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Plato's *Republic*: The Limits of Politics

Catherine H. Zuckert

Abstract: Plato's *Republic*, as the dialogue is known in English, is a classic, perhaps *the* classic investigation of the reasons why human beings form political communities—or “cities” in his terms. In the *Republic* Socrates inquires into the origins of the city in order to discover what justice “writ big” is. But in the process of constructing his “city”—or, actually, “cities”—“in speech,” Socrates does not offer us a definition of justice so much as he shows us the reasons why no actual city is ever apt to be perfectly just. From Plato's *Republic* we thus understand why justice is difficult, if not impossible to achieve for communities, but may be a virtue of private individuals.

Keywords: Plato, Republic, Justice, Political Philosophy, Community

Plato's *Republic*, as the dialogue is known in English, is a classic, perhaps *the* classic investigation of the reasons why human beings form political communities—or “cities” in his terms. In the *Republic* (368c-369a) Socrates inquires into the origins of the city in order to discover what justice “writ big” is. However, in the process of constructing his “city in speech,” Socrates does not offer us a definition of justice so much as he shows us the reasons why no actual city is ever apt to be perfectly just. In other words, from Plato's *Republic* we learn something about the limits of politics that make justice difficult, if not impossible to achieve for communities, if not for private individuals.

What we first learn from Socrates' attempt to discover what justice is by looking for it “writ big” in a city is that, like the city itself, justice arises out of a certain kind of necessity. The unstated implication is that justice is not desirable in itself.

Cities arise, Socrates points out (369b), because individual human beings are not self-sufficient. Because everyone has more needs than he or she can easily supply for him or herself, people gather together. Instead of everyone trying to fulfill his or her basic needs for food, clothing, and housing, people quickly learn that it works better for each to do what he or she does best and to trade their surplus with others. What Socrates calls the “true” and “healthy” city is thus characterized by a division of labor and specialization. And that division extends beyond the provision of what might be considered to be the most basic needs—food, clothing, and shelter—to the manufacture of tools, for example, plows for farming, as well to trade. It thus includes merchants, sailors, and money as well as wage-labor. (369c-371e)

The way in which this first “true” city embodies the principle of justice does not become clear until later, because when Socrates asks Adeimantus whether this first city is complete, and where justice and injustice are to be found in it, Adeimantus is not sure. But the simple life Socrates goes on to describe—of people making the food, clothing, and shelter they need, naked and shoeless in the summer, but clothed and housed in the winter, and with enough to relax, feast, and drink to the gods in the evening, as well as to have sweet intercourse with one another—sounds almost idyllic (372a-c). It is a vision to which many subsequent thinkers have returned. It is, therefore, worth our while to look more carefully at what Socrates calls the true city. *The* principle of justice Socrates and his interlocutors later find “rolling around at their feet” (432d-433a) turns out to be *the* organizing principle of the first, true city. It is the principle of the division of labor and specialization—namely, that each should do what he or she does best by nature and share or exchange the benefits.

Why is this the first and perhaps most fundamental rule of justice? There are two reasons, I would suggest. First, when each does what he or she does best by nature, and they share or exchange the fruits of their labor, everyone benefits. In other words, under this arrangement the good of the individual and the good of the community are the same. There is no question of someone taking advantage of someone else by force or by fraud. However, the harmony of individual and social good in this simple city is not solely or automatically a product of the division of labor and specialization per se. In most actual divisions, the tasks and the rewards are not equal. Some people, usually poor and uneducated, are forced by economic necessity if not outright coercion to perform tasks that maim rather than fulfill them. Other people reap more of the benefits. For the division of labor to be just, Socrates thus insists that it be based upon differences in natural inclinations or talents. Because each does what he or she is naturally inclined to do, each presumably contributes his or her part spontaneously and voluntarily. No one forces someone else to work; no one decides what other members of the community must do. Everyone contributes his or her bit to the good of the community as a whole, *and* everyone enjoys the same benefits or rewards. That is possible, we soon learn, only when all members of the community restrict their desires and consumption to what they need. No luxury or surplus can be allowed.

Reflecting on the embodiment of what Socrates later identifies as the principle of justice in this first “true” city, we can already see three important elements, if not prob-

lems. First, justice arises not as a matter of choice or something desirable so much as a necessity imposed by the limitations or weaknesses of individual human beings. Second, insofar as the justice of the division of labor rests on differences of natural talents, it rests on an abstract generalization. As Socrates says, we observe that different individuals perform various tasks more or less easily. It is not the case, however, that any individual human being is as uni-dimensional or single-talented as Socrates suggests. Some people can do many things well; others can perform few, if any tasks well. It is not possible, moreover, to see or know what any individual can do easily or well until he or she does it. Some tasks require great physical strength; others presuppose good memories or facility with words. The relevant differences in natural aptitude may be more visible in the simple city than they are in more complex economies and civilization. (No one can know until a person has been highly educated and trained whether she will become a great mathematician or pianist, for example.) But even in the simple city, aptitude per se is not visible; and individuals will, in fact, be able to do more than one thing. Nature does not provide as much direction as Socrates suggests. But where the allocation of tasks is not based on natural differences, it is not clearly or unambiguously just.

Glaucon famously raises a third fundamental problem by declaring that the first “true” city is a “city of pigs” (372d). Put simply, Glaucon’s point is that human beings are not satisfied merely with what they need to survive comfortably. We want more. We do not simply desire more basic goods to secure us against future wants; we desire services and goods that are not necessary for our self-preservation. We want luxuries like servants, artists, various kinds of adornment, entertainment, honors, and learning. (372e-373c) Arising more from our imagination and intellect than from simple need, these “luxuries” include activities like poetry that we often define as distinctively human.

Socrates does not say whether he thinks such ever-expanding human desire is natural. But, by characterizing a city animated by desire for non-necessary goods as “feverish” in contrast to the “healthy” city he first described, Socrates suggests that such a city is “sick” and thus in danger of disintegrating. He does not deny, however, that some, if not all human beings are moved by a desire to have more than they need merely to survive. Indeed, he points out that in this desire they have found the origin of both war and injustice. (373e)

Because human desires are not limited to the requirements of self-preservation, whether of the individual or of the species, as one might argue animals are instinctively regulated, more complex civic institutions become necessary. So, Socrates observes, even if the citizens of a “healthy” city are satisfied with what they need, they will find themselves destroyed by others if they do not provide for the common defense. And, fighting wars successfully requires knowledge, skill, or art. Following the principle that each person should perform the task or art for which he or she is best suited by nature, Socrates and his interlocutors are thus led to ask, what sort of person is best able by nature to defend or guard the city? Just as we have seen that human desires in general are directed not merely to what is necessary for survival and so to a just

division of labor, but also to what is not necessary and thus to the unjust seizure of the goods of others, so we now see that the defenders of cities need to have a double nature, characterized by what appear to be opposed inclinations.¹ Simply stated, the guardians need to be gentle to their fellow citizens, but harsh toward enemies. Socrates thus admits, in effect, that human nature is not as uni-dimensional or uni-directed, as his first true city presupposed.

