

Autour de Leo Strauss

Éditorial

Lucien S. A. Oulahbib* et Timothy Burns**

Les textes réunis dans ce numéro de *Klesis* proposent un aperçu de la pensée de Leo Strauss, figure majeure de la philosophie politique du XX^e siècle. Ils tentent plus précisément de mettre en valeur des aspects généralement négligés de l'œuvre de celui qu'on trop vite qualifié de « conservateur », voire de « néoconservateur ». C'est peut-être que la recherche s'est trop souvent méprise sur la nature du projet qui a conduit Strauss à renouer avec les Anciens et à relire les Modernes. En effet, ce projet ressort moins à la volonté anachronique de se replier sur un passé glorieux qu'à celle, résolument prospective, de s'appuyer sur les usages de traditionnels de la *raison* afin de mieux déchiffrer « notre » modernité.

Dans « Philosophe et art d'écrire », Corine Pelluchon explique ainsi comment Strauss développe une lecture résolument critique des Anciens. L'articulation entre philosophie et politique établie par ces derniers se révèle ainsi, dans plus de cas qu'on pourrait le croire si l'on s'en tient à une lecture superficielle de l'œuvre du philosophe germano-américain, comme *l'exemple à ne pas suivre*. Ainsi, bien qu'il ait vocation à le penser, le philosophe doit savoir exercer son talent dans une – relative – indépendance du pouvoir. De même, il lui revient de ne pas figer les notions de peuple et d'élite : sa tâche se révèle alors celle de laisser ouvert le passage qui conduit de l'un à l'autre et retour – ce qui indique le refus de toute dérive oligarque, mais aussi que l'éducation du peuple reste un enjeu politique essentiel pour le philosophe digne de ce nom, du moins si l'on entend par là une éducation libérale au sens classique, articulant morale et politique envers et contre la force du réalisme « historial » qui les contrarie de façon récurrente.

C'est au fond la même grande question dont traite l'article David Cumin, « Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, et le concept de politique ». Le spécialiste de Schmitt interroge en effet lui aussi le lien entre philosophie et politique en analysant un dialogue à vrai dire peu connu voire caché ou crypté entre Schmitt et Strauss autour de la notion de politique qui s'est déroulé au début de la période si cruciale des années 1930. Cumin montre comment Schmitt a tenté d'inscrire sa définition, anti-libérale, du politique, dans la distinction entre ami et ennemi plutôt que dans l'idée à ses yeux lénifiante (sinon

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ennuyeuse, malgré son ludisme artificiel) de l'État dit de droit au sens contractualiste normatif. Schmitt pense légitimer cette définition par l'approche hobbesienne d'un État non seulement fort mais total au sens où il assumerait franchement son fondement théologico-politique. Or, c'est cette filiation à Hobbes que Strauss conteste en considérant que, pour le philosophe anglais, l'État de droit ne prétend contraindre l'état de nature qu'en vue d'une souveraineté tempérée et non absolue. C'est ce que Schmitt a fini par admettre, se tournant ainsi plutôt vers Hegel et Machiavel afin d'asseoir sa notion totalisante du politique.

Cette question du politique qui dépasserait la seule définition de la *polis* pour aller aussi bien questionner celle de la *politeia*, c'est-à-dire la notion même d'appartenance, Strauss la partage, certes, avec Schmitt (et aussi avec Heidegger). Il considère cependant que ce n'est pas dans la puissance seule mais dans l'universalité de ses problèmes permanents que se tisse *et se déchire* la nature *humaine*. Il existe ainsi une tension entre universalité et vérité d'une part, et entre universalité et transcendance d'autre part – tension qui, historiquement, a été masquée par un rationalisme appauvri par le scientisme issu des Lumières, et qui se trouve être l'enjeu pivot d'une vision straussienne encore en devenir selon Lucien S. A. Oulahbib, lequel tente de la reconstituer dans ses lignes conductrices dans l'article intitulé « Actualité persistante de Léo Strauss ».

