientific, proceeds on the basis of premises agreed to by the (potential) believer; it proceeds from the given, "pre-scientific" world of "common-sense," i.e., on the basis of premises shared by the non-philosophic. The examination discloses that humans are animated by a deep and passionate "erotic" longing for self-transcending union with the eternal or divine, over and against awareness of their own mortality, a longing that may be hidden, repressed, or diverted into worldly addictions like monetary acquisition, but is at work everywhere in political action. But this longing proves to call forth purification by thought, since humans also desire escape from delusion. In the best cases, Socratic dialectic purges this longing, and with it both political ambition and hope for any possible union with the divine. The conversions of a few erotic potential citizens to the philosophic life thus give decisive evidence that the philosopher's own liberation is not idiosyncratic. Dialectic therefore provides the ground of philosophy or science simply, and was understood to be adequate by later thinkers like Maimonides, Farabi, and Marsilius (who understood the Socratic answer to encompass the most elementary premises of the Bible).

But the dialectical purging proves to be healthy for but a few strong souls, and this is the deepest cause of esoteric writing, the "benevolent deception" practiced by Socratics, who grasp the sources of the most firmly rooted moral prejudices that pervade every time and who accommodate their writing to them. The practice of Socratic political philosophy does not, then, according to Strauss, entail *any* promise of a rational politics or morality; it instead includes only a kind of writing that makes contributions to the edification of the reigning civic virtues, while simultaneously leading a few morally serious readers toward the philosophic life.

IV. Moderns

Equipped with this recovery of the intention of classical political philosophy, and having undergone the "change of orientation" that it entailed, Strauss returned to his study of the origins of modern political philosophy in the work of Hobbes, re-opening the "quarrel of the ancients and the moderns," which had been temporarily closed by the apparent victory of the moderns. His intention in returning to Hobbes was two fold: to understand modern thought radically, and to clear away later developments that had hidden the fundamental questions. Strauss argued that Hobbes, unlike his successors, addressed squarely the question of the right way of life, but that Hobbes did so while "taking for granted" the tradition, and hence the possibility and necessity, of political philosophy, or that he did so with a "neglect" of the purport of classical political philosophy. Hobbes misunderstood that intention to be the attempt to establish the right social order. He and his successors, Strauss argued, were thereby led to put the establishment of that order into the service of the grounding of science. For Hobbes, Strauss claimed, was guided in his thought by an effort to overcome "the cavils of the skeptics,"—challenges posed by those who, like Calvin or the *mutakallimûn*, claimed that the world is fundamentally unintelligible because it is at every moment the work of a mysterious, creative God. Hobbes granted that unintelligibility, and proposed against it a phenomenological-positivist science (positing laws made by the human mind, and re-making the world on their basis). Hobbes's new activist or "effective" political science was to be the means to make this science secure, by its disenchantment of the world through a "re-orientation" of humanity, away from faith in god or gods and toward "civilization." Strauss noted that Hobbes and his successors, rather than taking seriously what is disclosed in speech about the good and bad, just and unjust, reconceived political phenomena on the basis of a theoretical imposition, turning away from the speech of statesmen as something infected with imaginative superstition or fanaticism and obstructing the achievement of this-worldly pleasures.

To achieve their end, the moderns laid out new theoretical principles of social life: "power," rather than the good as the end of striving; natural rights, or selfish but justified claims, rather than natural or divine obligations; a state of nature rather than a perfect beginning; natural laws as merely human rules showing the best means to peace and comfortable living; a social contract of individuals to secure their rights. The aim of the liberal regimes founded on these new principles was, Strauss argued, to de-politicize human life, an aim that required a rejection of the Socratic claim that humans have an erotic longing for eternity. That longing was seen by the moderns as merely a distorted form of desire for the goods of this world, with which—thanks to the conquest of nature by the new natural science—humans could be made content. The new, liberal regimes were designed to provide an enlightenment and a liberation from ignorance, superstition, and prejudice, both through the scientific conquest of nature and through the acceptance of the new, "rational" understanding of justice (natural rights) rather than the categorical duties to which an allegedly divine law summons them. The disenchantment of the world through the success of the new political science was, then, a key part of attaining the desired end: a world in which science had succeeded at last grounded itself, i.e., met the challenge posed to it by divine revelation.