Socrates also admits, in effect, that justice or order may spontaneously arise as a matter of necessity, but it cannot and will not be spontaneously or automatically maintained after the requirements of mere preservation are met. Human beings do not naturally live at peace with one another, because we are naturally drawn—both as individuals and in communities—in opposite directions.

The practical problem that arises as soon as we recognize the need for some members of a community to be armed to defend the whole remains all-too-familiar. The arms that enable some members of the citizen body to defend the rest can be used just as well—indeed, even more easily—to oppress the other members of their own community without arms. Military dictatorships and corrupt policemen are still all-too-common. (E.g., Syria or, perhaps closer to home, the Mafia.) Like Socrates we thus have an immediate interest in asking how we can prevent the armed from oppressing their unarmed fellows. Like Socrates and his interlocutors, we also need to persuade both our military forces and the police not only to risk their lives in order to protect the lives of others but also to believe that it would be wrong for them to seize power as the reward they are due for protecting the rest of us.

To prevent those with arms from using them to oppress the unarmed, Socrates suggests, it is necessary to regulate their education from birth. Because guardians will have to risk their lives in order to defend the city, they should also not be allowed to hear stories about the terrors of the afterlife that might make them afraid to die. Nor should they be presented with images of gods or heroes engaging in immoderate behavior—whether that be lamentations for the loss of a beloved son or friend, excessive eating and drinking, or even laughter. (386a-391e)

By forbidding the expression of a desire for anything more than people need in order to survive comfortably, Socrates’ second, defensive city might seem to have returned, at least domestically, to his first “true” city, characterized by free and equal economic exchange. There is, however, a crucial difference between the first “true” and “healthy” city, in which people voluntarily supply and exchange the goods and services they need on the basis of their own various natural inclinations, and the second “purged” city (399e), in which the natural desire people have to do and possess more than what is necessary to preserve themselves has to be intentionally and repeatedly repressed.

The tension or gap between the good of the individual and the good of the community becomes evident—especially when Socrates turns from the guardians’ education in music to “gymnastics.” Although every citizen is supposed to do what he or she does best by nature, Socrates points out, they will not be training and conditioning guardians to fight in defense of the city the way athletes are trained and conditioned for gymnastic contests, even

though such athletes would appear to be those best suited by nature to bodily exercises. In order to perform well in specific contests, Socrates reminds his interlocutors, athletes have to follow a strict regimen of eating and sleeping. But, in order to fight defensively, soldiers have to be conditioned to go without food or sleep. (404a-b) In Socrates' second, "purged city" it is no longer simply the citizens' natural inclinations or talents that determine what they do and learn, but their specific function in and for the city. Turning from the guardians' formative gymnastic training to remedial care of their bodies or medicine, Socrates thus enunciates a very harsh doctrine. In the purged city doctors will not be allowed to acquire as much knowledge as possible about ways of preserving life. The goal of the purged city is no longer the preservation of individuals, as it was initially in the "true" city. The goal has become instead the preservation of the community. Individual human beings who are not able to perform their functions are to be left to die. (404e-408b) If justice is to be found in this second, "purged" city, it appears to consist in putting the interest of the community or the "common good" above that of the individual. Such a stance would seem to be characteristic of a soldier who risks his life in defending his city and family. But, we should ask, is this justice? And if it is, is justice a virtue that is choiceworthy in and of itself?

Liberals are apt to object to the obvious deprivation of freedom of thought and expression Socrates has mandated to "purge" his city.² But, even if one takes the education Socrates proposes in its own terms, one can ask whether it is apt to produce the desired results. Will soldiers be truly courageous—or even disciplined, for that matter—if they do not fear death? Will people who have never been exposed to excess or luxury be able to restrain their desires, if and when they have an opportunity to indulge them? Would human beings really want to live in a society where laughter is forbidden?

As Socrates makes clear in his description of the rude medicine they will allow in the city, the point of the education of the guardians is not to make them knowledgeable. It is rather to develop and harmonize both their harsh and gentle sides so that they can serve as guardians. And that means, primarily, that they must be inculcated with right opinions. Above all, Socrates emphasizes, guardians must be taught to love the city, because a person will "surely love something most when he believes that the same things are advantageous to it and to himself" (412d). The second, "purged" city Socrates has sketched is not characterized by freedom of thought. Nor is it simply based on the truth. On the contrary, Socrates informs his interlocutors, instituting such a "just" city will require them to tell a "well-born lie" that has two parts: the citizens must all be persuaded, first, that they are all brothers and sisters, children of the land they occupy; and, second, that they are all born with different metallic bloods—gold, silver, iron, and bronze—that determine the specific functions they will perform in the city as rulers, soldiers, farmers or mechanics.³ The need for such a lie points to the two ways in which no particular "city" or political community will ever be perfectly just: 1) no people has an unambiguous right to occupy any particular part of the earth to the exclusion of all others; and 2) allocations of necessary tasks in any community will never

simply or completely correspond to the desires and inclinations of individuals.

The "justice" of Socrates' second, "purged" city consists in the complete subordination of the desires of the individual citizens to the needs of the community as a whole. In order to achieve the common good, Socrates suggests, the community should be as unified as it can be. If it were possible, all citizens should feel the pain, if any one pricks her finger. (462b-d) No one should be aware of any difference that divides him or her from others. To achieve maximal unity, Socrates explains, it will not suffice to persuade citizens that they are all members of the same family and born to perform a certain function. The guardians—that is to say, those with the arms that would enable them to oppress their fellow citizens—must be deprived not merely of all private property, but of all privacy. They and their domiciles must always be open to public inspection. (416d) They must not be allowed to develop any private interests or affections that might qualify their complete dedication to the common good.

To make sure that all members of the community serve in the capacity for which they are best suited by nature, Socrates adds, males and females must be given the same education—and subjected to the same tests to determine who should learn and perform which of the necessary tasks. (451d-452a) To free females from the burdens of child-rearing as well as to prevent the development of particular attachments that would compromise citizens' whole-hearted dedication to the community, children must also be reared in common, without knowledge of their parents or their parents knowing which children are theirs. (457d-460d)

Socrates expects that there will be resistance to his proposals to abolish private property and households or families, as we know them. His suggestion that they destroy what we now call the nuclear family has been decried as "unnatural," but Socrates suggests that common notions about gender roles or the division of labor between the sexes are highly conventional. (The *Republic* is a very radical book; there was nothing really like it again until the 19th century when some of the proposals Socrates makes for the sake of argument, were seriously proposed as actual reforms.)