La traduction de l'« Introduction » à *Philosophie und Gesetz* (1935) réalisée par Olivier Sedeyn montre enfin comment la tension précitée ne peut ni doit être réduite à la confrontation entre l'Orthodoxie et les Lumières sans toutefois y échapper. En définitive, il ne s'agit pas de « dépasser » (*aufheben*) cette confrontation, mais de la considérer comme la matrice permanente du rationalisme véritable. C'est en ce sens que, dans sa présentation à la traduction anglaise de *Philosophie und Gesetz* (*Philosophy and Law*, 1995), Eve Adler écrit : « [...] as it turns out, is not so much that modern rationalism is the true natural prototype of rationalism as that there is no true natural prototype of rationalism ».

In “Leo Strauss’s Life and Work” Timothy Burns briefly describes the major themes of Strauss’s life work. Those themes are explored in much greater detail in the English articles in this issue of *Klesis*.

Thomas Pangle’s “Relativism: The Crux of Our Liberal Culture,” begins with a careful explication of the first seven paragraphs of Strauss’s *Natural Right and History*, in which Strauss traces the roots of contemporary relativism to the foundations of liberalism itself, and in which Strauss demonstrates the rise of the specific fanatical obscurantism that liberal relativism both culminates in and elicits from its opponents—the defenders of modern natural right. He then sketches Strauss’s account of the deep-rooted causes of these contemporary phenomena: the tension in the human soul between faith and reason, on one hand, and the novel modern attempt, on the other, to dispose of that tension through a political project, an attempt that finally resulted in an eruption of

long-incubating self-doubts about that modern attempt, doubts that have led liberals to readily embrace the relativism of late German thought. After adumbrating the most serious form of this relativism—Nietzschean and Heideggerian radical historicism—Pangle concludes by highlighting some of the more important signposts by which Strauss leads his thoughtful readers to a recovery of the Platonic-Socratic alternative to modern rationalism and to the radical historicism to which it had eventually and necessarily given rise.

Christopher Bruell's "On the Place of the Treatment of Classical Philosophy in the Plan of the Work as a Whole" prepares the way for a discussion of chapters three and four of *Natural Right and History* by highlighting some of the most salient features of the other chapters of that work. Bruell argues that Strauss' case for the classic natural right teaching faces, as he acknowledged, the objection that that teaching seems to depend on a teleological view of the universe, a view which appears to have been destroyed by the victory of modern natural science. But Strauss suggests that the problem that a non-teleological view of the universe faces—the problem that what appear to us to be intelligible causes might instead be the work of a divine being or beings—was actually at the center of the concerns of both modern and classical philosophers. The moderns, however, overlooked or failed to grasp the manner in which classical philosophy had approached this genuine and grave problem. And the moderns' novel approach to it may have required a political project whose questionableness therefore calls that approach itself into question.

But appropriating for oneself Strauss' recovery of classical philosophy faces serious challenges, as Bruell brings out in his "The Question of Nature in the Thought of Leo Strauss." He there sketches the aims, success, and failures of the modern political project in order to bring to light the experience of our current predicament as Strauss experienced, clarified and confronted it. If, as Strauss suggests, "philosophy" provides the path out of that predicament by providing a normative standard by which to guide one's life, we must understand precisely and fully the grounds that, according to Strauss, make philosophy genuinely possible, or validate it as the right life, in light of the need to dispose of the challenge posed to philosophy by the claims against its fundamental presupposition made especially by Heidegger. For the subject matter and fundamental presupposition of philosophy is "nature" or permanent intelligible necessities, but since such necessities presuppose the existence of man, the finiteness of man—stressed by Heidegger—would appear to make such necessities questionable. And even if Strauss would answer that it is only a (demonstrably questionable) historicity of man, rather than his finiteness, that had seemed to make nature questionable, the Heideggerian or historicist dissatisfaction with the early modern solution to the problem of causality has served to put that fundamental problem back into sharp focus: are what we perceive to be intelligible necessities genuinely so, or has all that is instead come to be freely out of nothing, as Heidegger may suggest? Awareness of that problem is central to the Socratic philosophizing that Strauss recovered.