V. The Modern Failure, Historicism, and the Crisis of Our Time

Having come to understand early modern political philosophy as aiming to answer to the theologico-political problem in this manner, Strauss came to see the West's eventual loss of faith in reason as having been an incipient problem from the very beginning of modernity, with each successive attempt to correct for it, or "wave," deepening the crisis. Strauss saw "liberal relativism," the relativism "according to which the one thing needful is respect for diversity or individuality," as growing out of the natural right tradition of tolerance, which was explicitly based upon Hobbes' denial that there can be anything intrinsically right or good. That kind of individualism, which sought to obviate the need for any religious or transcendent meaning, failed to answer what proved to be an enduring human longing for such meaning; it at least suggested a fundamental meaninglessness or whimsicalness to self-sacrificial just or noble action, and hence could not be sustained. Its rejection was perceived and anticipated by Rousseau, whose call to build a high democratic culture of man-made humanity, based on the "general will" of peoples, over and against early modern rationalism, was taken up in earnest by the German Idealists. Hence the first form that the moral rejection of early modern rationalism took, Strauss found, was "historicism," the belief that the human mind is decisively and inescapably formed by the time and place in which we find ourselves. The "historical school" offered meaningfulness

in the customs and laws that had grown up in the course of a people's history, embodied in a general will, and—to ensure that that will was not arbitrary or erroneous—understood as one particular expression of an evolving human consciousness, one "progressing" toward full rational self-consciousness. But this too failed to satisfy morally serious human beings, owing to its fundamentally secular or this-worldly orientation. The problem was illustrated by Strauss with the example of early, strictly political Zionism, which had to transform itself into "cultural" Zionism if it was to capture the minds and hearts of those who understood themselves to be part of a noble tradition of suffering. But that very transformation meant that what had been understood by the tradition as the revealed word of God would instead be understood as a product of the human mind. It thus clouded the central issue of the right way of life—of faith or reason—and failed to satisfy the longing for transcendence of orthodox believers.

While this attempt of the historical school failed, the belief that history added a dynamic dimension to human existence nonetheless persisted, and was radicalized in the thought of Nietzsche, who proclaimed the need for a departure from the horizon of Western rationalism that threatened to produce satisfied "last men," and Heidegger, whose doctrines Strauss calls "radical historicism" or "existentialism."

Strauss found, through examination of Nietzsche's articulation of the West's crisis, that at the bottom of the modern political-philosophic attempt to ground philosophy over and against the claims of revelation was intellectual probity—or the ability to face up to hard truths—which he understood as a great, and always necessary, but fundamentally insufficient, virtue. He saw this virtue reaching its fullest form in Heidegger's apparently atheistic analysis, in *Being and Time*, of the call of conscience as the call of Care. But he saw probity's insufficiency showing itself in, among other things, the fact that death becomes Heidegger's new god, summoning man to serious, stubbornly resolute, elevated action. And while Strauss was explicitly indebted to Heidegger for his understanding of the "neglect," by early moderns, of fundamental questions that Heidegger's "destruction of the tradition" had first made possible, he nonetheless found Heidegger's historicism to have its own unexamined or taken-for-granted character. For Heidegger's destruction of the tradition was carried out without awareness of the art of esoteric writing that had been practiced, in various forms and for various reasons, by thinkers within the tradition.

The rich unfolding of modernity thus appeared to Strauss to represent not only a neglect of, but a progressive estrangement from, erotic human nature as disclosed by Socratic dialectics. He accordingly characterized the result as an "estrangement from man's deepest desire and therewith from the primary issues," and called this the "price which modern man had to pay" for attempting to conquer nature. As a result of the failure of modernity, moreover, modern science and philosophy lost sight of what is required to

establish the ground of the rational life.