Because the proposition that friends hold all things in common was an old adage (even in ancient Greece), Socrates thinks that his third, most novel proposal will provoke the most outrage and opposition. And, surely, his advocacy of "philosopher-kings" (or queens, according to the argument) has proved to be the single most distinctive and famous feature of the *Republic*.⁴ But, why, we should ask does Socrates insist that the rule of philosophers will be necessary to bring a truly just society into existence? Strictly speaking, he observes that the least change in any existing city that would be required to make it truly just would be for a ruler to become a philosopher, or a philosopher to become a ruler. (473c-d) However, we still confront the question, why? At first it looks as if the philosophers possess the knowledge required to found and maintain such a city. Specifically, they are said to know the forms of the virtues, i.e., what human excellence is, and how to foster it. (500c-501b) What that means, in effect, is that they know what human potential is—both in general and in the case of specific individuals. Such phi-

losophers would presumably be able to assign individual citizens the tasks for which they are best suited by nature, because these philosophers would know the nature of each as well as of the species as a whole. *If* human beings were programmed by nature to perform a specific task, as Socrates suggested in his initial description of the “true” city, it would be possible for a ruler to allocate tasks on the basis of his or her knowledge of nature. But, in fact, we know that human beings are not so clearly directed by nature or to a single task.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Socrates introduces another reason why philosophers would make the only just rulers: philosophers are the only human beings who cannot use rule to obtain what they most desire. (520d-521a) As lovers of wisdom, philosophers do not possess knowledge so much as seek it. And, Socrates argues, their overwhelming love of truth makes philosophers relatively immune to the fear of death and desires for wealth and reputation that lead other human beings to be unjust. (484d-486c) However, Socrates acknowledges, that very love of truth also makes philosophers not merely uninterested, but positively unwilling to rule, because ruling would constitute an unwelcome distraction from their search for knowledge. Only if they feel compelled to rule by their own sense of justice, which tells them that they owe the city service in return for the education the city provided them that enabled them to become philosophers. But here’s the catch—or vicious circle. Philosophers won’t incur such an obligation for serving the city in return for the education they have received from it—unless their city is already ruled by philosophers. But philosophers who were not themselves educated by the city would not want to rule—and non-philosophers wouldn’t understand the reasons why they should force the philosophers to rule. Nor, in fact, could they. No one can force someone else to pay attention to a particular set of concerns.

So, where does Socrates—or Plato—leave us? By spelling out the requirements of establishing a just political community, Socrates has both indicated what justice *per se* would require and why human beings are never apt to achieve it. 1) Socrates announced the first and most fundamental requirement of justice in his initial description of the “true” city: there must not be a conflict between the natural inclinations and good of the individuals who compose the city and the good of the community. 2) Unfortunately, as Glaucon’s protest against the “city of pigs” indicates, the natural inclinations, talents, and good of individual human beings are not as easily known, as Socrates seems to suggest. Once their basic needs are satisfied, human beings are easily led to imagine and wish for unnecessary luxuries, and to try to seize the goods of others unjustly in order to satisfy their new desires. 3) The unarmed, innocent inhabitants of cities thus require the protection of armed soldiers or policemen against unjust foreign aggressors and domestic criminals; and to prevent these armed guards from misusing their power, they must be persuaded not to fear death or to desire pleasure to excess. But, Socrates also admits, attempts to convince human beings not to fear death or desire pleasure won’t work. People will seek their own good at the expense of others unless they are subject to constant supervision. And who is to supervise the supervisors? Won’t the su-

pervisors or rulers use their power to seek their own good? Unless they are philosophers, who don’t seek to rule, because of their own peculiar nature and understanding of the good, they will.

As Socrates indicates when he describes the degeneration of the just city, the “aristocrats” who believe that they are better born or have “better blood,” than their fellow citizens are apt to use their arms to force the “lower born” to work for them. These “timocrats” thus accumulate private property, even slaves, and try to perpetuate their bloodline by means of their own offspring. (545c-547c) Children will not be reared, nurtured and educated in common; and, as a result, women will not be educated the same way as men. In other words, absent the rule of philosophers, human beings develop the kinds of unjust regimes we have seen in history. Because they are not philosophers, the so-called “aristocrats” do not understand what true human excellence is. Mistaking it for the honor granted by others or, more frequently, for wealth, “aristocracies” degenerate into “oligarchies”; and the worship of wealth characteristic of oligarchies gradually produces a lack of restraint. People seek wealth in order to live as they please, and when they exhaust their own or their families’ resources, they seek control of the government to seize the resources of others.

What is at the bottom or the cause of this tendency for political communities to spiral downward into injustice, especially as they become wealthier and more powerful? The reason we see in reviewing Socrates’ account of the origin of both justice and injustice in the first “healthy” and then “feverish” cities-in-speech he describes is that in his first sketch of the “true” city he recognizes only the natural forces that work to bring human beings together for their mutual benefit—our lack of self-sufficiency as individuals and the advantages of an exchange of goods produced by a division of labor based on differences in natural talents and inclinations. What Socrates is only grudgingly and half-heartedly forced to admit in responding to the questions of his interlocutors is that this simple economic community constituted on the basis of wholly voluntary exchanges—the model still at the root of modern “market” economics—can be maintained only if people limit their desires to what is necessary to live comfortably and at peace. But, as we have also been reminded, people are easily led to desire more than they need—and consequently to become unjust.

Socrates admits that his attempt to purge the citizens of his city-in-speech of all such desires won’t work, but he does not specify the reasons why. He points—but only points—to the first reason when he asserts that it would be desirable for the city to become so unified that if any citizen feels pain, all do. Socrates says that creating such a literally common feeling would be desirable, but he doesn’t claim that it is possible. He knows that, in fact, no human being can feel the pain of another; at most we can imagine and empathize with it. And because we literally do not feel the pain of another, we do not care as much about that imagined pain as we would if we ourselves were suffering. In sum, as embodied beings, human beings all exist separately from others. The goods of the body can be distributed, but they can’t literally be shared. Only intellectual or purely intelligible goods can be shared with others without any loss. There are, therefore,

fundamental natural limits to the extent to which human beings, even “friends” can hold all things in common.

Moreover, when the good in question is life or the preservation thereof, not merely of the individual, but of the community, Socrates' attempt to unify the city by forcing its inhabitants to share everything comes into conflict with another very natural human characteristic. Young male human beings may become sexually aroused relatively easily, but they do not perform on command. Nor, because sexual desire in human beings is so closely tied to the imagination, are human beings indifferent to their partners. It would be difficult to breed and raise human beings, as if we were dogs. Socrates makes the radical proposals he does about the breeding and nurturing of citizens in common in order to provide females with the education they need in order to develop their individual natural talents. His proposals thus recognize and privilege one sort of natural difference—particularly in the intellectual abilities necessary to learn different skills or “arts”—at the expense of another, the obvious natural difference between members of the two sexes with regard to procreative functions.

