Philosophy, Christianity and the Problem of “Moral Analogy” in Leo Strauss’s “Political Philosophy” (with some preliminary comparisons with the thought of Michael Oakshott)

Tocqueville on “Moral Analogy”

In his Introduction to *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville identifies a profound spiritual as well as moral and political threat to modern humanity, one that clearly foreshadows the specter of “technology” later raised by Martin Heidegger and then Leo Strauss. For Tocqueville, the French Revolution presents in its clearest form the “alarming spectacle” of a radical dislocation between man’s internal life and his attempts to give external or social representation to his belief, the spectacle of a world “in which nothing is connected” and where “conscience sheds but doubtful light on human actions.”¹ That for Tocqueville this dislocation is understood more radically than for his teach Francois Guizot may be gathered from the very instability of the border between internal and external in Tocqueville’s almost anguished account. The rupture between beliefs and practices, between the soul and the world, is one that cannot be confined to man’s relation to his social and institutional expressions; rather, this rupture now threatens the order of the soul itself. This is the deepest threat implied in the rupture between “acts and beliefs,” the abolition of “the laws of moral analogy.” Tocqueville is disturbed by the prospect, not of only social and political tumult, but of a condition that affects man’s very orientation towards truth or being and which we have learned in the twentieth century to call nihilism: “where conscience sheds but doubtful light on human actions,” and “where nothing any longer seems either forbidden or permitted, honest or dishonorable, true or false.”²

Tocqueville’s notion of “moral analogy” goes to the pivotal questions of political philosophy, questions involving the relation between our interest as human beings in transcendent truth and meaning and our belonging to authoritative social, moral, and political structures that perform necessary functions. I propose that this concept, understood in its full implications, can provide a uniquely fertile perspective from which to situate the leading possible configurations of political philosophy, including, here, those of Leo Strauss and Michael Oakshott. Whereas Leo Strauss proposes a distinctly “vertical” or “aristocratic” response to “technology,” or to the collapse of “moral analogy,” Oakshott seems to pursue an almost opposite strategy, one that abandons the quest for a linkage between the theoretical and the practical and in fact attempts to insulate philosophy as absolute experience and the realm of practice from each other.

Let me must first briefly develop and expand upon Tocqueville’s idea of “moral

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¹ *Democracy in America*, pp. 12, 17-18.

² *Democracy in America*, p. 18. My emphasis.
analogy.” Human existence, I propose, is marked by an inescapable dualism or tension between the “practical” and the “theoretical,” categories that have been essential to the configuration of the field of philosophy since Aristotle articulated them in The Nichomachean Ethics Book VI.

These “internal” and “external” dispositions or orientations, though never fully separate or distinct, seem to represent two permanent dimensions of our existence. To prepare further investigations in later chapters I will here only suggest other formulations of these fundamental orientations. What Guizot called the “external” as opposed to “internal” can also be aligned somewhat roughly but very meaningfully with authority as opposed to freedom, with the immanent as opposed to the transcendent, with actuality as opposed to possibility, with the concrete as opposed to the abstract, with being-at-home as opposed to homelessness or alienation, with tradition as opposed to modernity, and, finally, with aristocracy (in Tocqueville’s very broad acceptance of the term) as opposed to democracy. Of course these correspondences are far from perfect, as the meanings of the terms vary considerably with context. In fact I will be at pains to uncover the instability of these oppositions. I hope to show, nevertheless, that an understanding of the polarity represented by these two sets of terms provides a key to a uniquely rich understanding of the human condition in relation to the faculty or possibility of “reason.”

The following table summarizes these broad but very significant correspondences:

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Tocqueville’s fundamental insight is that human meaning happens in a field defined by the fundamental polarity between free, transcendent possibility and concrete, authoritative actuality.

Tocqueville understands that the powerful tendency of modern democracy is at once to drive these poles apart and to evacuate the space between them such that it collapses; the radical emancipation of one pole from the other releases the energy from their normal...

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3 For readers familiar with the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, it is impossible not to hear a resonance with Thomas’s idea of an “analogy” between God and man. In Thomas’s system, “analogy” served to link Divine infinity with the finitude of His creation and thus with human reason. The categories with which we understand the finite world are by no means adequate to God’s infinity, but they have a meaningful application by “analogy.” It is only thus through analogy that we are able to affirm, for example, to use the same word, “just,” to refer to a human judge and to God. Whether such a verbal device of “analogy” is finally sufficient to hold together the poles of divine infinity and concrete human meaning is of course another question. The subsequent history of Christian scholasticism, and, after that, indeed, of the post-Christian encounter with infinity, seems to suggest doubts.
tension into a compulsion to fusion: the attempt to “abolish” the laws of moral analogy cannot in fact erase the human need to actualize transcendent possibility, to concretize in some way the purest and most abstract longings of the human spirit or to embrace traces of transcendence in the most practical functions. Thus the modern pursuit of unlimited freedom (idealism) can only fall back on the authority of the most common practical needs (materialism), and the most resolute pragmatism cannot fail to project a horizon of abstract and limitless hope. The attempt to abolish or deny “moral analogy” succeeds, not really in overcoming, but only in perverting the linkage between transcendence and immanence, in reproducing it in extreme and potentially inhuman forms.

Thus, in the modern attempt to abolish the “laws of moral analogy,” or to deny all likeness between God and man, all continuity between transcendence and immanence, human beings do not cease to imitate some God, but in fact radicalize transcendence to the point that they can only imitate Him by occluding and thus debasing their own humanity.

Reflective Responsibility in Theory and Practice

In order to see the deepest implications of Tocqueville’s enactment of reason’s responsibility in the face of the democratic-materialist abolition of moral analogy, I must attempt briefly to characterize an early and paradigmatic example, indeed the primordial and definitive example, of an act of reflexive responsibility, an articulation of the rule of reason: that is, Plato’s evocation of the “idea of the good” in the sixth book of the Republic. (Recall: to know the meaning of justice one must describe the perfectly just city, which turns out to be ruled by philosopher-kings. And the idea of the “philosopher” turns out to be a strict correlate of the idea of “the good” – the philosopher is the one whose soul has been turned from the cave and its fleeting shadows to the sunlike idea of the good.) Plato’s teaching here, or his suggestion, is at once so mysterious and challenging that no technical explanation captures or exhausts it, and yet in a way so elemental, so primitive that every child who has delighted in the sunlight’s illumination of natural beings has experienced what Plato is evoking.

Let me attempt my own rendering of what is at stake in this “idea of the good.” The good is described as the ground at once of knowing and of being. To know any natural being is implicitly to be aware of and in wonder of the givenness of the possibility of knowing, of some fittedness of my mind to the thing, to a natural being, and of that being to my mind. If I can see and know the tree whose leaves I see shimmering in the sunlight, if I can embrace the reality of the seeing and knowing I experience immediately, then I must also somehow be aware that the tree is in some sense made or ordained to be seen by a being such as I am, and that I am somehow made or ordained to see a being such as a tree. The beginning of reason’s responsibility is this reflexive awareness of wonder of the very possibility of knowing, of a yoke between being and knowing. But this awareness of the mutual fittedness of myself and the tree is also an awareness of a larger, comprehensive order, of a whole of which the tree and I are parts. The sheer reality of knowledge implies the embeddedness of knower and known, of mind or soul and being (I do not say
subject and object) in some larger whole. And since this seeing and knowing is immediately, intrinsically, irreducibly wondrous and good, its ground in some larger whole is naturally thought to be The Good. The Good is a “yoke,” a bond between knower and known. To affirm some connection between one’s own mind’s participation in the reality of what is given and some ground of goodness is Plato’s primordial expression of what I mean by reflexive responsibility – that is, of responding coherently and truthfully to an immediate participation in truth. On the other hand, to reduce mind and being, knower and known, to some “material” object on the one hand and some subject that is radically free to impose any form whatsoever (thus reducing the thinking being itself, insofar as it is knowable, to some merely biological or mechanical or cybernetic psychological object) is simply to forsake or to suppress peremptorily and violently the primordial experience of things, the very reality of beings – let us say the experience of the reality of be-ing, the joint happening of being and knowing -- from which Plato, like and any child, begins.

