The Question of Nature and the Thought of Leo Strauss

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My theme is the question—and questionableness—of nature: to what extent is it necessary to raise that question in order to come to grips with the thought of Leo Strauss, and what does raising it entail?

If not necessarily the thought itself, surely the expression of the thought of a genuine thinker is bound to be affected by his understanding of the situation in which he finds himself when he begins to speak out. The situation in which Strauss found himself—and in which we, to the extent that we remain unaffected by his thought, find ourselves still—was one in which philosophy had destroyed the credibility of religion for much of educated Europe. (According to an assessment that had been ventured already by Rousseau in one of his *Letters Written From the Mountain*, "Religion, discredited everywhere [in Europe] by philosophy, had lost its ascendancy even over the people." [*Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Masters and Kelly, IX 227]) But the philosophy that had achieved this result—modern philosophy or the movement, which began according to Strauss with Machiavelli, known by the name of "the Enlightenment" (WIPP 46; TOM 207f., 231)—had won its victory over philosophy's perennial antagonist without, in the end, being able to convince itself that that victory was deserved. (*Philosophie und Gesetz* 17f.)

Now, any doubts that it may have felt on this score had not at first imperiled the political dimension of the Enlightenment's effort. (*Philosophie und Gesetz* 20f.) We can perhaps approach the understanding of that effort required for our present purpose by beginning from the observation that the biblical religions had brought more fully to light

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than ever before certain fundamental human longings and demands. These longings and demands had, indeed, always been an element of pre-philosophic political life; but they had found a place within classical (Greek and Roman) politics, at least, without seriously threatening (that is, without more than sporadically threatening) the sway that political considerations proper and political forces strictly or narrowly understood exercised over those politics. (See, for example, what Thucydides indicates about the Spartans—*even* the old-fashioned Spartans—at V 70; and consider what Aristotle permits himself to say at *Politics* 1328b11-12.) To have posed or inspired such a threat, to have acquired a weight within political life comparable to that of the political necessities themselves, the longings and demands in question (for perfect justice, for example, or complete happiness) would probably have required a more explicit articulation than it was customary for them to receive. It is true that they were spelled out with considerable clarity and force by classical political philosophy—by Plato, above all, who then went on, as if unavoidably, to call for a true politics to replace the old and still actual politics. (Compare *Gorgias* 521d6–8 with 502d10–503d6; *Republic* 473c11-e2 and 592a5–b6.) But, whatever may have been Plato's ultimate intention, it was only the Christian teaching of "the truth and the true way" that succeeded in transforming political life root and branch, either by imposing upon politics the tasks that appeared—from the perspective of the demands and longings it gave voice to—to be the highest tasks, or by causing political life to be judged by a standard suggested by those longings and demands, or in both of these ways. (Machiavelli *Discourses* Bk II ch 2 para 2; Montesquieu *Spirit of the Laws* Bk IV ch 4) And the political achievement of the Enlightenment can therefore be said provisionally to consist in this: that it, in turn, succeeded in freeing politics from the tasks that Christianity had insisted upon—in part by diverting men from their pursuit (*Spirit of the Laws* Bk XX ch 1, Bk XXV ch 12), in part by assaulting the tasks directly with its rhetoric (*Spirit of the Laws* Bk XXIV ch 11, for example).

Thus Enlightenment philosophy had apparently succeeded in returning politics to that form which they had had before they began to come under biblical influences, or to that form at its peak. (NRH 164) But in doing so, this philosophy had demanded an all but explicit renunciation of tasks whose legitimacy had been recognized in principle even by the classical politics that had refused to permit their pursuit to set the direction of political life or in this way determine its character. (Compare, for example, *Spirit of the Laws* Bk XII ch 4 with Aristotle *Ethics* 1129b14–25 and 1130b22–26, on the one hand, and *Politics* 1324b3–9, on the other.) The Enlightenment could therefore bring about no more than an approximation of such a return. The predominance within political life of political considerations proper—freedom and empire (Thucydides III 45.6)—and political forces strictly or narrowly understood was, indeed, restored. But the political order was at the

same time stripped of something which even a tacit acknowledgment of the higher tasks had conferred upon it as a matter of course: a pretension to completeness, to being the whole within and through which human life might reach the utmost goal of its striving. (*Ethics* 1160a20-23; Plato *Laws* 632c1–4, 817b1–c1, 887b5–c2) To many, therefore, the new or restored political order was bound to appear but a poor relation of its former self—and not just to those in whom the biblical claims, which had merely been discredited, that is to say weakened rather than definitely disposed of, continued to lead an underground life.