Even if it were possible, as it may now seem to be, to overcome this natural difference by means of technology, Aristotle's criticism of the communal institutions proposed in Plato's *Republic* would still hold. (*Pol.* 2.1261a10-1264b15) When property or other things are held in common, Aristotle observes, no one in particular feels responsible for caring for them. So, rather than everyone caring equally for everyone in the community—or feeling together—no one cares or feels anything much for anything or anybody else. This phenomenon is now known as the “tragedy of the commons” in rational choice theory. And it has much more devastating effects with regard to the care for people than for public resources or parks. Public, government sponsored or required “care” for the elderly or young is notoriously cold, officious, bureaucratic and unfeeling. The fact is that human beings care first and most about themselves, and, second, about those they hold particularly close to them, friends and family. As Aristotle sees it, this care about oneself and one's family is the source and foundation of politics—rather than the division of labor based on natural differences to which Socrates points. (*Pol.* 1.1252a24-1253a29) But whether it is the source or merely a serious complication, the attachment human beings feel to themselves and “their own” is the chief and enduring obstacle not only to the establishment of a completely just community but also to the establishment of a world community encompassing all members of the human species or family. This observation does not mean that there is nothing human beings can do to make their political communities more just or caring. Philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and their many successors would not have asked what is just, if people did not want to know and to use their knowledge to improve their own lives and communities. Recognizing both the power and the importance of self-love and particularistic affection should, however, make us conscious of the limits of our power and hesitate to impose the same rules on everyone, everywhere for the sake of achieving a too abstract understanding of justice.

Notes

¹ See Hans Georg Gadamer, “Plato and the Poets,” *Dialogue and Dialectic*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 54-55 (*Gesammelte Werke* V:198-99), who argues that Socrates thus shows that human existence is both political and historical.

² E.g., Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950).

³ I translate γεννάσιον (414a) literally as “well-born,” because the *lie* concerns birth literally and is not described as καλόν.

⁴ C. D. C. Reeve, *Philosopher-kings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Leo Strauss, “On Plato's Republic,” *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 50-138.

A Lesson in Politics: Some Remarks on Leo Strauss' Socrates and Aristophanes*

Marco Menon

Abstract: In the first paragraph of this paper, I tackle the problem represented by Leo Strauss' work on Aristophanes' comedies *Socrates and Aristophanes*. In the second and third part, I analyze the character of Socrates' atheism, and the influence of natural science on his unbelief. The fourth part addresses the tension between the fundamental requirements of the city and the requirements of the philosophical way of life. The final section dwells on the peculiar meaning of Aristophanes' political lesson.

Keywords: Leo Strauss, Aristophanes, Socrates, political philosophy, poetry

1. Leo Strauss' "real work"

To my knowledge, the philosopher who stated the case for poetry more forcefully than anyone else during the last two centuries was Friedrich Nietzsche in the *Birth of Tragedy*. In a sense, he once again opened the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy, or poetry and science¹. His recovery of poetry was related to a sort of political action or spiritual warfare², and this should be of no surprise, since even the classical quarrel between poetry and philosophy was of political significance. Leo Strauss' *Socrates and Aristophanes* faces the same issue, apparently taking the side of poetry. We can ask what Strauss' intention might have been, and as a preliminary hypothesis I would assume that he was working on a renewal of political philosophy³; but for now it seems better, following his advice, to start from the surface.

Socrates and Aristophanes is a truly unique book⁴. Firstly, it is the only book in which Strauss analyzes, one by one, all the works of a single author. Only *Thoughts on Machiavelli* is comparable, aside from the fact that it does not analyze all the works of Machiavelli one after the other, but is merely a close reading of the *Prince* and the *Discourses*. Secondly, *Socrates and Aristophanes* is a commentary on the works of a comic poet, not a commentary devoted to the work of a political philosopher. Nor is it even a commentary devoted to the work of a political historian, as in the case of the chapter on Thucydides in *The City and Man*. The title, however, points to two distinct figures: Socrates and Aristophanes. Socrates is the philosopher traditionally recognized as the originator of political philosophy and the philosopher who famously wrote nothing. In fact, we only ever deal with Socrates

through the writings of someone else: Plato's Socrates or Xenophon's Socrates. As in the case of *Xenophon's Socrates* or *Farabi's Plato*, one could speak of *Aristophanes' Socrates*, yet this is not how Strauss entitles his "real work"⁵. Why?

Strauss maintains that Aristophanes' comedy is the source to which we must turn in order to rediscover the pre-Socratic Socrates (pp. 4-6)⁶ who is simply a natural philosopher and not yet a sophisticated political philosopher (pp. 311-14). I am therefore tempted to say that the Socrates of *Socrates and Aristophanes* is neither the Socrates of Aristophanes nor the Socrates of, say, Xenophon. He is simply the unpolitical Socrates, that is, the unpolitical philosopher par excellence.

Now, why does Strauss need to recover the figure of the pre-Socratic Socrates? The reason for this is the crisis of the tradition of political philosophy⁷. This urgent need prompted Strauss to read *The Clouds* of Aristophanes, as we are told at the beginning of *Socrates and Aristophanes*. The crisis of our tradition forces us to return to its origins, to disinter its roots, to start over (p. 3). Our tradition vouches for the possibility and necessity of political philosophy, and in the nineteenth century our tradition was radically challenged. According to Strauss, the peak of this criticism is the attack of Nietzsche on Socrates and Plato: Nietzsche attacks the philosopher who, according to our tradition, founded political philosophy (pp. 6-8). The first, and perhaps the most important, formulation of Nietzsche's critique is developed in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, where the German philosopher addresses some of the flaws which brought Aristophanes to his critique of the pre-Socratic Socrates. In *The Clouds*, Aristophanes subjects, so to speak, the pre-Socratic Socrates to a comic trial. In this comedy, the incredible limitations of the pre-Socratic Socrates are revealed: the first being his lack of prudence and self-knowledge; the second his inability to understand the needs of the city; the third his total misunderstanding of Eros (pp. 311-13).

Nietzsche takes up arguments similar to those of Aristophanes to use against Plato's Socrates: he criticizes the Platonic tradition of a Socratic, philosophical citizenship. But the traditional Socrates would seem to be completely free of the above-mentioned limitations: he is the champion of prudence and self-knowledge, the truly erotic man, the citizen par excellence, and the only real politician in Athens (p. 314)⁸. Nonetheless, this sort of citizen-philosopher, who is the emblem of our Great Tradition, has been violently and irreversibly challenged: from

Nietzsche's perspective, the very phenomenon of "Socrates" would actually be the most degenerated symptom of decadence, since the philosopher as such does not believe in the gods of the city, that is, he does not take political life seriously⁹.