The beginning of reason’s responsibility is thus the moment of reflection in which thinking becomes aware of itself and thus opens itself to the next moment, to the question of its own conditions and thus to wonderment. This sense of wonder issues into an awareness of a yoke between knowing and being, an awareness that gives rise to the idea of the essential goodness of knowing and thinking within some larger whole, the idea of a fundamental link between the human being’s rational faculty and the goodness of The Whole. This is the moment of a fundamental awareness of the goodness of thinking.

But this awareness of the goodness of thinking cannot fail to issue into the thinking of goodness.

The primitive discovery of the immediate evidence of some order and goodness connecting mind and being does not of course give anything like a complete understanding of the order of this whole. The whole and the good that yokes it, that makes it a whole, remain elusive – mysterious something that, as Plato says, every soul pursues whatever it is pursuing, but without being able to grasp what it is. But every soul already participates, already is part of some larger whole and is subordinate to some “higher” authority – political, moral, religious, or rather, originally, all these at once, indistinguishably. The “soul” or “the human spirit” comes to self-awareness as a part of a larger whole, a particular whole with a particular history, if you will, a tradition.

And so, inevitably, any orientation towards the cosmic whole can only express and articulate itself in language conditioned by subordination to this prior, political whole. The very terms “higher” and “good” already have a profoundly political meaning before it occurs to philosophers to take them up in their efforts to respond to an awareness of The Good. (At the same time, let it be noted, that, if philosophy is something more than a sheer construction of a certain faction of aristocratic Greeks, then this very political usage of “higher” and “good,” or their Greek equivalents, must already have been conditioned by humanity’s implicit ontological or teleological awareness.) Therefore, in striving to respond articulately to an awareness of some cosmic ground, some order of the whole, the philosopher cannot help but situate this whole, this higher order, in relation to
the more familiar order, the highs and lows in which he already participates as a speaking, reasoning being in the practical, political world – that is, in his particular political world, his cave, as Plato says. The elusive cosmic good can be thought only as both other than and continuous with the goods a speaking, reasoning human being seeks to attain or preserve in the practical, political realm. To articulate this otherness and this continuity is to take theoretical and practical responsibility for what Tocqueville names “moral analogy.”

What begins as a reflexive responsibility inherent in the sheer activity of reason itself thus eventually assumes an inherently political dimension. Reason’s immediate responsibility of reflection yields an awareness of the good of thinking which further calls reason to think the good. The yoke between being and knowing must somehow be both thought and enacted as a yoke between the Good and the goods of common, practical human existence. This is the theoretical-practical ground from which all responsible thinking and the thinking of all responsibility must issue.

Plato enacts this ground by affirming or seeming to affirm the simple superiority of theory to practice, of pure thinking to human being (as if the good, the yoke of being and knowing, were not beyond but could be fully grasped and enjoyed by the superior human beings, the “philosophers.” He thus suppresses by appearing to answer the question of the relation of the good of thinking to the common human good: the rule of pure knowing in the philosopher’s soul is presented in The Republic as the pure ground of the philosopher’s authority over the souls of non-philosophers. This is what is at stake in the famous analogy between the order of the philosopher’s soul and the order of the true city. The responsibility of reason takes the simple form of the rule of reason as grounded in reason’s claim to absolute self-possession in The Good. The myth of the Republic is a very refined and exquisitely self-conscious form of an essentially aristocratic configuration of transcendence. To doubt (as we must) this implied claim that the best soul possesses a natural capacity to grasp the ground of being is to consider that the pure right of reason to rule is hard to distinguish finally from the pure identification of reason with the necessary responsibility of ruling in the soul and in the city. The claim to transcend our political conditions by purely natural powers is a very political claim. We will see further on that this is the aristocratic strategy that Leo Strauss attempts to recover for our times: the idea of the pure and complete satisfaction of human nature by the highest exercise of the theoretical life itself is offered as an antidote to the leveling power of modern rationalism. This is the ground of “natural right” according to Leo Strauss. Michael Oakshott, on the other hand, appears altogether to repudiate the classical linkage of philosophy with a “reflexive responsibility” both theoretical and practical.

Aristocracy and Democracy: The Rule of Reason
Tocqueville’s way of addressing the collapse of moral analogy, in which what is godlike in man turns against his very humanity, his very nuanced sense of reason’s responsibility, must be understood in relation to the two great spiritual and intellectual alternatives that the author of Democracy in America puts before us: “Aristocracy” and “Democracy.” In traditional or Aristocratic societies, the transcendence of the human spirit, its awareness
of some elusive order or meaning and self-affirmation within some larger reality, is intimately associated with actual ruling practices. The rule of reason here takes the direct form of the association of the mind’s transcendence with existing hierarchies in the practical world. What is better or higher is immediately associated with the definite, particular, concrete authority of ruling classes and their ways. In traditional or “aristocratic” societies, as we have seen, these ruling ideas or notions find poetic expression in concrete representations of particular heroes and gods that are as it were the idealization of figures of transcendence that are immediately effective in that particular society. “Aristocracy” is thus another name for the authority of “moral analogy,” for the availability of an effective sense of the hierarchical linkage between actual practices and institutions “higher” spiritual or theoretical possibilities. Even Plato’s lofty notion of a philosopher-king, however radically innovative, would have made no sense even to his more philosophical readers if it did not draw upon an existing sense of the nobility of a serene and leisureed aristocratic who appeared “above it all” in the sense of not being preoccupied with “common” concerns. In aristocratic or traditional societies, the rule of reason is the more or less rational articulation of already ruling figures of transcendence. The defect of the “rule of reason” so understood is of course just that against which Karl Marx declaimed: in general such ruling ideas are not reflexive and critical but simply the rationalizations of a ruling class, of whatever class or type of human being happens to rule. Here the rule of reason is mostly rule and hardly reason. Even in its most refined philosophical form as the “right of the wise to rule” (as our reading of Leo Strauss will illustrate further), wisdom’s claim, however noble and even plausible in the best of cases, can never be established on the basis of pure reason but must always appeal to some more or less sound prejudice in its favor. The rule of reason is never purely rational, but always a form of ruling.

In a modern or modernizing, democratic society, as Tocqueville has shown, these concrete hierarchical figures and the practices of obedience or deference that accompany them are less and less available. The poetic imagination of democrats is thus increasingly untethered from concrete figures of transcendence. The effective subject of the democratic imagination is democracy itself, the prospect of a whole people marching forward, leveling all obstacles to its progress. Reason plays a role in this democratic and progressive poetic imagination, but its role is, or risks becoming, purely negative: critical reason – Descartes’ idea of reason, Tocqueville says -- is used to debunk traditional and aristocratic claims to the representation of something “higher,” and thus to liberate individuals from particular and artificial constraints. In this modern, rationalistic formulation of the rule of reason, all the emphasis is on reason in its pure and therefore purely critical form, not as ruling but as liberating from rule, the rule of reason not for its own sake (for any sake it might have, any higher claim to rule would be tainted with aristocratic pretensions) but as a means to the liberation of “the individual.” In this modern democratic or universalist rationalism, reason rules by suppressing its claim to rule, by covering its tracks. Reason purified of “moral analogy” cannot affirm itself, cannot stand up for itself, cannot exercise reflexive responsibility.

Tocqueville demonstrates with unsurpassed power and clarity the spurious and unstable character of this rationalistic liberation. Emancipation from traditional authority does not
eliminate the need for authority, a need which is at once socio-political and existential (II.i.2), and so a new authority emerges that is all the more powerful since it is generally unacknowledged: the individual, stripped of a hierarchically ordered frame of existence, falls back on the tyranny of the majority, a tyranny that dispenses with crude physical coercion and imposes itself directly on the naked and exposed democratic mind. The very possibility of a truth grounded in something higher is eclipsed by the prestige of quantity, the power of the greatest number. This prestige of power tends further to slip from the hands of an actual majority (for any actual majority would be concrete and particular, like an aristocracy) into the increasingly general idea of progress towards some indefinite perfectibility. Purged of all particular claims of goodness, such an idea of progress would be mere change, or the authority of sheer, groundless historicity, of whatever historical world we happen to be thrown into. The rationalist rule of reason, which knows itself only through its negation of the traditional or aristocratic contents of life, dissolves all moral analogy and thus itself dissolves into the rule of the majority or of “progress,” before it finally just dissolves altogether. The risk of what Heidegger called “technology,” the risk of the progressive heightening of human power at the cost of the oblivion of human meaning is inherent in the democratic-individualist construction of the rule of reason, in which reason undermines ruling and thus, implicitly and finally, its own ruling activity.