Timothy Burns's "Leo Strauss on the Origins of Hobbes's Natural Science" analyses the fifth chapter of *Natural Right and History* together with Strauss's unfinished manuscript, *Hobbes' Critique of Religion* (1933–34), recently translated into English. The unfinished Hobbes manuscript provides some important, if provisional, results of the ten-year study of Hobbes that Strauss undertook in his effort to understand the roots of the peculiar situation at which the project of modern rationalism had arrived. In it, Strauss argues that Hobbes's positivist-phenomenalist science is a result of the realization that, as a working hypothesis, the Calvinist doctrine of an omnipotent God creating the world *ex nihilo* at every moment has to be assumed—rendering nature fundamentally unintelligible—if the possibility of revelation were to be eventually refuted. Twenty years later, in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss argued that Hobbes' positivist-phenomenalist science resulted instead from the recognition of the impossibility, for knowledge of anything, of conceiving of mind as derivative from matter and hence subject to the flux of mechanical causation. This article examines the similarities and differences between the two arguments; it attempts to explain why and to what extent Strauss abandoned his earlier argument in favor of the later one; and it examines the concern shown in each work to respond to the thinking of Heidegger.

David Leibowitz's "The Section on Hobbes in Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History*: The Meaning of Hobbes's Claim to be the Founder of Political Philosophy" provides a fuller elaboration upon the very difficult Hobbes section of *Natural Right and History*, chapter five. Strauss, Leibowitz argues, seems to trace the "specific character of modern natural right," and even of modern political philosophy as such, to the emergence of modern, non-teleological, natural science (166, 177). But the precise connection is never made explicit; it is left as a conspicuous riddle. Leibowitz attempts to solve the riddle by following the unexpected twists and turns of Strauss's argument, and in so doing brings to light Strauss's unorthodox view that the new, Hobbesian political philosophy is intended to settle the most fundamental of all theoretical and practical questions, a question that the new, modern natural science is constitutionally incapable of addressing. The article concludes with a discussion of Strauss's criticism of the modern approach to this question, and with a comment on his quiet pointer to the largely forgotten Socratic alternative.

Christopher Baldwin's "Thinking Nietzsche Through and Strauss's Recovery of Classical Political Philosophy" examines the role that Strauss's early confrontation with the thought of Nietzsche played in his eventual recovery of classical political philosophy. It does so by considering that aspect of Nietzsche's thought that according to the mature Strauss most distinguishes Nietzsche's thought from Plato's and Aristotle's: his reflections on religion and the challenge it poses to philosophic rationalism. Nietzsche, Baldwin argues, offers a rich and thought-provoking but also problematic account of religion, and of how philosophy might begin to meet the challenge posed to it by religion. Strauss learned from Nietzsche how fundamental our moral experience of the world is to our humanity and to a believer's experience of

revelation. Yet he also saw that Nietzsche failed to adequately articulate and understand our moral experience of the world. Learning from Nietzsche the importance of exploring and understanding morality, as well as recognizing Nietzsche's own attempt to do so as impressive but flawed, helped Strauss begin to see the necessity and possibility of returning to the tradition of classical political philosophy inaugurated by Socrates when he "brought philosophy down from the heavens" and sought knowledge about the nature of morality and politics. Thinking Nietzsche's thought through, more fully than did Nietzsche himself, helped prepare Strauss for his eventual recovery of classical political philosophy.

But his written work, published and unpublished, is only a part of the entire corpus of Strauss's work; his classroom lectures have long been praised and utilized by his students. Through the work of the Leo Strauss Center at the University of Chicago, transcripts and audio files of his classes are now being put on line and thereby made widely accessible. Nathan Tarcov, director of the Leo Strauss Center, briefly describes this important work in a concluding note.