Now the dissatisfaction with modern politics flowing from these or other sources found powerful expression in modern philosophy itself, most notably in Rousseau. To the uneasiness that modern philosophy owed to its doubts as to the legitimacy of its victory over religion, there was thus added an uneasiness occasioned by the unsparing criticism that it proceeded to level at its own political program—if it was not this very criticism that first brought out or returned those doubts to active life within it. (*Philosophie und Gesetz* 21; I would also refer in this context to the paper I gave at the MSU conference that opened this series: in that paper I tried to answer the question whether the author of NRH still maintained the thesis which he had laid out in the "very daring" introduction to his second book [letter to Kojève of May 9, 1935, OT 230].)[2] And the crisis in modern philosophy that begins with Rousseau (NRH 252)—and which is, among other things, a crisis in confidence—exacerbated, in its turn, the dissatisfaction with modern politics that had helped to set it in motion. For doubts as to the status of reason and its capacity to supply the guidance that we need both individually and collectively are, by that very fact, doubts about the soundness of any orientation or arrangement, either in politics or in life, that traces its origin to rational or philosophic endeavor. In the ensuing confusion, attempts were made to find an antidote in a return to supra-rational sources of light. But those attempts were undermined from within by lingering effects of the very victory of the Enlightenment whose legitimacy was now despaired of by the Enlightenment's own most proper heirs. (*Philosophie und Gesetz* 15-17; "Preface" to the English translation SCR 13-15, 30)

The situation, in short, in which Strauss began his literary career could be summed up, and was in fact summed up by him at about this time, as follows: "unsere Situation ist gekennzeichnet durch die prinzipiell grenzenlose Anarchie, es gibt überhaupt keine allgemein-verbindliche Norm mehr . . . . Und es ist die Frage: ist diese Anarchie zu überwinden und wie ist sie zu überwinden?" (Strauss to Löwith #16 GS III 630f.) And the works which he produced in its course can be said to have been addressed primarily to

[2] The paper to which the author refers is published as the preceding piece in this issue of *Klesis*: "On The Place Of The Treatment Of Classical Philosophy In The Plan Of The Work As A Whole," presented at Michigan State University. The "series" to which the author refers is a series of conferences on the work of Leo Strauss. [Eds.]

those with a capacity to experience the predicament thus summed up—a predicament that those works themselves make a comprehensive effort of matchless probity to clarify and to confront—to experience it as their own.

The question all but had to arise, therefore, as to what hope he gave us that this predicament, *the* crisis of our time, can be not only confronted but overcome. For many of those who have been attracted to Strauss, the answer to this question on the level of the individual—but not merely of the individual—is indicated by the terms "philosophy" and "the philosophic life." I do not entirely disagree with this view: I only wonder what it or these terms themselves entail. And I will attempt, in the balance of this paper, to approach its more particular theme by way of spelling out something of what seems to me to be worth puzzling about here.

To begin, then, at the very beginning: the predicament that we face is the absence of a norm or standard of universal validity by which to guide our lives both individually and collectively or, in other words, the omnipresent relativism, which is accepted with equanimity or even welcomed only by the most complacent or thoughtless among our contemporaries. And the solution, let us say, is philosophy or the philosophic life. But in what way is that which is designated by these terms the solution we seek? Does philosophy *discover* the norm or standard that we require? In that case, what is that norm or standard and by what arguments, appealing to what evidence, does philosophy establish its validity? These questions are the more necessary to raise here, since the crisis which, following Strauss's indications, we have tried to delineate (in some of its most massive features) has also been described by him as "the self-destruction of rational philosophy" ("Preface" to SCR 30). But the discovery and vindication of such a norm or standard would constitute, certainly, a rebirth of rational philosophy. What grounds, then, do we have for heralding such a rebirth?