Purely critical reason cannot rationally defend its claim to rule. Thus reason is either impure or empty. If it is possible for reason to achieve reflexive probity, this can only be by coherently affirming and thus by deliberately assuming responsibility for the limited rationality of its claim to transcendence or nobility. Reason must assume responsibility for sustaining some kind of “moral analogy,” although the analogy between the spiritual-theoretical and the moral-practical can never be simply determined by reason.

For Strauss, then, the most acutely self-aware, self-critical and therefore responsible philosophy will knowingly sponsor a kind of aristocratic partisanship, since it knows that its own nobility is necessarily grafted upon the idea of perfection, or excellence that is concretely represented in a political regime. Thus Strauss’s claim that theory transcends practice is rooted in an awareness of the practical conditions of theory, and of the practical sources of the nobility of theory. From Oakshott’s point of view, any such philosophic partisanship would be alien to philosophy’s essence.

**Theory, Practice, and Transcendence**

Theory must rule practice, and yet it cannot. Thinking (Tocqueville’s “internal” dimension) is called to assume and to represent Being (the “external”), but thinking is always preceded and exceeded by Being. This very excess of Being with respect to thinking – transcendence -- reason necessarily configures along two axes of significance or of free signifying that we may call “vertical” (aristocracy, actuality) and “horizontal” (democracy, possibility)
The vertical axis is determined by the self-affirmation of the thinking agent himself or herself: the affirmation of the rule of reason, general and impersonal, merges with the concrete affirmation of the goodness of the thinker’s own concrete being, of his soul. Vertical transcendence enjoys itself and would be satisfied in its superiority over mere necessity and instrumentality; it is good in itself, it is noble. The freedom of this transcendence is the proud rule of reason, its positive affirmation of its own nobility. This freedom is pagan.

The horizontal axis of transcendence emerges from reason’s awareness that it is called by something or someone other than itself, that thinking is responsible to what is irreducibly other. This awareness opens thinking to the claims of all other human beings and to non-representable possibilities or to the possibility of what is non-representable, what cannot be grasped by reason. Horizontal transcendence hungers and thirsts for justice, a justice it does not possess, and therefore does not grasp or represent, a possible unlimited and universal justice projected upon a possible future. The freedom of this transcendence is humble openness to the possibility of a justice it does not claim to possess or represent, and thus its negation of present, concrete, prideful representations and affirmations of nobility. This freedom is biblical.

Neither of these axes of transcendence, vertical and horizontal, can signify without the other; there is no place for meaning in either line but only in some surface opened up by the tension between them. The freedom of self-affirmation would collapse into mute sameness or self-identity without some openness to a possibility it does not already represent; to affirm one’s being is always, implicitly, to indicate a possibility that exceeds one’s actually being. And the freedom of openness to otherness and possibility would be no one’s freedom and have no meaning in any actual world if it were not affirmed by an actual human agent who possessed some sense of his own concrete goodness or nobility as representable within some actual world.

Reason’s responsibility is therefore to hold open some such surface of meaning within some available space defined by these axes. As we have seen, Alexis de Tocqueville came to understand this responsibility by reflecting on the threat to meaningful, humane transcendence posed by the modern attempt to synthesize reason’s pride with its openness to universal possibility, to collapse the tension between the two axes of transcendence. He named this threat the abolition of “the laws of moral analogy.”

Central to Strauss’s alternative was an emphasis on the dignity and goodness of philosophy understood as a way of life distinct from and superior to practical, political existence. And yet this distinction was not for Strauss an absolute separation, for he argued as well that political reflection was essential to philosophy, or that “political philosophy” as understood in the Platonic tradition was not by any means a mere topical subfield within philosophy. Political understanding, he suggests, resides somehow at the heart of philosophic existence. For Oakshott, on the contrary, the question of the good must not even arise with respect to the meaning of philosophy.
Leo Strauss: Heterogeneity vs. Technology

In the essay, “What is Political Philosophy?” (based on lectures given in Jerusalem from December 1954 to January 1955), Strauss explores, or between the highest and the ordinary, as he responds to the second of “two very common objections” to which “classical political philosophy is today exposed.” (36) (We shall take up the first of these objections shortly.) This second objection is that “classical political philosophy is based on classical natural philosophy or classical cosmology, and this basis has proven to be untrue by the success of modern natural science.” In Strauss’s response to this objection he provides perhaps his richest and plainest statement, or his richest relatively plain statement, of the essential character of philosophy (“what philosophy is or what a philosopher is” 39). The question of the nature of man (which arises necessarily, we have seen, from practical questions of the good life and the good society) seems indeed to be inseparable from the question of “the nature of the whole,” or of “cosmology.” But the example of Socrates, who “originated classical political philosophy,” suggests that human nature may be understood on the basis of “the quest for cosmology rather than a solution to the cosmological problem,” that is, “in the light of the unchangeable ideas, i.e., of the fundamental and permanent problems.” (39) The question of man leads to the question of the whole, which can be understood to lead back to the question of man. This is possible because “the human soul is the only part of the whole which is open to the whole and therefore more akin to the whole than anything else is.” (My emphasis.) I note that this Socratic recourse from the whole to the soul in fact seems to require a cosmological insight into a link between the two.

Strauss frames a discussion of such a link in terms of the categories of “homogeneity” and “heterogeneity,” a “fundamental” and unsurpassable dualism of human knowledge.

At one pole we find knowledge of homogeneity: … in mathematics, and derivatively in all the product arts or crafts. At the opposite pole we find knowledge of heterogeneity, and in particular of heterogeneous ends; the highest form of this kind of knowledge is the art of the statesman and of the educator. (39)

Knowledge of the whole would combine these two kinds of knowledge, but this appears to be unattainable. But note that Strauss states clearly that “the latter kind of knowledge is superior to the former,” because, as knowledge of the ends of human life,” it is “knowledge of a whole” – the best or the only clue, presumably, to knowledge of the whole. Is not the reader then authorized to associate the “knowledge of homogeneity,” that is, mathematical or productive knowledge (finally, it seems clear, “technology” in the deep Heideggerian sense), associated with “the charm of competence,” and thus shamelessly or madly indifferent to the mystery of human difference (32, 40) with the “insolence” Strauss’s political philosopher arms himself to “crush.” The knowledge of heterogeneity is associated with “humble awe” before this difference; at the extreme (not, that is, in its “highest form”), this knowledge would seem to reduce to a poetic or
religious sacrifice of reason before such mystery. Strauss of course espouses no such sacrifice; he succumbs to neither charm, but proposes, in a rare poetic abandon, a “mating of courage and moderation,” to be “accompanied, sustained and elevated by eros” and “graced by nature’s grace.” (40) It is this rational and moderate partisanship of human meaning that will “spare the vanquished” (which presupposes that what is vanquished is indeed vanquished). And note that Strauss identifies the maintenance of this tension between homogeneity and heterogeneity, a moderately partisan maintenance favoring human insight into the human difference, not merely with “political philosophy,” but with *philosophy* simply. The wine of moderation thus appears in the last analysis to be, not only a political, but a philosophical asset.

Everything here thus suggests that Strauss’s insight into a cosmological kinship of the soul is in no way separate or independent from the kinship noted earlier, that between the regime or political whole and the authoritative human beings who rule it and through whom it knows its virtue or character. The meaning of the soul’s openness to the cosmic whole can never be discerned in pure isolation from the determination of the meaning of the political whole by its ruling virtues. There is no way to absolve the partisanship of the most delicately adjusted philosophic tension from its original dependence on a fundamentally political partisanship. The best man’s kinship with the Whole is continuous with his kinship with the best regime.