But which point of view is adopted by Nietzsche in his critique of Socrates? Nietzsche adopts the perspective of the tragic vision of the world or of the tragic vision of human life, going back to the "first" Aeschylus:¹⁰ he adopts the perspective of a tragic poet. Aristophanes also stands for poetry, but he is a comedian. Both Aristophanes and Nietzsche, however, claim to be disciples of the god Dionysus (p. 22)¹¹. Two disciples of the god Dionysus attack the philosopher par excellence, Socrates: What is the difference between these two critics? How are we to determine which of the two is more radical? Of course, we are dealing with two profoundly different historical and political situations and, even more importantly, with the difference between the spirit of tragedy and the spirit of comedy. Only one thing seems to be certain: *The Clouds* provide us, as Allan Bloom claimed, with a "record, unparalleled in its detail and depth, of this first appearance of philosophy, and we can apprehend the natural, or at least primitive, responses to it, prior to philosophy's effect on the world. This provides a view of the beginning at a time when we may be witnessing the end, partly because we no longer know that beginning"¹².

2. Political responsibility and the philosophic way of life

Strauss starts, therefore, from the beginning and asks whether political philosophy is possible and necessary to begin with. He asks the question "why political philosophy?" We need to understand why Socrates brought philosophy down to the city and to the household (p. 4). One thing seems clear: in *The Clouds*, the philosopher receives both a political critique and a political lesson. This comedy, however, poses some questions that can only be answered by a careful reading of Aristophanes' other comedies (p. 53), and, in a sense, the purpose of *Socrates and Aristophanes* is the perfect understanding of Aristophanes' political critique of the philosophical way of life¹³.

What is the thrust of this criticism? It can be stated as follows: The philosopher does not take the city and its gods seriously. In other words, the philosopher lacks prudence because he questions what the city reveres as sacred (pp. 48-49) and, therefore, exposes himself to the moral indignation of his fellow citizens. The philosopher is in danger of being persecuted (and eventually of being prosecuted). Moreover, his teachings can be misinterpreted by corrupt men who may feel entitled to forget the precepts of morality and to act against them. For this reason, the philosopher may be perceived by good and upstanding citizens as an agent of disorder, as a threat to public order.

Socrates takes neither the city nor the conditions upon which social peace is based seriously – he ultimately fails to take the conditions for his own way of life seriously, which requires security and concentration. The *phrontisterion* is unable to secure its own political conditions of

possibility. The Socratic school corrupts young people and estranges them from their families and the city, but is materially dependent on it and on individual acts of generosity and petty theft. This community of natural scientists is exposed to the greatest danger when Socrates reveals the truth about the gods to Strepsiades. It is only Strepsiades' intellectual slowness that prevents him from being immediately aware that Socratic atheism destroys the main pillar of justice: in fact, if Zeus does not exist, then there is no guarantee that superhuman punishment awaits those who transgress the most fundamental of prohibitions (p. 19).

The prohibition of incest and the prohibition of patriicide are the fundamental pillars of political life or the life of every human community. Strauss defines these prohibitions (along with the need for divine worship) as unconditional requirements of the city (p. 304): these are the sacred restraints that underpin every closed or political society. But from the point of view of the pre-Socratic Socrates, Zeus, far from being a god, does not even exist (p. 19). Revealing the truth about the gods seems more urgent to him than respecting the basis of his fellow citizens' moral beliefs. For this reason, Aristophanes, as a poet who knows the limits and cravings of the human soul, comically chastises the philosopher for his superficiality.

When Strepsiades realizes the effects of Socratic education on his beloved and spoiled son Pheidippides, he is shocked and becomes angry: it is his moral indignation which literally brings down the Socratic school. We might say that the recommendation of the clouds to Strepsiades also applies to the philosopher: the new goddesses maintain that "the only thing that matters is the fear of the gods". Aristophanes seems to suggest that his friend Socrates publicly respect what is sacred to the city; he should, in a sense, pay lip service to the gods of the city. In this sense the poet tells Socrates to take the gods of the city seriously because, for good citizens, the only thing that matters is the fear of the gods (p. 44).

3. Socratic unbelief and the science of nature

But why does Socrates fail to take the gods of the city seriously? Why are natural science and the debunking of sacred things so closely related? As we know, Strauss writes that, for Socrates, "Zeus, far from being a god, does not even exist" (p. 19). This is the Straussian reading of *Clouds* v. 367 in which Socrates literally states: "What Zeus? Don't be silly. Zeus does not exist". From the philosophical point of view, belief in the existence of Zeus is equivalent to *leresis*, empty talk and nonsense. This is not so far from the spirit of Farabi, who defines divine promises of happiness in the afterlife as "ravings and old women's tales"¹⁴.

I think there are at least two reasons which may explain Socrates' unbelief. The first is as follows: Socrates does not take Zeus seriously firstly because Zeus is far from being a god (p. 33); but this would mean, at least, that Socrates knows what a god is. We are not offered any explicit definition here, but we know that, according to the poets, the gods are models of the blessed life. In a sense, Socrates seems to assume this basic tenet, but from

his philosophical point of view, Zeus cannot be a model of the blessed life, that is, a god, because of his childish indifference to learning (p. 33). Far from being a god, Zeus proves, indeed, to be a childish being. He is in actuality nothing but a proud and whimsical tyrant¹⁵. According to Strauss' Socrates, the model represented by Zeus does not live up to the ideal of a perfect being: the denial of the divinity of Zeus is implied by the assertion of the primacy of contemplative life¹⁶.

We cannot underestimate this statement; for, in order to deny the divinity of Zeus, it is not necessary at all to prove that Zeus does not exist. If Zeus were to exist, a wise man such as Socrates would not want to imitate him. The statement which indicates the childish character of Zeus completes the *elenchos* with which the Unjust Speech destroyed the Just Speech; Zeus is deprived both of justice and bliss. It is easy to conclude that an unjust and unhappy superhuman being cannot actually be recognized and revered as a god because he bears a closer resemblance to a human tyrant¹⁷. We could even assume that he is a powerful being with certain characteristics and so on, but this does not show that he would be an authoritative model which can legitimately raise a claim to imitation or obedience.

A second reason why Socrates does not take the gods of the city seriously seems to be the fact that, as he maintains, Zeus does not even exist or, to put it more precisely, Zeus does not exist in nature. Here the other aspect of the problem of Socrates comes to the forefront. In this regard, it seems useful to turn to some important pages of *Natural Right and History*, especially the first part of the chapter on *The Origin of the Idea of Natural Right*. We learn from Strauss' account that the discovery of nature is the work of philosophy and that the discovery of nature is possible when the authority of *nomos* is called into question. This means that nature needs to be discovered, and that there is something that hides it. According to Strauss, authoritative decisions hide nature: in plain English, authority hides nature¹⁸.

