On the Place of the Treatment of Classical Philosophy in the Plan of the Work as a Whole

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> The interpreter must make explicit what the author merely presupposes, especially if it is something which we do not presuppose. (Letter to Gadamer, February 26, 1961, *The Independent Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. II, 1978, 6)
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> . . . in our present-day perspective the most important things are almost invisible. (Six lectures on natural right and history, delivered at the University of Chicago, Autumn 1949, V 1)

The following remarks are meant to prepare a discussion of chapters three and four of *Natural Right and History* (NRH), the chapters entitled "The Origin of the Idea of Natural Right" and "Classic Natural Right," by considering the place of these chapters in the plan of the work as a whole.

Natural Right and History is widely taken to be, and reasonably taken to be, a defense of natural right. But, like Aristotle's defense of slavery, it is a defense of an unusual kind. It all but begins with a warning not to let the keenness of our awareness of the need for natural right hasten us to the conclusion "that the need can be satisfied." (NRH 6; cf. 150n24) And it is unsparing in its criticism of natural right teachings (like the one to which our nation was dedicated) that in its judgment fall short of meeting that need (cf. NRH 249-51, for example, with 1). Indeed, the book goes so far as to suggest that the only defensible natural right teaching is the classic one. This suggestion—made explicitly in the lectures on which the book was based (I 6)—is conveyed in the book itself by a remark to the effect that "an adequate solution to the problem of natural right cannot be found" before the problem "caused by the victory of modern natural science . . . has been solved": that victory "would seem to have . . . destroyed" the "teleological view of the universe"; and it is

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natural right "in its classic form" which is "connected with a teleological view of the universe." (NRH 7–8) (Classic natural right is connected with that view through its apparent dependence on a "teleological view of man": cf. NRH 7 and 126–27 with 145–46.) If only one form of natural right is defensible, the defense of natural right offered in or constituted by *Natural Right and History* is, of necessity, a defense of that form of it. Yet, as a discussion that limits itself to "that aspect of the problem of natural right which can be clarified within the confines of the social sciences," the book explicitly declines to take up the problem whose solution it has declared to be required for an adequate defense of natural right in that form. The problem in question was caused, to repeat, "by the victory of modern natural science," a victory the book nowhere suggests can be reversed. (In the same context, the transcript of the lectures contains this additional sentence: "Naturally, there is no scarcity of elegant solutions to that problem, but the experience of some centuries has shown that modern natural science always survives the elegant solutions of the problems created by and coeval with modern natural science." I 7) In this situation, one might well be tempted to turn to a natural right teaching which is not undermined by the victory of modern natural science, but rather even presupposes it. And the book grants that there is such a teaching. Its originator, Hobbes, was the first man "to draw the consequences for natural right from this momentous change" from a teleological to a nonteleological natural science; Hobbes held "the conviction that a teleological cosmology is impossible"; and he shared with "his most illustrious contemporaries ... a sense of the complete failure of traditional philosophy." (NRH 166, 176, 170) But, not to mention now other difficulties, natural right in its modern form, the natural right teaching inaugurated by Hobbes, culminates according to *Natural Right and History* in a "crisis" whose "ultimate outcome" is historicism, that is, a type of thought that rejects natural right in any form. (NRH 34, 8) And it is against historicism, as the title of the book confirms, that its defense of natural right is above all directed. Yet in criticizing, as it therefore necessarily does, the path embarked on by Hobbes and his contemporaries —for "it is necessary to state not only the truth but also the cause of the error" (Aristotle *Nichomachean Ethics* 1154a22-26, as quoted in a letter to Helmut Kuhn regarding his review of *Natural Right and History* [which had just appeared in German translation], *The Independent Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. II, 1978, 23)—the book nowhere denies that their starting point reflected genuine awareness on their part of a difficulty in "traditional philosophy," that is, in classical philosophy as it had been transmitted to them or as they had come to understand it.