**Strauss’s *Natural Right and History*: The Political Character of “Nature”**

I cannot here begin to do justice to Strauss’s understanding of a possible recovery of a political understanding of philosophy that arose in connection with the ancient Greek investigation of the problem of “natural right.” Just a few indications will have to suffice in the present context. It is clear, for example, that Strauss understands himself to be addressing the phenomenological project of his teachers and contemporaries when he invites the reader in the third chapter (“The Origins of the Idea of Natural Right”) of perhaps his most famous work, *Natural Right and History*, to follow him in his search behind a “scientific” to a “natural” understanding of “political things.” (81) But “nature,” Strauss argues, is originally a term of distinction (the opposite of “convention”) and cannot therefore be simply identified with “the totality of phenomena.” (82)

The political character of Strauss’s understanding of philosophy itself might be further illustrated by setting *Natural Right and History* against the background of Heidegger’s *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Set against Heidegger’s account of the “restriction of Being,” it becomes apparent that Strauss is very deliberately embracing such a restriction, or that he is perfectly aware that his understanding of philosophy is political in its inception and to its very core. Whereas Heidegger has declaimed against the restriction of Being to eternal presence, Strauss not only embraces this definition but, on close inspection, does so very deliberately on deeply political grounds. I propose, in fact, that the main lesson of Chapter Three of NR&H (“The Origin of the Idea of Natural Right”) is that “eternal presence” is from the outset a political notion; or, in other words, that the very notion of the trans-political in Strauss is politically grounded.
Thus Strauss plainly limits the meaning of nature or physis at the outset to what for Heidegger would be its “restricted” meaning as what Strauss calls “a term of distinction” – from the outset, that is, nature is distinguished from custom or from convention. Most decisively for our reading, Strauss traces the “original form of doubt” that founds the idea of nature as a term of distinction to “the original character of authority” from which it arose. This is to say that Strauss deliberately embraces the political-ethical framing of the originary perspective of philosophy, the original framing of the very notion of “nature.” Strauss recognizes that philosophic doubt or questioning is not absolutely free or boundless but receives an original direction or orientation from its responsibility for supplanting an earlier form of authority. Philosophy uproots or aims at uprooting the ancestral good, yet it preserves an essentially practical perspective: nature itself is understood as “the ancestor of all ancestors… the authority.” Philosophy is decisively determined or restricted by a practical orientation inherited from the authority it attempts to supplant.

In the next chapter (“Classic Natural Right”), Strauss presents Socrates’ study of human things as based upon a new approach to the study of all things, a return from the madness of his predecessors to a certain sobriety and common sense which is respectful of the “eidos” (form, shape, character) of things, attentive to “the ‘surface’ of the things.” (123). This respect for the heterogeneity of beings as given to the common understanding implies a view of the whole as a “totality” of parts in some elusive “natural articulation”; the whole is not simply the sum of the parts, it cannot “be” in the same sense as its parts, but may be said to be somehow “beyond being.” We begin to see in what way this is a fundamentally political approach to understanding when Strauss observes that our only access to knowledge of the whole is through a consideration of opinions, partial and imperfect as these must be. Philosophy, for Socrates, is the ascent from opinion to knowledge of truth, an ascent which can be meaningful without ever reaching its end. At bottom all opinions reflect and culminate in an understanding of the most authoritative notions, an understanding of the good and the just. Socrates and the school of “classic natural right” argue against the conventionalists and hedonists that a life according to nature is a life directed not towards pleasure in and of itself but towards virtue or excellence: “everyone can be forced to admit that he cannot, without contradicting himself, deny that the soul stands higher than the body.”(127)

Strauss understands that the choice for philosophy understood not as the Question of Being but as a concern for or attunement to the heterogeneity of beings, for “what each of the beings is” is inseparable from the embrace of a certain ultimately political perspective. Strauss seems to endorse the elevation of philosophy above all practical concerns, but on closer inspection he shows that this very pretension is parasitic on an essentially aristocratic disposition. The philosopher’s transcendence is a prolongation of the gentleman’s lofty contempt for that which he considers beneath him: the philosopher is to the gentleman what the gentleman is to the vulgar. Philosophic elevation is thus parasitic on the rule of the gentleman – a rule the “nobility” of which Strauss praises, but the justice of which he also subtly questions.
Strauss’s deliberately aristocratic understanding of political philosophy (and, further, his deliberately political understanding of philosophy), are nowhere more succinctly stated than in his proposition that virtue is to human nature as act is to potency. Human nature cannot be the unproblematic ground of virtue, because we only know the meaning of human nature from the standpoint of virtue – that is, from the perspective of a definite, particular understanding of virtue. Human nature is not the foundation of natural right, since human nature is always an interpretation.

For Strauss the ruling, authoritative opinions that constitute “the city” as a particular regime both conceal and give access to a more adequate understanding of the good and the just. Common opinions are at once the indispensable starting point of philosophy and its eternal antagonist. Therefore, although for Strauss philosophy can claim no final and complete access to “nature,” there may be said to be a natural and permanent situation of philosophy in relation to the city. Strauss’s attention to “the things themselves” takes the form of a reflection on this situation. This reflection is practical or political as well as theoretical, because the philosopher must not only gather fragments of truth from the opinions of his fellow human beings, but must also take an interest in shaping their opinions such that they come to tolerate if not to admire the activity of philosophy – a toleration that can by no means be taken for granted. In effect, then, the activity of philosophy is inseparable from an interest in ruling, either directly or indirectly, an interest, that is, in securing the ascendancy of a regime of opinion that allows a place for philosophy.

This interest should not be interpreted, moreover, as simply external or instrumental. Consider Strauss’s statement that “the best regime, as presented by classical political philosophy, is the object of the wish or prayer of the gentlemen as that object is interpreted by the philosopher.” (139) This wish, and the understanding of the good life implicit in it, thus belongs in no simple sense either to the gentlemen or to the philosopher. The gentlemen’s wish is articulated by philosophy in ways friendly to the philosopher’s interest in the activity of philosophizing. At the same time, Strauss discreetly suggests that the very self-understanding of philosophy is shaped by its inherently political condition, by the necessity it is under to rule over opinion. The good of philosophy cannot be articulated except as a refinement, purification, or intensification of the gentlemen’s good, of aristocratic virtue. Strauss’s sometimes extravagant claims on behalf of the philosopher’s serene self-sufficiency must be understood against the background of these political reflections. The philosopher stands in relation to the gentleman as the gentleman to the common man; the philosopher’s elevation and (ostensible) self-sufficiency can rule over the city only because these can be understood as interpretations, prolongations of the city’s ruling virtues. “Philosophy stands or falls with the city.” (The City and Man)

Strauss’s version of the phenomenological call to “the things themselves” is thus a call for thinkers to reflect on and take responsibility for what he understands to be the natural and insuperable political conditions of thinking. It appears that our very understanding of what is “natural” as distinct from conventional is conditioned by a moral-political
judgment, an understanding of human excellence, defined by reference to its fulfillment projected upon the figure of “the philosopher.” And Strauss appears to envision no complete fulfillment of philosophy’s theoretical aspirations; it might be said, then, that the truth of philosophy is at least as practical as it is theoretical. Philosophy fulfills itself in assuming its ruling responsibilities. The goodness of philosophy cannot be severed from its justice.

Strauss’s return from the abstractions of modern theory to “the things themselves” is at once a return to concrete, practical human existence (in the determinate form of an assumption of political responsibility) and a return to “nature,” a “nature” ordered hierarchically in the light of that very responsibility.

It thus appears that, if philosophy cannot be simply identified with political knowledge, it is deeply, internally conditioned by this kind of knowledge.