The philosopher as such is an enemy of authority as such, but this is not a form of political rebellion: it is a necessity in the same way that it is necessary to dig up the *moly* in order to see its white root (cf. Hom. *Od.* X 303-306). The discovery of nature is guided by the distinction between hearsay and seeing with one's own eyes, and the distinction between what is man-made and what is not man-made. Nonetheless, despite the theoretical intention that drives the philosopher, the discovery of nature is never politically innocent. In fact, the discovery of nature implies a break with the authority of ancestral laws, or with the authority of divine law. In other words, the philosopher must reject the gods of the city and refuse to acknowledge as sacred what the city holds to be sacred.

As Strauss writes: "Originally, the questions concerning the first things and the right way are answered before they are raised. They are answered by authority. For authority as the right of human beings to be obeyed is essentially derivative from law, and law is originally nothing other than the way of life of the community"¹⁹. The law answers the questions about the first things even before these questions are actually raised. The law, and especially the positive divine law which is revealed by God or

by the gods, makes it pointless to search for the truth about the first things.

But why is it necessary that the law answer the question regarding the first things with authoritarian decisions? I believe the answer is as follows. Strauss writes: "Man cannot live without having thoughts about the first things, and, it was presumed, he cannot live well without being united with his fellows by identical thoughts about the first things, i.e., without being subject to authoritative decisions concerning the first things: it is the law that claims to make manifest the first things or 'what is'"²⁰. The point is that the multiplicity of *nomoi*, or the multiplicity of ancestral laws that contradict each other, especially on the issues regarding the first things, requires the suspension of judgment. Only a rational demonstration can determine which of the many ancestral laws tells the truth; therefore, from the philosophical perspective, authority as such no longer represents the criterion that guides choice: the discovery of nature leads the philosopher to distinguish between *physis* and *nomos*, and then to recognize the customs and ancestral laws of various peoples as conventions.

In *Socrates and Aristophanes*, the distinction between *physis* and *nomos* is decisive for Strauss' argument (pp. 140, 143). If *nomos* is sheer convention, then *nomos* is not part of those things that exist by nature, nor is it part of what is generated, directly or indirectly, by the first causes. *Nomos*, like all artificial or conventional things, depends directly on man. The greater dignity of natural things, or divine things²¹, as compared to *nomos*, is due to the fact that law presupposes nature, but nature does not presuppose the law: nature is the condition of law. Nature exists in the fullest sense, for nature is eternal, and law appears to be a mere human construct²². Socrates, who as a philosopher takes his bearings from the discovery of nature and the devaluation of what does not exist in nature or by nature, cannot see Zeus anywhere. All those phenomena which are traced back to the activity of Zeus are actually phenomena with natural causes. Rain, lightning and thunder are natural phenomena produced by natural causes. Socrates has to deny the existence of Zeus because there is no record, in his empirical observations, of a superhuman being who speaks, thinks and exerts a will (pp. 19, 21).

4. The political conditions of the contemplative life

At this point, the objection of Aristophanes, as I see it, steps in. As is shown by the behavior of his comic heroes or spokesmen, Aristophanes does not believe that the traditional gods exist in nature; therefore, to this extent, the comic poet agrees with Socrates. Trigaius, the hero of *Peace*, is not afraid of the punishment of Zeus (p. 155); Mnesilochus, Euripides' father-in-law in the *Thesmophoriazousai*, knows that only human authorities can punish him (p. 225); Blepyrus, hero of *Pluto*, or *Wealth*, does not hesitate to challenge the father of the gods in order to restore Pluto's sight (p. 291); Pisthetaerus, the superhuman founder of the *Birds*, dethrones Zeus and obtains his absolute power over gods and men (pp. 163, 188-89). The heroes of Aristophanes behave with full awareness of the weakness of Zeus, who cannot actually punish anyone.

His weakness seems to be the comic equivalent of his nonexistence (p. 143): only men who believe in Zeus can punish other men in the name of Zeus. Zeus has no power to punish anyone, and requires the assistance of man. But what constitutes, then, the difference between Socrates and Aristophanes on the issue of Zeus? Aristophanes would say: “of course, Zeus does not exist in nature, but he exists by convention. And this convention is something you’d better not dismantle so irresponsibly”. Socrates radically devalues convention, or *nomos*, because he looks only at nature. The greater dignity of *physis* compared to *nomos* becomes for the philosopher a greater epistemological and axiological dignity as well, but the perspective of the citizen turns this axiological hierarchy upside down. By not taking the city seriously, Socrates fails to understand the importance of *nomos* and the fundamental role played by the belief in God or in the gods²³.

Aristophanes knows that Zeus does not exist in nature, but he also knows that the actions of men who believe in Zeus have a real impact, for the actions of believers are just as real as those natural phenomena which Socrates observes. Opinions about the gods rule the world of human affairs, not the world of nature, but the world of human affairs is the world to which Socrates is necessarily bound by the simple fact of being a human being, even if he lives as if he were an Epicurean god. The comic poet compels us to reflect on this great misunderstanding on the part of those who lead a philosophic way of life.

The criticism of Aristophanes is not the criticism of someone whom we would define today as a *theocon*. In a remarkable passage, Strauss says that both Socrates and Aristophanes belong to the same species of man, although to two different subspecies (p. 46, cf. p. 17). The poet and the unpolitical philosopher are perfectly and necessarily distinct from one another; nevertheless they seem to share something very important. If we abstract from the specific difference between the poet and the unpolitical philosopher, and even if we abstract from the rivalry between these two forms of wisdom, we can see that in both cases we are dealing with human beings that Strauss would characterize as “nonconformists, people who are prepared to stand alone, to fight alone, ‘rugged individualists’”²⁴. Both the poet and the philosopher stand above and beyond the city (p. 77). Both of them reach a happiness that puts them above the city, an essentially private happiness²⁵, which is not directly determined by the regime and by the laws that govern the world of human affairs.

There is a statement in Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* that seems to describe exactly the specific difference between poet and philosopher:

Auch der theoretische Mensch hat ein unendliches Genügen am Vorhandenen, wie der Künstler [...] Wenn nämlich der Künstler bei jeder Enthüllung der Wahrheit immer nur mit verzückten Blicken an dem hängen bleibt, was auch jetzt, nach der Enthüllung, noch Hülle bleibt, genießt und befriedigt sich der theoretische Mensch an der abgeworfenen Hülle und hat sein höchstes Lustziel in dem Prozess einer immer glücklichen, durch eigene Kraft gelingenden Enthüllung²⁶.

This statement would fit perfectly in the context of the Straussian comment on the comedies of Aristophanes. A

character like Dikaiopolis shows us the perfect happiness of the comic poet who manages to enjoy himself and his art, thinking only about himself, focusing solely on himself. Seen in this way, he does not seem to be different from the pre-Socratic Socrates, who dedicates himself entirely to the study of divine or natural things, to the contemplative life. Even this Socrates, like the poet, is totally focused on himself and his own happiness.