We thus seem to have involved ourselves, if not the argument we are trying to follow, in a contradiction. The natural right that the book attempts to defend is, as we have seen, classic natural right. Yet the thinkers who turned away from classic natural right, to elaborate eventually a new natural right teaching, were motivated in part by awareness of a

genuine difficulty in the philosophy to which the classic natural right teaching belongs. Or, to put the matter somewhat more adequately, the book's defense of natural right is directed, as we have also seen, above all against historicism. Now, historicism's rejection of natural right is based on a rejection of philosophy as such "in the full sense of the term." (NRH 35; cf. 12) The intended defense of natural right requires, therefore, a vindication of philosophy as such, even though "the possibility of philosophy is only the necessary and not the sufficient condition of natural right." (NRH 35; cf. 93) But this has proven to mean that that defense requires a vindication (as against historicism) of classical philosophy, "which is nonhistoricist thought in its pure form." (NRH 33) And it is, in fact, to this (narrower or broader, at any rate preliminary) task that the argument of the book as a whole is explicitly devoted. (NRH 33-34; cf. 31-32; cf., further, Helmut Kuhn, "Naturrecht und Historismus," *The Independent Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. II, 1978, 14) (As for the distinction between classical philosophy and classic natural right, consider NRH 11: "Conventionalism is a particular form of classical philosophy.") But it approaches this task having conceded at the outset, so-to-speak, that the moderns' dissatisfaction with classical philosophy—a dissatisfaction that extends indeed to classical philosophy in all of its forms (compare NRH 109 with 172 and 174)—was not entirely without ground.

What it would seem to object to, then, is not their identification of the problem with which they were grappling, but rather the manner in which they were doing so or the path which the moderns chose to embark upon when they were confronted with that problem as one which remained, as they thought, unsolved. And this suggests that the way out of the impasse into which we have stumbled—if there is a way out—or at least its first step may lie in a full and frank elucidation of the problem in question. But nowhere in the book does Strauss provide such an elucidation.—This provisional conclusion is based on a premise that could well be questioned: that chapter two, "Natural Right and the Distinction Between Facts and Values," is not intended to supply the elucidation we seek. Compare, in particular, the remark toward the beginning of the chapter to the effect that "the perennial conflict between the Socratic and the anti-Socratic answer [to "the question of how man ought to live"] creates the impression that the Socratic answer is as arbitrary as its opposite, or that the perennial conflict is insoluble" (NRH 36) and the parallel remark, toward its end, that "If we take a bird's-eye view of the secular struggle between philosophy and theology, we can hardly avoid the impression that neither of the two antagonists has ever succeeded in really refuting the other" (NRH 75 and context) with NRH 170-71.—Among the reasons for his silence on the matter, however, may have been a wish to indicate by it that, in the study of authors who are also philosophers, there is something which can be presupposed (because it *must* be presupposed): namely, their preoccupation with the problem in question. According to remarks he made elsewhere in criticism of intellectual probity, such

probity differs from love of truth insofar as it consists (merely) in readiness to admit that one is an atheist and to draw all of the consequences that follow from this admission—insofar, that is, as it amounts to making an admittedly unprovable assumption into the dogmatic basis of one's position. (*Philosophie und Gesetz*, 26n1; GS II 25n13) Now, in order to appreciate the full bearing of these remarks, which (so far as I have been able to observe) tend to be somewhat misunderstood, we must not, like King David when he was confronted by the prophet Nathan, fail to apply them to ourselves: we who, at least in many cases today, are content to be "irreligious because fate forces us to be irreligious and for no other reason." (NRH 73) What Strauss suggests, in other words, by his remarks as to the *insufficiency* of intellectual probity (of which, incidentally, there can never be too much), is that philosophers as philosophers are constitutionally unable to content themselves in this way. It is only because we (as scholars of the history of philosophy) are not philosophers (as of course we readily grant) that a problem has been able to be rendered almost invisible to us, that was for them always at the center of their concerns.