**Philosophy as Technology’s Other**

Returning to “What is Political Philosophy,” let us now consider the first modern objection to classical political philosophy, namely, the charge that it “is anti-democratic and hence bad.” (36) The first thing to notice is that, although Strauss points out that even Plato was capable of finding good things to say about democracy, he finally does not deny but explains and begins to justify the anti-democratic character of the Socratic philosophers. At first this justification seems to turn on the distinction between the democratic aim of freedom and the aristocratic aim of virtue. Freedom is “ambiguous” or indeterminate; since it may be freedom for evil as well as for good. Virtue requires character education and therefore leisure and therefore wealth, or rather a specific kind of leisurely wealth. Owing to “a kind of natural scarcity,” the rule of such virtuously educated ones must always be the rule of a minority.

Now, Strauss cannot ignore the fact that “virtue” shares at least some of the indetermination of “freedom;” he has just shown us (34) that every regime asserts its own partisan claim regarding virtue. But Strauss prefers such partisanship to the universality or homogeneity of democracy. To be sure, modern democracy advances the project of “universal education,” based on “an economy of plenty.” But such an economic means to education subverts its humane end, for economic expansion “presupposes the emancipation of technology from moral and political control.” Thus “the difference between the classics and us with regard to democracy consists exclusively in a different estimate of the virtues of technology” (my emphasis). Strauss stands with the classical political philosophers against a fundamentally democratic view of humanity because “their implicit prophecy that the emancipation of technology … from moral and political control would lead to disaster or to the dehumanization of man has not yet been refuted.” (37)

Strauss in fact acknowledges agreement with modern democrats (and “even our communist coexistents”) regarding the essential meaning of justice as “to give equal things to equal people and unequal things to people of unequal merit.” (37) He does not
attempt to refute on “objective” or theoretical grounds the modern democratic or socialist emancipation of equal freedom from partisan claims of unequal virtue. Leo Strauss thus avers that he is much less sure of the goodness of aristocratic virtue than of the badness or the threatening character of modern, technological democracy; this is the exclusive basis of his choice of classical, aristocratic, and necessarily partisan “virtue” over the modern and fundamentally democratic and non-partisan or universalist commitment to “freedom.” The good of humanity, which it is the calling of philosophy to represent and to defend, is knowable first of all and most surely as an alternative to the manifest evil of dehumanizing technology.

Strauss’s “Restatement” to Kojeve

The main burden of Strauss’s “Restatement” is to uphold the self-sufficiency of philosophy as a supreme human end and thus to refute Kojeve’s claim that the philosopher and the (beneficent) tyrant are one.

Strauss addresses the philosopher’s relation to those who are not potential philosophers in connection with the pleasures attendant to “awareness of progress” in the quest for truth. “Xenophon goes so far as to speak of the self-admiration of the philosopher,” and Strauss does not take exception to this formulation, or to “self-satisfaction” as an alternative term. The key here is the claim that the philosopher does not need the admiration of others to confirm his own “estimate of himself.” Nonetheless, Strauss allows that the philosopher does in an indirect way depend, in his own self-understanding, on his relations with non-philosophers, since it is in bringing to the surface “self-contradictions” in their opinions that he assures himself of his superiority and of his “progress.” (204) Strauss thus depicts the self-satisfaction and self-admiration of the philosopher – in effect, his “happiness,” such as it is – as thoroughly embedded in a practical, pre-philosophic world, despite Strauss’s protestations concerning the serene detachment of the philosopher. Thus, while there are indeed “specific pleasures” associated with the quest for wisdom, the enjoyment of these pleasures can never be separated from the philosopher’s sense of the “rank” of these pleasures as dependent upon the “rank” of the activities to which they belong. (204) And thus we are thrown back on the “self-admiration” of the philosopher, which clearly depends upon or is bound up with the admiration of his philosophical recruits and with his capacity to look down upon the self-contradictory non-philosophers. The very rank of the ostensibly most self-sufficient activity is inscribed in a broader, pre-philosophical hierarchy.

By proposing, further, a kinship between the socially embedded self-admiration of the philosopher and the idea of “the good conscience” which as such does not require confirmation by others” (204), Strauss in fact calls our attention to the contrast between conscience and intersubjective support or recognition. For Strauss has, despite his own protestations to the contrary, traced the dependence of the actual activity of philosophy on various human sources of confirmation, direct and indirect. In fact he has given us no reason to disagree with Kojeve’s dismissal (as paraphrased by Strauss) of the Christian idea of conscience as a trans-political moral standard:
It is practically impossible to say whether the primary motive of the philosopher is the desire for admiration or the desire for the pleasures deriving from the understanding. The very distinction has no practical meaning unless we gratuitously assume that there is an omniscient God who demands from men a pure heart. (197; my emphasis)

On might indeed say that Strauss’s fundamental agreement with Kojeve lies in the determination they share to avoid the Biblical attempt to envision the practical realm from the standpoint of an omniscient God who searches hearts, and in this sense a determination to stay within the practical meaning of the question of the meaning of philosophy and of its relation to practice. Thus, in the course of one of Strauss’s apparently unequivocal statements (contra Kojeve) of the absolute transcendence or detachment of the philosophy (“the philosopher is concerned with nothing but the quest for wisdom…”), he remarks that “we do not have to pry into the heart of any one in order to know that, insofar as the philosopher, owing to the weakness of the flesh, becomes concerned with being recognized by others, he ceases to be a philosopher.” (203) There is no point in looking into hearts, or in scrutinizing motives too closely, that is, because, it appears, we can settle the matter by sheer definition. In this way Strauss quite deliberately sets aside the question of whether the name for this purely detached or transcendent being, the “philosopher,” in fact corresponds to any actual being. At the same time he clearly invites us to admire -- and thus to bolster the self-admiration of -- those who strive to be or who see themselves as philosophers. He would not call attention to the crucial consideration to which, on close reading, he alerts us, namely, that the philosopher’s aspiration to detachment or elevation is never absolutely fulfilled, and that it thus can only remain in part a partisan claim or “boast.” The ruling idea of philosophy as perfect and uncompromising operates in Strauss’s work to deflect humbling or conscientious questions regarding the actuality of philosophy.

I conclude that Strauss’s “idea of philosophy” is determined by a pervasively political intention: the avoidance of the intellectuals’ embrace of a universal, technological, and transformative political project. The philosopher’s “absolute” detachment from the practical realm is inscribed within an understanding of rank, a frame of admiration that is profoundly political in nature. The philosopher’s sense of elevation remains embedded in a pre-philosophic hierarchy of goods: only this can convert the philosopher’s otherness into a sense of superiority. Leo Strauss’s “philosopher” is hardly less situated within an “intersubjective” or simply human world than Kojeve’s revolutionary tyrant-philosopher. In Kojeve’s case, however, the theoretical passion for certainty and universality is translated into a practical project and seeks transparent fusion with the substance of public opinion. For Leo Strauss, on the contrary, both the philosopher and the non-philosopher accept to be oriented by a theoretically uncertain hierarchy of goods which, despite its particular, partial, and therefore partisan character, points “higher” and opens their souls to the possibility of a Truth beyond human power. Strauss’s “philosopher” shares more with political man than he knows: he avoids what Strauss regards as the disastrous compulsion to realize Truth politically only because his “rank” is already implicitly and indirectly grounded in understandings shared with the public. The
Straussian “philosopher” need not seek universal and certain public recognition because he is “happy” enough or “satisfied” with the ruling recognition he already enjoys – if only indirectly. The lofty idea of an inhuman philosophical “eternity” is Leo Strauss’s political therapy for modern intellectual ambitions.

Having closely scrutinized Strauss’s admirably discreet indications on the relation of the philosopher to the practical world from which he emerges, it is now possible to see that Strauss tips his hand near the beginning of this discussion, in the very course of his extravagant praise of the philosopher’s otherness. Immediately after extolling the philosopher’s “search for an eternal order,” from the point of view of which “all human concerns reveal themselves … as paltry and ephemeral,” Strauss deftly situates the philosopher within a decidedly practical hierarchy: “He then has the same experience regarding all human things, nay, regarding man himself, which the man of high ambition has regarding the low and narrow goals, or the cheap happiness, of the general run of men.” (198) Philosophy is to practical greatness as practical greatness is to commonness. This expresses as compactly as possible how philosophy’s detachment from the practical world is in a deeper sense continuous with that world.