As Nietzsche maintains in *Morgenröthe*, the philosopher and the poet are two examples of the contemplative life²⁷, for both of them reach a perfect bliss thanks to an unpolitical way of life (p. 74). In this way the poet and the unpolitical philosopher are similar. Thanks to this affinity, the unpolitical philosopher can learn from the poet how to defend himself before the tribunal of the city: is not Dikaiopolis’ apology before the Acharnians indeed the model of any possible defense of a philosopher before the tribunal of the city (pp. 60-67)? The poet, unlike the pre-Socratic philosopher, knows the nature of the city, because he takes his bearings from what is first for us. As becomes clear from Plato’s *Symposium*, where Socrates states that Aristophanes divides his time between Dionysus and Aphrodite (177d7-e3), the comic poet begins with that *alogon* which is the foundation of the family and therefore the foundation of the city (pp. 49, 173). The unpolitical philosopher, blind to the needs of Eros, fails to understand the basic needs of the multitude. Firstly, he remains blind to the desire for beautiful and imperishable superhuman beings (pp. 82-83); secondly, the unpolitical philosopher has no feeling for what is naturally festive and golden, such as the pleasures associated with the rural world of comedy: women, wine, food, laughter, singing and dancing together in the popular festivals in the country (pp. 173, 307). Lastly, the pre-Socratic philosopher cannot understand the negative side of the erotic soul of the multitude. Not without some exaggeration, we might say that patricide and incest are the erotic crimes par excellence. The pre-Socratic philosopher failed to realize the danger he was courting by denying the foundation on which the sacredness of the prohibition of incest and patricide is established. This ignorance makes the pre-Socratic philosopher unable to appreciate the role played by the belief in God or in the gods.

5. A lesson in political prudence

Therefore, only an external constraint can coerce the unpolitical philosopher to involve himself in human affairs, and therefore to cross-examine the most authoritative opinions that govern the world of human affairs:

Philosophy [...] was concerned only negatively, only accidentally, with political things. Socrates himself, the founder of political philosophy, was famous as a philosopher before he ever turned to political philosophy. Left to themselves, the philosophers would not descend again to the “cave” of political life, but would remain outside in what they considered “the island of the blessed” – contemplation of the truth²⁸.

This means that only an external necessity, the clash with some non-philosophical instance, can force the unpolitical

philosopher to reflect on the conditions and the dangers of his philosophical way of life. In this sense, the origin of political philosophy is due to a compulsion to self-knowledge, and thanks to this constraint, the pre-Socratic philosopher understands that the political community, or *nomos*, is the necessary condition of the philosophical way of life, the life according to nature²⁹. But the city is not naturally inclined to philosophy; the city is profoundly indifferent, if not hostile, to philosophy. Aristophanes makes us clearly understand this fact when Pisthetaeus kicks Meton out of the city of the birds (pp. 175, 182). Meton is the character most similar to Socrates. Philosophy is not the “one thing needful” to the city. The city does not gladly bear someone who is, at the same time, useless and dangerous, even less gladly someone who might pose as an Epicurean god, utterly blissful and unconcerned. From the philosophical point of view, the city is primarily a means of survival.

We can therefore plainly state the strictly *political* character of Aristophanes’ lesson. Commonly, Socrates is held to be a champion of *phronesis*, that is, “that kind of knowledge which is inseparable from ‘moral virtue’, i.e. goodness of character or of the habit of choosing, just as moral virtue is inseparable from prudence”³⁰. Can we say the same of the Socrates who has been taught by the comical poet? The Socrates chastened by the clouds does not recant his atheism and his selfishness. We may surmise that he understood the necessity of respecting (at least publicly) piety and justice, and therefore his political wisdom would be but a wary, utilitarian approach to things political, rather than a moral concern for the common good.

In *Birds*, v. 376, we read that the wise learn how to be cautious from the enemy (p. 165). The word in question is not *phronesis* but *eulabeia*; this kind of circumspection recommends that the philosopher deal cautiously with what is sacred to the city. This prudence is a kind of noble fear.³¹ Is this the same kind of circumspection that gives its name to the seal of Spinoza, *caute*?³² Does not the wise Socrates learn how to be cautious from the friendly enemy Aristophanes? The lesson of the comic poet may be summarized by this fundamental rule of thumb: “Don’t separate wisdom from moderation”, where moderation is not a virtue of thought, but of speech³³. In a sense, Aristophanes shows that the philosopher should conceive an exoteric teaching, or a better one³⁴.

It is not possible to determine whether Socrates had personally put this lesson into practice. Certainly, according to Strauss, Xenophon and Plato did as they handed the figure – until now traditional – of the citizen-philosopher Socrates down to history. The idealization of Socrates is the philosophical politics of his disciples (p. 314). Going back to *The Clouds* of Aristophanes, and reopening the quarrel between poetry and philosophy, Strauss makes us understand why political philosophy, understood as political action in defense of philosophy³⁵, has been (and still is) possible and necessary.

Notes

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¹ Cf. D. JANSSENS, *The Philosopher’s Ancient Clothes: Leo Strauss on Philosophy and Poetry*, in P. Armada, A. Gornisiewicz (ed. by), *Modernity and What has been Lost: Considerations on the Legacy of Leo Strauss*, St. Augustine Press, South Bend 2011, pp. 53-71; T. BURNS, *Philosophy and Poetry: A New Look at an Old Quarrel*, in “American Political Science Review”, 109, 2015, pp. 326-338.

² See, for example, M. MARTELLI, *Filosofia e società nel giovane Nietzsche, 1870-1873*, QuattroVenti, Urbino 1983; L. ALFIERI, *Apollo tra gli schiavi: la filosofia sociale e politica di Nietzsche, 1869-1876*, Franco Angeli, Milano 1984; D. LOSURDO, *Nietzsche, il ribelle aristocratico: biografia intellettuale e bilancio critico*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2002; for a Nietzschean interpretation of Strauss (and a Straussian interpretation of Nietzsche as well) see L. LAMPERT, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1996; L. LAMPERT, *The enduring importance of Leo Strauss*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2013.

³ Heinrich Meier would speak of a renewal of philosophy *tout court*: cf. H. MEIER, *Politische Philosophie und die Herausforderung der Offenbarungsreligion*, C.H. Beck, München 2013.