Or is it the philosophic life itself that is to be seen, not so much as norm or standard, but rather as the end, or the peak of a hierarchy of ends, by and towards which we need to direct our lives? In this view, we are to look to philosophy not for an answer which it *gives*, but for that which it itself *constitutes*. But then in this case, too, we have to do with an answer to a question—indeed to *the* question, the question of how we are to live or of the right way of life—and therefore we remain, precisely as would-be philosophers, under the necessity of determining whether the answer (that which philosophy is said to constitute) is the correct one. The response will perhaps be made on philosophy's behalf that it, as we have just come close to conceding, is the very discipline that (in one or another of its forms) recognizes this necessity and undertakes the task of making the determination insisted upon. Well and good: but the undertaking of a task cannot be equated with its successful completion. Engaging in an inquiry cannot be taken to confer, by itself, a legitimacy or

validity that the inquiry is admittedly in the process, merely, of seeking to establish. For—prior to its completion—if not all possibilities, at least some significant alternative or alternatives must remain open: what else can it mean that the inquiry has not yet been completed? And so long as there remains at least one significant alternative that has not been disposed of, we are so far from being able to anticipate our inquiry's successful conclusion, that we cannot exclude that an option for that alternative, based on what claims to be no more than a simple faith in its rightness, is superior to all of our striving. The task of determining the rightness of the answer that philosophy itself constitutes (to the question of how to live) must not only be undertaken, then, but also brought to completion, if we are to have a reasonable confidence in the rightness of this answer. And if that task has been completed, the same questions can and must be put to the answer that philosophy *is* as to any answers on this score that it merely *gives*: by what arguments, appealing to what evidence, is its validity established? Finally, if a part of that evidence should be said to be an experience or experiences which only philosophers as philosophers have, we ourselves would have to suspend judgment on the philosophic life until that time, not only when we will have had the experience or experiences in question, but when we are able to make clear to ourselves their character and significance.—The result of these and similar considerations could be expressed as follows: if philosophy itself, that is, the philosophic life, is to be regarded by us as the answer to the question of the right way of life, its claim to this effect must have been established by an inquiry that is, in principle, prior to our engaging in that life, or to our engaging in it from this point of view. And on other grounds, too, as it seems to me, the inquiry which establishes the desirability of philosophizing must precede philosophizing proper, in the strictest sense of the word. For it is difficult to see how the necessary inner freedom vis à vis philosophy's own most proper subject matter is otherwise to be won. (Cf. Strauss to Löwith #64 GS III 696.)

But what is, then, its proper subject matter? This is the question to which all of our previous reflections have been pointing, for—as the question of what philosophy is or of what philosophizing consists in—it lies behind, obviously, any question of what solutions philosophy may or may not supply to our fundamental predicament. And Strauss has given to it the following answer: "The discovery of nature is the work of philosophy . . . . The whole history of philosophy is nothing but the record of the ever repeated attempts to grasp fully what was implied in that crucial discovery which was made by some Greek twenty-six hundred years ago or before." (NRH 81–82) Or again: "The first philosophers are called by Aristotle 'those who discourse on nature'. . . . The primary theme of philosophy . . . is 'nature.' What is nature?" ("Introduction" to HPP 2) Philosophy, then, is not simply deep or brilliant thinking, nor even deep and penetrating thinking. Strauss gave many indications to the effect that he regarded Heidegger as the greatest thinker, or even "the only great

thinker," of our time ("Existentialism" *Interpretation* Vol 22 Nr 3, 305;[3] cf. Strauss to Löwith #41 GS III 674); but he gave indication also, at least occasionally, of a doubt as to whether Heidegger is properly called a philosopher (Strauss to Löwith #41 GS III 674; cf. "Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy" SPPP 34). The reason would seem to be that, as he put it in a lecture toward the end of his life, "Heidegger seems to have succeeded in getting rid of phusis without having left open a back door to a Thing-in-itself and without being in need of a philosophy of nature (Hegel)." ("The problem of Socrates" *Interpretation* Vol 22 Nr 3, 330;[4] cf. Strauss to Löwith #64 GS III 696) As should go without saying, this same reason establishes not the irrelevance of Heidegger's thought to reflection on the meaning and possibility of philosophy, but the contrary; and the recently published correspondence (GS III 377-772) adds to the evidence that we possess of Strauss's life-long engagement with it. We are compelled therefore, if we wish to uncover the subject matter of philosophy—that is, to see whether, strictly speaking, it has a subject matter—to try to get some grasp, however limited, of what is at issue in the confrontation of these two figures. And Strauss himself has encouraged us to do so by way of a remark which he graciously applied to his own case: "The scholar becomes possible through the fact that the great thinkers disagree. Their disagreement creates a possibility for us to reason about their differences—for wondering which of them is more likely to be right." ("Existentialism" 306)