And in case the practical thrust of Strauss’s remarks is not clear enough, he provides, towards the end of the “Restatement,” this charming call to arms, at once playful and moving: “Warriors and workers of all countries, unite, while there is still time, to prevent the coming of ‘the realm of freedom.’ Defend with might and main, if it needs to be defended, ‘the realm of necessity’. ” (209) This call expresses a profound irony that pervades Leo Strauss’s whole political-philosophical project: The growing modern, absolute (universal and certain) commitment to the human realm, “the realm of freedom,” in fact portends tyranny; and it is “the realm of necessity,” the realm governed by the idea of an impersonal eternity altogether remote from all human concerns, that in fact very much needs to be defended. For Strauss our true freedom or humanity depends in our time upon espousing the cause of eternal necessity.

Christianity and Modern Equality

Leo Strauss is almost always at pains in his published work to minimize the connection between Christianity and modern equality/technology. It is not hard to imagine reasons for this reserve. In his “Introduction” to Natural Right and History, while explaining his recourse to the “history of ideas” in order to excavate the “problem of natural right,” Strauss produces this quotation from Lord Acton:

> Few discoveries are more irritating than those which expose the pedigree of ideas. Sharp definitions and unsparing analysis would displace the veil beneath which society dissembles its divisions, would make political disputes too violent for compromise and political alliances too precarious for use, and would embitter politics with all the passions of social and religious strife. (7)
Strauss then immediately notes that the partisanship surrounding natural right in his day sets the camp of “liberals of various descriptions” against that of “Catholics and non-Catholic disciples of Thomas Aquinas.” He also notes that those of both camps are “modern men.” Clearly Strauss did not shrink from engagement with the liberals. In that sense the neo-Thomists were his most likely allies. This is enough to explain, apart from other considerations, why Strauss chose to withhold certain elements of a “sharp and unsparing analysis” of the “intellectual history” underlying the modern oblivion of the “problem of natural right.”

To return briefly to Strauss’s “Restatement” to Kojève, we note that Strauss here bends every effort to exclude the question of Christianity from direct consideration. His strategy, which consists at bottom in situating the good of theory or philosophy within a fundamentally aristocratic horizon, depends crucially on the claim that nothing essential has changed since Plato and Aristotle surveyed the human condition. Thus, as we have seen, he must argue that the essential problem of “technology” (the linking of intellectual progress to common material aspirations) was foreseen by the ancients – even if they did dismiss its “basic presuppositions” as “preposterous.” (178) In this context Strauss addresses Eric Voegelin’s claim that Machiavelli was influenced by “the Biblical tradition,” and discusses at some length Voegelin’s attempt to link Machiavelli’s remark about the “armed prophet” (Prince VI) with a Christian influence. While, on close inspection, Strauss (very characteristically) leaves more questions open than at first appears, the clear thrust of this discussion is to chide Voegelin for putting the emphasis on “prophets,” whereas Machiavelli is supposed to have put the emphasis on “armed.” And “it is difficult to believe that in writing this sentence Machiavelli should have been completely oblivious of the most famous of all unarmed prophets.” (183) Thus he seems to dismiss the notion that Machiavelli practiced his own style of imitation Christi. But even those who are modestly familiar with Strauss’s reading of Machiavelli will recall that Strauss’s own Machiavelli in fact imitates Christ or adopts Christian arms in a single but decisive respect: “The only element of Christianity which Machiavelli took over was the idea of propaganda. This idea is the only link between his thought and Christianity.” (WIPP 45; my emphasis). On reflection, as in other cases when Strauss seems to settle a complex matter with a flat or absolute declaration, this insistent “only” appears to be a kind of provocation to closer scrutiny of the fundamental question of Christianity and modernity.

Once this question is opened up, it is clear that the challenge of Christianity to the foundation of classical perspective is always in play just beneath the classical surface of Strauss’s argument in the “Restatement” (and indeed elsewhere), and that Strauss’s answer to it cannot be as straightforward as he wants it to appear. Of course Kojève himself follows Hegel in seeing Christianity, or, more generally, Biblical or “slave” morality, as performing essential work in the historical construction of an ethic of

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4 Consider this, for example, from Natural Right and History: “Aristotle did not conceive of a world state because he was absolutely certain that science is essentially theoretical and that the liberation of technology from moral and political control would lead to disastrous consequences…” (23; my emphases) What can this absolute and “theoretical” “is” mean here, except that the prospect of the liberation of technology is judged, practically, to be a disaster?
universal intersubjectivity. The contribution of “the Biblical morality of Slaves or Workers” is held to be the recognition of the intrinsic value human beings derive “from the successful execution of their work, their projects, or their ideals,” (189) that is, from various kinds of work, without regard to glory or honor. Kojeve’s view is that, on the basis of the ultimacy of the desire for recognition, this Slave morality of work is synthesized with the Master morality of honor. Strauss’s ingenious rejoinder is that classical philosophy had already conceived a superior resolution: “noble work is the synthesis … between the morality of workless nobility and the morality of ignoble work” (191) – that is, between the leisure of the aristocrat and the productive activity of the commoner. But of course such a synthesis presupposes that common productive (not to mention reproductive, that is, related to the bearing, nurturing and education of children) activity is already seen as “ignoble,” that is, seen within an aristocratic horizon. To be sure, any articulation of the goodness of “ordinary life” (such as Charles Taylor’s) must account in some way for the distinction between good (or at least innocent) activities and bad ones. What is notable here is that Strauss recurs immediately to notion of nobility, and thus implicitly to the aristocratic distinction between noble and base, in order to arrive at the conception of “the highest kind of job” upon which his praise of philosophy is built, and thus ignores the more common and Biblical distinction between right and wrong. Thus he avoids consideration of a most troublesome possibility of which he is certainly aware, namely, that there are real human goods available to ordinary human beings that cannot be subsumed under any purely human or rational hierarchy.

To be sure, Strauss at least once here refers to common morality in a way that does not suggest its being assumed under a rational teleology, referring here, apparently without qualification to “the untrue assumption that man as man is thinkable as a being that lacks awareness of sacred restraints.” It appears there are two main ways in which the immediate evidence of basic moral distinctions might be articulated within some larger context: either the moral is understood in the light of some humanly available end or architectonic purpose (in which case it is best construed in terms of the distinction noble/base), or it is understood as a response to the absolute authority of a personal God (and thus conceived dominantly in terms of right/wrong). Strauss’s aristocratic strategy requires that he privilege the first alternative. The cost of this strategy, we have seen, is in effect the suppression of the question of the rightness or purity of the aristocratic philosopher’s motive. Thus Strauss is willing to accept the substitution of human recognition in an aristocratic and thus implicit or indirect form for the infinitely rigorous Biblical demand of purity of heart as conceived under the eye of an omnipotent God. The Christian critique of the vanity of pagan nobility, including that of philosophers, is silently deflected.

Strauss’s understanding of the rule of reason, “theoretical” as well as “practical,” is deeply conditioned by the insight that coercion is endemic in the human condition – law or right is founded in politics, and therefore in a regime that may be more or less noble but that cannot avoid the necessity of keeping down “lower” impulses. Every such regime presupposes a particular definition of higher/lower, which will always be contestable, never fully natural.
“Philosophy” cannot therefore dictate directly to the city; there is no universalizable natural law because human life must be ruled by some idea of perfection, and every such idea is political conditioned, partial, partisan. Philosophy, for Strauss, must recognize the necessity of this practical partiality. Philosophy must not try to abolish the cave, which would only universalize it, but rather take responsibility (subtle and indirect) for ruling it.

Let us note, finally, that the Christian critique of philosophic claims to a humanly available completeness or transcendence is inseparable from a certain rehabilitation of time and of individuality. As we have seen, Strauss acknowledges, in the last paragraph of the “Restatement,” that what I have called his aristocratic strategy depends upon the view that “there is an eternal and unchangeable order within which History takes place and which is not in any way affected by History.” (212) Of course he is aware that the notion that human being somehow affects the heart of Being, and thus that history is a fundamental dimension of reality, was not first proposed by Hegel, or by Kojève, or by Heidegger.