What the argument of the book would seem then to object to, to repeat, is not the moderns' preoccupation with this problem but the path they took when they were forced, as they thought, to conclude that the philosophy which the tradition had transmitted to them had failed to solve it. The book's two last chapters, "Modern Natural Right" and "The Crisis of Modern Natural Right," consisting, each of them, of two parts and constituting together nearly half of the work as a whole, are devoted to the critique of that path. They are devoted, in particular, to showing why it had to lead to the result that, according to Strauss, it did lead to. Now, in this connection, one point—to which our attention had already been drawn at least as early as the end of chapter one—is especially noteworthy. Although the moderns had developed a distinctive natural philosophy (NRH 169-77, 201, 248-49, 263-66, 272, 281, 311-12), as well as a distinctive political philosophy, the argument is concerned much more with the latter strand of their thought than with the former. And this choice can be regarded as (in every way) an obvious one, only so long as we allow ourselves to lose sight of the fact that the declared intent of the book, and of this last part of it particularly, is to vindicate classical philosophy and not yet classic natural right (paragraph three above). The most compelling reason for it was indicated early on in the remarks to which we have referred. According to what Strauss suggests there, it was the "crisis of modern natural right" that became a "crisis of philosophy as such" (NRH 34); historicism, in other words, which contends that "philosophy in the full sense of the term is impossible" (NRH 35) and which rests in part on "a critique of human thought as such" (NRH 12, 20), is "the ultimate outcome" of a development that took place not within "philosophy in general" but rather within "political philosophy" (NRH 34). Now, a crisis in natural right need not, of itself, entail a crisis in philosophy as such, need not force one to

question the very possibility of philosophy—any more than a crisis in a given natural right teaching forces one, in and of itself, to call into question even the philosophy to which that teaching belongs. Strauss acknowledges as much both in what he says about classical philosophy (NRH 11-12, 81-93, 109-13, 145-52) and in a number of other passages scattered throughout the book (NRH 23-24, 32, 35; 95-97, 118-19, 275-76; 26, 261-62). That the "crisis of modern natural right. . . could become a crisis of philosophy as such" requires therefore an explanation. And the explanation that he offers at the end of chapter one is that "in the modern centuries philosophy as such had become thoroughly politicized." (NRH 34) But this explanation is itself in need of some explaining: it does little more than to pose the question for which we must look to the last part of the work, the final two chapters, for an answer.

What development, then, did Strauss have in mind in referring to the thorough politicization of philosophy in modern times? The last part of the work yields its answer to this question somewhat grudgingly; but, for this very reason, at least one passage of startling clarity stands out. (NRH 169-79) Strauss admonishes us there, "in trying to understand Hobbes's political philosophy," not to "lose sight of his natural philosophy." (NRH 169) He does so by way of explaining a remark which he made after quoting Burke's description of a transformation that had taken place in atheists or atheism: "'Boldness formerly was not the character of atheists as such. They were even of a character nearly the reverse; they were formerly like the old Epicureans, rather an unenterprising race. But of late they are grown active, designing, turbulent, and seditious.'" Strauss had commented (in part) as follows: "Political atheism is a distinctly modern phenomenon. No pre-modern atheist doubted that social life required belief in, and worship of, God or gods." (NRH 169) And, just before admonishing us, as we have seen, to keep in mind Hobbes's natural philosophy in trying to understand his political philosophy, he had ascribed this development to Hobbes (but cf. NRH 177–79). Now, Hobbes's natural philosophy was of a sort to permit (or require) "an attitude of neutrality or indifference toward the secular conflict between materialism and spiritualism." But Hobbes was not entirely satisfied with a neutral stance in this regard: he "had the earnest desire to be a 'metaphysical' materialist. But he was forced to rest satisfied with a 'methodical' materialism." (NRH 174; cf. "On the Basis of Hobbes's Political Philosophy," WIPP 183) I am strengthened in my inclination to interpret these remarks as I do by what Strauss says, some hundred pages further on, about Rousseau. After directing us, for the understanding of "Rousseau's theoretical principles," to the *Second Discourse*, the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (NRH 264), he observes that "The argument of the *Second Discourse* is meant to be acceptable to materialists as well as to others. It is meant to be neutral with regard to the conflict between materialism and antimaterialism, or to be 'scientific' in the