He has helped us more materially by the remarks which from time to time he made about the character of the differences we are now concerned with. This, for example, from *Natural Right and History*: "Radical historicism," that is, Heidegger, "compels us ... to realize the need for unbiased reconsideration of the most elementary premises whose validity is presupposed by philosophy." (31) There are, then, such "premises" (whether or not they are precisely the ones pointed to in the context [30-31]): philosophy is not a presuppositionless activity. And Heidegger calls them into question. Another remark as to what philosophy "in the strict and classical sense" presupposes occurs in the concluding paragraph of Strauss's response to Kojève's critique of his first Xenophon book. (We should note that this paragraph was withheld by Strauss from subsequent printings of the response; it had appeared in the French version of their exchange and was restored to *On Tyranny* by Gourevitch and Roth: see the UC Press version of their edition for the authentic wording of the paragraph in question [viii, 212].) And here, too, Strauss lays stress on the non-acceptance of the presupposition mentioned—in this case, on the part of Kojève,

[3] "Existentialism," a lecture given by Strauss in February 1956, published in *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 22.3 (Spring 1995), pp. 303–320. It is edited by David Bolotin, Christopher Bruell, and Thomas Pangle. [eds.]

another contemporary for whom he had the highest regard: he had identified him earlier in the response as belonging "to the very few who know how to think and who love to think," that is, as "a philosopher and not an intellectual" (185f.). However that may be, philosophy "in the strict and classical sense," according to Strauss's remark in this paragraph, presupposes "that any 'realm of freedom' is no more than a dependent province within 'the realm of necessity.'" (212; cf. NRH 90) Now what the primacy of "the realm of necessity" entails had been indicated by Leibniz's formulation of the "Satz vom Grunde" or "Principle of Sufficient Reason." And, when he made his response to Kojève, Strauss was aware of the fact that Heidegger had suggested that, "Die Freiheit ist der Ursprung des Satzes vom Grunde." (The remark of Heidegger occurs in "Vom Wesen des Grundes" [*Wegmarken* (1996) 172]; Strauss had referred to an earlier version of that treatise in a review essay that appeared in 1946 ["On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy," *Social Research* 13, 3 September 1946, 336n]; cf. also "The Problem of Socrates" 329.) But what is meant by nature, properly understood, is nothing other than necessity, or "the realm of necessity" in its primacy: Strauss refers in *Natural Right and History* to "knowledge of 'natures,' that is to say, of unchangeable and knowable necessity" (90). Nature, then, is not merely philosophy's most proper subject matter. As we had to some extent foreseen, nature is also its fundamental presupposition, a presupposition that has come to appear to be radically questionable.

What is the source of the difficulty? Nature, as we can perhaps at least provisionally say, appears to presuppose man. According to one of Strauss's formulations, philosophy is "awareness of the fundamental problems and, therewith, of the fundamental alternatives regarding their solution that are coeval with human thought." (NRH 32; cf. WIPP 39; cf. also WIPP 249 where, bringing out apparently an unstated implication of Riezler's thought, Strauss says, "This implies that in order to be truly real, reality must be 'seen': if there are no human beings there cannot be concreteness.") Or, philosophy (at least in its Socratic form) is the attempt "to understand the unity that is revealed in the manifest articulation of the completed whole" (NRH 123); but the completed whole is "the given whole," that is, "the whole which is permanently given, as permanently as are human beings" ("On the Interpretation of Genesis," *L'Homme*, janv-mars 1981, XXI (1), 8).[5] At the minimum, it would seem, one must raise the question "whether there can be a universe without man: is man's being accidental to the universe, to any universe?" (LAM 31; cf. Strauss to Löwith #53 GS III 684-85; cf. Aristotle *Physics* 223a16-29) Now, so far as I am

[4] "The Problem of Socrates," a lecture given by Strauss in April 1970, has been published in *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 22.3 (Spring 1995), pp. 321–338. It is edited by David Bolotin, Christopher Bruell, and Thomas L. Pangle. [eds.]