… heaven forbid that those words of Solomon [“there is nothing new under the sun”] refer to those periodic revolutions of the Physicists, by which, on the theory, the same ages and the same temporal events recur in rotation… For ‘Christ died once for all for our sin’; and ‘in rising from the dead he is never to die again: he is no longer under the sway of death…” (Augustine, City of God XII.14)

Athens vs. Jerusalem: a Practical Necessity

Leo Strauss’s “elevation” of the philosopher’s “eternity” is intended as a rhetorical counterweight to the dehumanizing power of technology. Christianity, by referring the meaning of morality to an authority beyond humanity, and by implicating man at heart of Eternity, is the ultimate target of this strategy.

For Strauss, any possible political salvation (or the rehabilitation of “natural right”) requires a recovery of the possibility of philosophy understood as the best way of life. The salvation of philosophy depends in turn upon Strauss’s discretely excavating and embracing its political origins: the humanity, the naturalness of philosophy must be rooted in the practical experience of the noble as above the base.

But this experience competes with the experience of sacred moral restraints as flowing from the equal subjection of all human beings to a mysterious personal God, an experience in which is rooted the thirst for righteousness as universal justice (as already available in elementary premises of Bible). Christianity re-configured reason to espouse this thirst, thereby creating demands it could not satisfy. Machiavelli founded modernity by mobilizing the strategy of propaganda against its Christian source.

Strauss proposes to counter Machiavelli’s strategy by a return to classical political philosophy from a post-Christian perspective. The Biblical insight into equality and the concomitant demand for justice cannot be denied, but must be quarantined: contrary to
the tendency of Christianity, Athens and Jerusalem must be considered as radically
distinct alternatives (on the model of Athens/Mecca), so that philosophy can find
satisfaction in its own putatively satisfying “virtue” and not be driven to project meaning
upon a universal humanity.

Strauss must know the cost to rigorous thinking and to authentic human existence of this
compartmentalization of the two dominant figures of human transcendence; his
opposition between Athens and Jerusalem is thus a very studied and deliberate practical
choice in the face of “technology.” It follows that Strauss’s own thinking, or let us say
his own existence as a thinking human being, can only lie beyond this simple opposition.
The effectual truth of either/or is neither/and: neither simply one or the other, and
somehow both. This same would be true of any thinker who has understood what Strauss
has understood.

Leo Strauss seems to have reinvented this classical rhetoric to stiffen the spine of the late
enlightenment. Contrary to Heidegger, he appears to believe that modern nihilism is best
resisted, not by deconstructing the spiritual links between classical reason and modern
rationalism, but by reinforcing them. He calls our attention to a gap between his thinking
and his writing on the most central point when he allows that philosophy itself may be an
act of faith (310), or when he pretends that what he presents as the sheer fact that
Socrates was "a philosopher" decides the issue of the best or right way of life. This
rhetoric is not without beauty, because it is not without truth. But it is perhaps permitted
now to reconsider the judgments implicit in Strauss' rhetorical choices. Can the praise of
the autonomy of philosophy today continue to point to a possibility beyond the dominant
dogmas and habits of the age without unduly contributing to the complacency or
insulation of "philosophy" as an academic sect, a mere counter-aristocracy? And can the
rhetoric of the good moderate the modern passion for justice without respecting the
sources of that passion as expressed in revealed religion?

Oakshott’s Post-Christian Philosophy – A Preliminary Comparative Inquiry

The juxtaposition of Oakshott and Strauss is a tantalizing but daunting prospect. Both
authors are so penetrating, so original, and so remote from the beaten theoretical paths of
their less extraordinary contemporaries, that we cannot help but ask how the insights of
one relate to those of the other. Moreover, they clearly belong in some way within a
broad family of critics of modern rationalism, a family that would also include
Heidegger, Arendt, and Voegelin, for example. And yet the challenge of comparison is
daunting, for these two illustrious thinkers seem to part company as if from their very
first premises, their initial questions, the ways they take up matters from the outset.
Moreover, they do not engage each other in such a way as to provide us much footing in
determining what is at stake between them. (There is an Oakshott review of Strauss’s
Hobbes, I believe – but other than that?) Still, if we sense we can learn much from both,
how can we resist the call to engage each from the standpoint of the other, even if this
would seem to require the all but impossible achievement of attaining some vantage point
superior to both?
We begin with the obvious observation that Oakshott seems simply not to be interested in “political philosophy” as Strauss understands it – that is, in philosophy as intrinsically attuned to a fundamental political concern, as inwardly conditioned by political necessities and questions. On the other hand, one might say there is at least a superficial similarity between Strauss’s praise of the serene autonomy of philosophy (in comparison with which all merely human concerns are “ephemeral and paltry,” and all that) and Oakshott’s understanding of philosophy as the (unattainable) wholeness of experience, “experience without presupposition, reservation, arrest or modification” (EM, 2). But of course I have argued that Strauss’s praise of the pure detachment of philosophy from practical concerns must be understood rhetorically, and that the deeper truth is that the detachment of philosophy from practical nobility must be understood as continuous with a pretension of such nobility to a detachment from ordinary, “vulgar” human concerns. Oakshott, for his part, seems to have little interest in continuities between philosophy, or absolute experience, and the world of practice, which is just one among a number of “modes” of experience.

Oakshott’s idea of philosophy is thus very austere, to say the least. Absolute experience seems to be a kind of sheer self-possession and unhindered self-identity. The question of the character of its goodness does not seem to be acknowledged as a pertinent question, and so the problem of the relation of some goodness of philosophy to the goods of practice does not even arise.

How can the question of the good be set aside? Of course Oakshott recognizes the pertinence of the question, but only within a “mode” of experience that is considered altogether distinct from that of the most adequate and comprehensive idea of experience, namely, philosophy. The leading questions of practice, the realm which concerns human agency and therefore the possibility of change from a worse to a better condition, are not considered relevant to the interest in absolute knowledge that governs the pure mode of philosophy. To be sure, the distinction between the realms of eternal and necessary truth and things that can be other than they are is an ancient one that structures Strauss’s philosophical rhetoric as much as it does Oakshott’s. And Strauss no more than Oakshott imagines that theory can dictate directly to practice; both may be said to follow Aristotle’s lead in endeavoring to protect the practical realm against philosophy’s imperialist tendencies. Nevertheless, philosophy emerges for Strauss as the answer to the most pressing practical question, the question how one should live. Even if, as Aristotle himself says (Nichomachean Ethics X), the purely philosophic life, as divine, remains beyond the reach of human faculties, the best humans are invited to strive towards and emulate such a contemplative life. Philosophy rules practice for Strauss, even if he cautions it not to rule directly. And the less salient implication, I have argued, is that practice deeply conditions philosophy. If the practice of the virtues is understood in the light of contemplative wholeness and self-sufficiency, it is no less true that the very good of self-sufficiency is implicitly modeled on an experience or a pretension sustained in practice.
In sum, Strauss’s thought, like Aristotle’s, is finally governed by an interest in sustaining what Tocqueville called a “moral analogy,” a linkage between the a sense of an orderly whole (a cosmic whole prefigured in practical order) of which the individual is a part and the individual’s awareness of his transcendence of any given whole. Philosophy rules, and the very character of philosophy is conditioned by its ruling responsibility. The question of the True never completely leaves the orbit of the Good.

Oakshott, for his part, is resolute in severing the True from the Good. Valuation is confined to the realm of practice, and practice is a mere “mode” of experience, an abstraction from the absolute encountered “without presupposition or arrest.” Is it not fair to ask, though, just where the “abstraction” lies, and what experience or region of human activity advances the strongest claim to standing “without presupposition, reservation, arrest or modification?” Strauss seems to argue that there is no more immediate and primordial and in that sense “natural” mode of existence than that in which we are interpellated by the question of the Good, a question that bridges practical and contemplative experience. This then becomes the ruling, integrating question for Strauss. Oakshott, for his part, begins with an idea of absolute experience inherited (indirectly) from Hegel, but severed from the ruling claims of a theory of History that aims to integrate the contemplative and the practical. Strauss might ask whether Oakshott’s idealism of pure experience and the radical separation of the practical from the philosophical that results are not themselves abstraction, even violent and uninterrogated abstractions from the natural springs of human questioning.