VI. Strauss's "Politics"

In the light of Strauss's account of the respective answers to the theologico-political problem, and especially his understanding of the magnificent failure of the modern attempt, in which philosophers became active proponents of political change, he was inclined to judge classical political science and practice as superior to modern in most respects. Classical philosophers' nobler accounts of politics, Strauss found, deliberately sought to do justice to the phenomena of political life, as actually experienced and viewed by the pre-philosophic, engaged citizen. Modern political philosophy, by contrast, had resulted in a relativist social and political science that is increasingly unable to recognize either tyranny or human nobility. While Strauss's writings manifest a reluctance to offer theoretical guidance to contemporary statesmen, he did stress that the world in which we find ourselves has been transformed in ways that adversely affect the souls of both citizens and potential philosophers, and he did not refrain from offering an (unsettling) account of our present situation, warning against two possible directions of liberal democracy, the regime that he found the best of the available alternatives in the modern world.

The first direction is a cosmopolitanism that it is rooted in the belief that human life as such is an absolute good, a cosmopolitanism that embraces and even promotes a peculiar humanitarianism that goes hand-in-hand with a ruling concern with pleasure and entertainment and unwillingness to devote one's life to high ends. Cosmopolitanism necessarily leaves little room for reverence, which is primarily for one's particularistic heritage or for tradition. Since Strauss regarded reverence as the matrix of human nobility, he saw this tendency as problematic for liberal democracy, which becomes ever more permissive and individualistic, tending toward a leveling moralism and an overemphasis of the virtues of sociability at the expense of more difficult virtues. Following Max Weber, he found modern democracy to foster "mass culture," one "which can be appropriated by the meanest capacities without any intellectual and moral effort whatsoever," producing a decay of the spirit, of taste, of the mind. Liberal republican energy and stability are necessarily threatened by this dwindling of spiritual resources and cultural shallowness.

Liberal democracy is likewise threatened by the growing void left by the recognition of this spiritual impoverishment. For such impoverishment cannot take place without an eventual terrible awareness of it, and it would not be unreasonable to expect unforeseeable forms of longing and rebellion against the political order that appears to be causing a diminution of natural human aspirations. The yearning for transcendent purpose may result in manifestations of pre-liberal religiosity, or various sorts of desperate nihilisms

that aim to destroy modernity, in perverted and fanatic expressions of the natural and inevitable civic concern for the sacred and willingness to fight on its behalf. Even within the confines of liberal democracy, Strauss suggested, that concern had already begun to produce an incoherence in liberal thinkers, like Isaiah Berlin, who turn away from reason and toward Heideggerian resolute or deadly serious decision. Since reason cannot supply the trans-modern norms that would temper modern liberal rationalism and political universalism in the way its citizens suspect it needs to be, liberals may attempt to abandon reason and stifle self-critical thinking. Modernity's disenchantment of the world eventually drives even the non-believing morally serious person, in other words, to a form of misology, or to what Strauss, citing the experience of Europe in the 30's and 40's, called "'fanatical obscurantism,'" i.e., a desperate, moralistic flight from what reason appears to reveal about the apparent groundlessness of our moral and civic being.

It is perhaps for this reason that Strauss, in the introduction to his most widely read work, *Natural Right and History*, sternly warns those looking to find a basis for natural right not to be led by the spirit of fanatical obscurantism that characterized their foes. He also makes abundantly clear that political life does not admit of the radical consistency that characterizes all genuine thinking. Not all of his students have taken these warnings to heart. He can be said to have fostered an understanding of the tendencies and noblest aspirations of liberal democratic regimes and moderation of their less healthy tendencies, in the service of elevation of purpose. Strauss's perhaps most enduring legacy in the study of American liberal democracy is manifest in the work of Herbert Storing and his students.

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