[5] "On The Interpretation of Genesis" is a lecture given by Strauss on January 25, 1957, and published for the first time in the issue of *L'Homme – Revue française d'anthropologie* referred to by the author. [Eds.]

aware, Strauss's writings do not disclose his thought on the question of the permanence or impermanence of man. (Cf. the letter to Helmut Kuhn that was published in *The Independent Journal of Philosophy* Vol II 1978, 24: "I am not an Aristotelian since I am not satisfied that the visible universe is eternal, to say nothing of other perhaps more important reasons.") He did not hesitate to stress, on the other hand, the centrality of the finiteness of man for Heidegger (NRH 32, 176; "Existentialism" 312; "The Problem of Socrates" 327; cf. Strauss to Löwith #'s 53 and 62 GS III 684 and 694). But the fact—if it is a fact—of man's finiteness would seem to cast a shadow on nature, and therewith on nature as we have seen that, according to Strauss, it must be understood. And for Heidegger, as the remark that we have quoted from "Vom Wesen des Grundes" would tend to indicate, this appears to have been the case.

Strauss himself quoted that remark in the late lecture to which we have referred. ("The problem of Socrates" 329) To understand the context in which he did so, we must return for a moment to the passage in *Natural Right and History* which contains his identification of "knowledge of 'natures'" with knowledge of "unchangeable and knowable necessity" (90). The longer statement, of which this identification is a part and which concludes with the contention that "all freedom and indeterminacy presuppose a more fundamental necessity," is meant to "express the same fundamental premise" that, in its earlier formulation, had been said to hold "that no being emerges without a cause or that it is impossible that 'at first Chaos came to be,' i.e., that the first things jumped into being out of nothing and through nothing" (89). Now, in the lecture, Strauss quoted the remark from "Vom Wesen des Grundes" after having referred to this same fundamental premise: "out of nothing nothing comes into being." As he had continued there, "This is apparently questioned by Heidegger: he says…out of nothing every being as being comes out." (The reference is apparently to "Was ist Metaphysik" [*Wegmarken* 119–20]; cf. Strauss to Klein #116 GS III 598f.) Strauss had then commented, in part, as follows: "This would suggest, things come into being out of nothing and through nothing . . . . This is of course not literally asserted nor literally denied by Heidegger. But *must* it not be considered in its literal meaning?" (329) And the quotation from "Vom Wesen des Grundes," which follows shortly after this comment, appears to supply or to point to the response that Strauss thought Heidegger would have made to the question or challenge it put to him.

Strauss was clearly dissatisfied with this answer or non-answer on the part of Heidegger. It will perhaps be said that he had no need to take it seriously, since he has given no indication, in writing at least, that he accepted its Heideggerian basis: the finiteness of man. Still, given the darkness of the matter on which he has remained silent, it is worth considering how Strauss would have argued the question—that is, how he would

have defended nature—precisely on that Heideggerian basis. And it may be that it is only in this way that we can approach the "true perplexity" in Strauss's position.