Oakshott’s approach can no doubt be understood and perhaps justified as a response to modern, predatory rationalism, which aims to master and possess reality for human convenience. But Strauss would of course interpret such an abstracting will to separation as part of a “strategy of separations” (of religion from politics, society from state, represented from representative, etc - the term is Pierre Manent’s) inherent in modern rationalism, and which is founded ultimately on the separation of the useful from the good, or, what amounts to the same thing, of the good from the true. And Strauss would thus regard such an abstraction as tending to aggravate the rationalistic disease it is meant to contain, if not to cure. In Strauss’s view, I think, any configuration of theory and practice that does not limit practice by situating it in effect under the (indirect) rule of theory (conceived as the good life of contemplating eternity) is bound to nourish the blind and destructive metaphysical passion of practice to create a world in which its contradictions are resolved – the passion of “technology.” Or, in my formula, adapted from Tocqueville: longings for transcendence that are not oriented vertically (aristocratically) and thus integrated into a scheme of “moral analogy” can only spill over into horizontal (democratic) projects that threaten the human soul.

Now it must be said that such a Straussian diagnosis seems utterly to miss the mark in the case of Oakshott, who never seems to betray any taste for technological projects of any kind. To be sure, Oakshott’s separations seem to lead to a certain constructivism at the individual level, in which a “poetic” conception of the best way of life is associated with a kind of pure (but somehow not aggressive) willfulness. And Strauss would no doubt find his prognosis justified by Oakshott’s insistence that “culture” and “values” are
absolutely prior to politics and by no means a matter of or product of political deliberation. This after all quite radical historicism takes a characteristically benign form in Oakshott’s thought, but (as has been noted, for example, by such a discerning and friendly critic Andrew Sullivan, Intimations Pursued) it would seem to leave Oakshott as a political thinker defenseless before the ugliest cultural and ideological assertions. In this sense Strauss would argue that Oakshott’s failure to appreciate the classical rule of reason causes him to throw out reason itself along with modern rationalism and leaves him vulnerable to the leveling, homogenizing power of democracy-technology.

Notwithstanding these Straussian questions that it seems to me Oakshott would have difficulty answering, it is time to grant that there is something attractive, even compelling in Oakshott’s aesthetic or “poetic” appreciation of the immediacy of ordinary life. There is truth in the separation of life from the rule of teleological reflection, because there is a beautiful mystery in the givenness of existence that cannot be referred to “higher” plan of reflection. This attunement to what Charles Taylor calls the sacredness of the ordinary surely points to some truth, and one to which Leo Strauss might seem to be utterly tone deaf. Strauss quite assiduously ignores this truth, because it is ultimately a Christian truth, and because, for Strauss, Christianity, in its appeal to the longings of ordinary human beings, its sanctification of a goodness irreducible to the resigned elevation of classical “reason,” is the real “first wave” of modernity.

The beauty of ordinary givenness is nowhere more beautifully expressed than in a recent novel by Marilynne Robinson, Gilead (New York 2004). Let me share just a couple of passages which, even deprived of their context, may serve to convey this sense:

I really can’t tell what’s beautiful anymore. I passed two young fellows on the street the other day… just decent rascally young fellows who have to be joking all the time… always so black with grease and so strong with gasoline I don’t know why they don’t catch fire themselves. They were passing remarks back and forth the way they do and laughing that wicked way they have. And it seemed beautiful to me. It is an amazing thing to watch people laugh, the way it sort of takes them over… (5)

… I am thinking about the word “just.” I almost wish I could have written that the sun just shone and the tree just glistened, and the water just poured out of it and the girl just laughed … People talk that way when they want to call attention to a thing existing in excess of itself, so to speak, a sort of purity or lavishness, at any rate something ordinary in kind but exceptional in degree… (28)

Now Strauss in a way silently accommodates or at least honors this sacredness of the ordinary in his efforts to sustain and not resolve the tension between “reason” and “revelation.” The effect of Strauss’s accession to this dichotomy is to leave the rule of reason incomplete. Strauss thus points us to an attunement of thinking that is in a way above or beyond his idea of (political) philosophy: the most rigorous thinking adopts a standpoint that respects both proud reason and humble piety, though it can enact at most only one of these modes. In practice, however, Strauss is willing, in order to counter the
powerful attractions of technology, to sacrifice the truth of ordinary holiness to the necessary nobility of the rule of reason.

And Strauss’s resistance to a post-Christian emancipation of life’s immediacy is, to me, at least understandable. For the untheorizable sweetness and beauty of the simple givenness of human experience will always be at a practical disadvantage in its inevitable contest with the call of teleology, both political and philosophical. It is not obvious that the classical Greeks were wrong to associate our deepest humanity with a quest to understand ourselves in the light of some high and comprehensive wholeness, a quest that cannot but have political implications. When the poetry of ordinary givenness is severed from belief in a Creator and Redeemer – and with concrete practices and institutions that implicate the ordinary in a framework or rather a larger fabric, even an infinite fabric in which the divine and the human are woven together – then the question of the whole seems necessarily to cede to the mode of Will. And this also is likely to have political implications. The just plain existence of things will always need to be protected from the question of Justice, and this cannot be done except by addressing that question, by faith or by reason – in fact, probably by both.

The question of “moral analogy,” of the connection between the human capacity for spiritual intellectual abstraction and practical sources of human meaning, both vertical and horizontal, will not go away. To decline to address the question of the good is to accede to one or another implicit answer. The problem of moral and political responsibility lies at the heart of the most rigorous thinking.

1 In his lectures on “The Problem of Socrates” Strauss returns at least twice to the theme, quite distinctive of his work, of “homogeneity” in relation to “heterogeneity.” In these passages it is clear that for Strauss the recognition of the specificity and the dignity of political things is essential to the safeguarding, against the homogenizing tendencies of thought, of the very possibility of sustaining qualitative differentiation as operated by common sense. And the very superiority of the philosophic life thus depends upon this fundamentally political safeguard. The radical otherness of philosophy itself in relation to political life thus depends on the space of differentiation opened in and by politics – just as, at the heart of ethical-political life, it is of the essence of virtue to affirm its distinction from mere continence. If “all nobility consists in [a] rising above and beyond oneself...” (164) and if every ascent that does not possess its end but rather glimpses it and reveres it participates in the thumotic character of political life (166-7), then it follows that even philosophic life is conditioned by thumos - perhaps especially in its claim to be exempt of it.

True philosophy - that is, political philosophy - would thus seem to involve a kind of equilibrium or mean between the proudful “charm of competence” of homogeneous (mathematical-technical) knowledge and the “humble awe” associated with the knowledge of heterogeneous human ends. On closer inspection, though, the picture is more complicated, since heterogeneity is at once more humble and more prideful than homogeneity. This can be seen by pursuing the discussion of the meaning of philosophy in relation to the problem of heterogeneity and homogeneity in Strauss’ the consideration of Plato’s Statesman the we find in the central section (between a discussion of The Republic and one of The Laws) of his chapter “Plato” in the History of Political Philosophy. Here Strauss explicitly associates “all arts, and especially the kingly art,” not with mathematical homogeneity, or the “art of measurement ... which considers the greater and the less ... in relation to one another” but with “measurements with a view to the right mean or the fitting.” (73) Thus it appears possible to preserve the sense of philosophy’s kinship with the arts, in that the arts are here considered not from the standpoint of production (recall Strauss’ phrase: “the productive arts or crafts”) but from the statesman’s standpoint of their use in relation to the whole of human life. Strauss’ discussion of
the problem of this wholeness suggests in fact that philosophy itself may be seen as the highest appearance of a certain equilibrium or “right mean” as a figure of the best life.

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