present-day sense of the term." (NRH 265-66) Now, the *Second Discourse* presents a " 'history' of man" which is "modeled on the account of the fate of the human race which Lucretius gave in the fifth book of his poem" (a poem that Strauss had called, in his thematic treatment of it, the "greatest document of philosophic conventionalism" NRH 111ff.). But Rousseau takes Lucretius' account "out of its Epicurean context and puts it into a context supplied by modern natural and social science" (cf. NRH 279 as well as 169); and this entails not only that, "at least at the outset, he follows Descartes rather than Epicurus," but also that, whereas Lucretius had sought the "remedies for the ills which he was forced to mention . . . in philosophic withdrawal from political life," Rousseau is concerned "to discover that political order which is in accordance with natural right." (NRH 264; cf. 179 as well as 273) Rousseau's "theoretical principles" or his "theoretical science" is of the same kind, then, as that of Hobbes, "namely, modern natural science" (NRH 263; in a footnote in the context regarding "the prehistory of this approach" [266n29] Strauss refers us to the earlier passage). And his dissatisfaction with that science could not have been less than that of Hobbes (cf. NRH 272, 281, and 265 with 172-75; cf. also 312). In this situation, he was led to depart from a classical model in such a way as to place an emphasis on the discovery of the right political order that was absent from the original. (One might consider in this connection also Strauss's earlier observation that "Gassendi, the famous restorer of Epicureanism [in modern times], had stronger incentives than the ancient Epicureans for asserting the existence of natural right." NRH 111n44)

In speaking of the moderns' "sense" that traditional philosophy had been a "complete failure" (NRH 170), Strauss cannot have had in mind a rejection on their part of everything which the classical philosophers had said or thought, for he refers in many passages to what modern philosophers accepted or took over from classical teachings (for example, NRH 167–69, 170, 172, 252, 261-62, 264, and 279, to say nothing of 164). He must have meant a sense, on the part of the moderns, that traditional philosophy had been a failure in the decisive respect. To put the matter in terms that he had used earlier in the book, traditional philosophy was thought to have failed to defend adequately "the most elementary premises whose validity is presupposed by philosophy" (NRH 31) or to have failed to respond adequately to the objection that philosophy, as "the life devoted to the quest for evident knowledge available to man as man," rests itself "on an unevident, arbitrary, or blind decision" (NRH 75; cf. 30–31). It was this failure, then, that the moderns sought to remedy by developing a new natural philosophy to take the place of the discredited natural philosophy or natural philosophies of the classics. (NRH 170ff.) But as we have seen in the cases of Hobbes and Rousseau, at least, the moderns were themselves not satisfied that the new natural science, which "is and will always remain fundamentally hypothetical" (NRH 174), fully answered their need. They turned therefore, in the train of

Machiavelli (NRH 177–79), to a new political philosophy which—by means of "a deliberate lowering of the ultimate goal" of political life (see, for example, in addition to NRH 178, 182-83, 186, 191, 266-67, and 269)—promised to dispose on the practical plane of objections that could not be definitively disposed of theoretically (cf. NRH 14–15 with 198). As for their own ultimate aim, it was nothing less than to give philosophy itself, or rationalism, a new breath of life. It is true, as can be seen already from the case of Rousseau, that the final result of their efforts was not very favorable to the cause of reason (NRH 252, 262, 278–79, 293); but this would seem, according to Strauss's account, to be due to the fact that "In Rousseau's doctrine of the state of nature, the modern natural right teaching reaches its critical stage," or that "By thinking through that teaching, Rousseau was brought face to face with the necessity of abandoning it completely" (NRH 273–74; consider also the contrast drawn between Rousseau and German idealism: NRH 252–55, and 278–79 together with 282 and 290). A rationalism which "rests ultimately," as Strauss had suggested of "Hobbes's rationalism" (cf. NRH 201 with 175), on political hopes is bound to be called into question, once those hopes no longer appear credible.

The distinctiveness of the intellectual position that Strauss, together perhaps with one or two others, occupied seems to be this: that he accepted the genuineness and gravity of the problem which preoccupied the moderns, while resisting their conclusions as to how it was to be dealt with. And the question to which this points is whether his resistance was not strengthened (at least) by his discovering, in the way that classical political philosophy had been brought by Socrates to complement a classical natural philosophy (NRH 121–24), a path that the moderns had overlooked.