He would have argued, as it seems to me, that man's finiteness does not necessarily entail that he is also an historical being, in the radical sense that the fundamental problems themselves change from human epoch to human epoch: we have already recalled his contention that those problems are, rather, coeval with human thought. And he would have argued further, I think, that it is only the alleged historicity of man or human life—and not his finiteness as such—that can cast a shadow on the principle of causality and therewith on nature. In one of his last letters to Löwith, with reference to a statement of the latter on Heidegger, Strauss put the matter to him as follows: "Auf die Frage, ob der Mensch ein natürliches Wesen sei, antworten Sie mit einem Ja und Nein …; wenn dem so ist, kann die Natur nicht der Grund alles Seienden sein und Heidegger, der diesen Grund in Sein findet, ist daher vorzuziehen." (#64 GS III 695–96) The task, then, was to show that man is a natural being or, in other words, that he is not an historical being in the sense indicated. And this task Strauss undertook, not least by his historical studies of modern thought. What was urgently needed, in his view, was "an understanding of the genesis of historicism that does not take for granted the soundness of historicism" (NRH 33). Or, as he also put it, "An adequate discussion of historicism would be identical with a critical analysis of modern philosophy in general." (WIPP 60) In his own contributions to that analysis, he sought to demonstrate the part played in the genesis of historicism by dissatisfaction with the solutions that pre-historicist modern philosophy had found to the problems with which it was confronted. Now, since these problems were but variants of the perennial problems, Strauss's demonstration of their importance even or precisely to historicism served a two-fold purpose: on the one hand, it tended to confirm that they are indeed permanent problems, problems coeval with human thought; on the other, it brought out a certain superiority of historicist thought to its modern alternatives with respect to the understanding of what their adequate solution would require. And from this, we can perhaps begin to understand a remark which Strauss made in a letter to Klein written about the time when he was working on *Natural Right and History*, that is, when he was again attacking the problem of history. The remark is to the effect that it seemed to him that at the bottom of the whole affair lay "the problem of causality" and that Heidegger himself had at least pointed in this direction. (#116 GS III 598) But, if this is the case, it was not simply the false lens of historicism or of the turn to history that had brought causality to sight as a problem. What truly has been gained, then, by showing that man's finiteness does not entail that he is also an historical being?

By way of elaboration of what he meant by the "problem of causality," Strauss had referred, in the letter to Klein, to Kant and "the unsolved Humean problem." (Cf. "The

Problem of Socrates" 329.) He had in mind, then, that problem as it had been understood and approached in modern philosophy. By showing the inadequacy of the modern approach (as he had begun to do already in his Spinoza book) as well as the unsoundness of the turn to history that was, in part, a reaction to that inadequacy, Strauss hoped to clear the way for an open-minded consideration of the ancient (Socratic) approach. The principle of causality had become the problem that it had for the moderns as a result of the challenge to it, unprecedented in its clarity and consistency, posed by the biblical doctrine of creation. (Cf. "Was ist Metaphysik?" 119, the passage in Heidegger apparently referred to in the letter to Klein.) Strauss turned to the ancient approach as to a sounder way of responding to such challenges. That ancient approach itself, then, could do no more than return the principle to the place that it could claim to occupy in the absence of such challenges. What place is that? According to one of the greatest heirs to the Socratic approach, it is ridiculous to attempt to demonstrate the existence of nature, for it is manifest that there are many natural beings and the attempt to demonstrate the existence of such beings would be an attempt to demonstrate the manifest by recourse to the immanifest (Aristotle *Physics* 193a3-6): this seems to me to fall short of a claim that the existence of nature is completely evident. (Cf. *Der Satz vom Grund* 17–18.) Its existence can perhaps be said to approach such evidence; but everything depends, therefore, on how we must judge of the closeness of that approach. In the third chapter of *Natural Right and History*, after speaking of certain "presuppositions" which "follow from the fundamental premise that no being emerges without a cause," Strauss elaborates as follows: "In other words, the manifest changes would be impossible if there did not exist something permanent or eternal, or the manifest contingent beings require the existence of something necessary and therefore eternal." (89) Now, if an evident premise or principle has as a necessary consequence something which itself lacks evidence, this fact must cast at least some shadow on the original principle. And, not to mention now other perhaps more familiar considerations, the very philosophy whose recovery is Strauss's lasting glory, Socratic philosophy, is constituted by the recognition of the elusiveness of that "necessary and therefore eternal" being. (NRH 122–23, Plato *Phaedo* 99d4-e6 and context; cf. Aristotle *Physics* 192b32–34)

In raising the difficulties or questions I have tried to raise—let me say in conclusion—my purpose has been only to indicate the character of the challenges which seem to me to confront any attempt to appropriate Strauss's thought for one's own. In the case of Strauss, as in that of any other thinker of his rank, these challenges are not the least of the good things that he has left to us.