⁴ On this puzzling work of Strauss, see C. H. ZUCKERT, *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1996; L. BIBARD, *La sagesse et le féminin: science, politique et religion selon Kojève et Strauss*, L’Harmattan, Paris 2005; M. STELLA, *The Plaything of Things, ou les Nuées selon Leo Strauss*, in A. Laks, R. Saetta Cottone (ed. by), *Comédie et philosophie: Socrate et les présocratiques dans les «Nuées» d’Aristophane*, Ed. Rue d’Ulm, Paris 2013, pp. 207-223; D. STAUFFER, *Leo Strauss’s Unsocratic Aristophanes?*, in J. Mhire, B. P. Frost (ed. by), *The Political Theory of Aristophanes: Explorations in Poetic Wisdom*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2014, pp. 331-351; M. MENON, *Saggezza politica e poesia. Leo Strauss lettore di Aristofane*, Universitas Studiorum, Mantova 2016.

⁵ L. STRAUSS, *On Tyranny*, ed. by V. Gourevitch and M. S. Roth, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2000, p. 309.

⁶ All the references to L. STRAUSS, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1980, are in parentheses.

⁷ On the problem of tradition in Strauss’ thought, see J. GUNNELL, *The Myth of the Tradition*, in “The American Political Science Review”, 72, 1978, pp. 122-134; N. TARCOV, *Philosophy & History: Tradition and Interpretation in the Work of Leo Strauss*, in “Polity”, 16, 1983, pp. 5-29.

⁸ See for example H. ARENDT, *Philosophy and Politics*, in “Social Research”, 57, 1990, pp. 73-103.

⁹ Cf. L. STRAUSS, *The Spirit of Sparta, or the Taste of Xenophon*, in “Social Research”, 6, 1939, pp. 502-536: 532, with F. NIETZSCHE, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, KSA 6, ed. by Giorgio Colli, Mazzino Montinari, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1967-77 e 1988, “Das Problem des Sokrates”.

¹⁰ Cf. G. COLLI, *Scritti su Nietzsche*, Adelphi, Milano 1980, p. 40.

¹¹ Cf. L. STRAUSS, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1983, p. 175.

¹² A. BLOOM, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1987, p. 269.

¹³ Cf. S. SMITH, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: The Case of Leo Strauss*, in “The Review of Politics”, 71, 2009, pp. 37-53.

¹⁴ Cf. L. STRAUSS, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1988, p. 14.

¹⁵ The gods of the ancient Greeks are said to be childish, proud tyrants, mortal, powerless, boastful, unjust, and poor (cf. STRAUSS, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1995, p. 103; STRAUSS, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, pp. 33, 143, 155, 188, 288, 294).

¹⁶ Cf. L. STRAUSS, *Farabi’s Plato*, in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume*, American Academy for Jewish Research, New York 1945, p. 370: “theoretical philosophy by itself, and nothing else, produces the true happiness in this life, i.e., the only happiness which is possible”.

¹⁷ Cf. Arist. *Nic. Eth.* 1178b7-24 with the argument of natural theology, as outlined in L. STRAUSS, *On the Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy*, in “The Independent Journal of Philosophy”, 3, 1979, pp. 111-118: 117; L. STRAUSS, *Reason and Revelation*, in H. Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, pp. 141-179: 153-54. See also MEIER, *Politische Philosophie und die Herausforderung der Offenbarungsreligion*, pp. 83-88.

¹⁸ See C. BRUELL, *The Question of Nature and the Thought of Leo Strauss*, in “Klesis – Revue de Philosophie”, 19, 2011, pp. 92-101. The relation between authority and nature seems to sketch out the relation

between revelation and reason: cf. S. SMITH, *Leo Strauss between Athens and Jerusalem*, in "The Review of Politics", 53, 1991, pp. 75-99; H. JAFFA, *Leo Strauss, the Bible, and Political Philosophy*, in K.L. Deutsch, W. Nicgorski (eds.), *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham 1994, pp. 195-201; MEIER, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*.

¹⁹ L. STRAUSS, *Natural Right and History*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1965, p. 84.

²⁰ STRAUSS, *Natural Right and History*, p. 91.

²¹ Cf. L. STRAUSS, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1988, p. 92.

²² Cf. STRAUSS, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 89-90.

²³ Cf. V. GOUREVITCH, *Philosophy and Politics II*, in "Review of Metaphysics", 22, 1968, pp. 281-328: 297-299.

²⁴ STRAUSS, *What is Political Philosophy?*, p. 38.

²⁵ On the strict similarity between modern liberal thought and the position assumed by Aristophanes, see R. VELKLEY, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy: On Original Forgetting*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2011, pp. 147-148, 155.

²⁶ F. NIETZSCHE, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, KSA 1, ed. by G. Colli, M. Montinari, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1967-77 and 1988, §15.

²⁷ F. NIETZSCHE, *Morgenröte*, KSA 3, ed. by G. Colli, M. Montinari, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1967-77 and 1988, §41.

²⁸ STRAUSS, *What is Political Philosophy?*, p. 92.

²⁹ Cf. N. TARCOV, *Leo Strauss's "On Classical Political Philosophy"*, in R. Major (ed. by), *Leo Strauss's Defense of the Philosophic Life: Reading "What is Political Philosophy?"*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2013, pp. 65-79.

³⁰ L. STRAUSS, *The City and Man*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1978, p. 24.

³¹ Cf. STRAUSS, *Natural Right and History*, p. 206.

³² Cf. STRAUSS, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, p. 180.

³³ Cf. STRAUSS, *What is Political Philosophy?*, p. 32.

³⁴ On the multifaceted meaning of esotericism, and therefore of exotericism, see A. MELZER, *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2014.

³⁵ See STRAUSS, *What is Political Philosophy?*, p. 126.

Plato, Arendt and the Conditions of Politics

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Abstract: I will expose and discuss Arendt's genealogical account of the contemporary understanding of the human affairs and her critiques to a technocratic conception of politics which nowadays holds sway. Politics was for Arendt originally meant to be the place where men can manifest their individuality through speeches and deeds which can affect the life of the community, as actually happened in the public sphere of the polis, where citizens could meet and discuss as equals. Starting from Plato, the philosophical thought, modelled on the idea of logical and natural necessity, refused to acknowledge the peculiar status of public life and looked for universally valid criteria and ends according to which the city or the state should be shaped anew. The politician was no more a citizen taking part into public confrontation and became a skilled technician who can operate according to his abstract principles: the core moment of politics, rather than debate, becomes legislation. The existence of a plurality of men is obscured by the concept of a human nature which should allow to know, foresee and manipulate human behaviour. While praising Arendt's rehabilitation of participative politics and positive liberty, I will criticise her dismissal of the traditional framework insofar it remains necessary to edify and maintain a well-articulated institutional and social context which allows freedom to be possible without disappearing in a short time or to remain a privilege of a number of happy few.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, genealogy of politics, instrumental reason

1. Introduction

Arendt famously blamed Plato for having started a philosophical tradition which, by subjugating politics to ontology, has radically misunderstood the nature of politics and more generally of the human world¹. In doing so, Plato would have implicitly contributed to the disappearance of the public space which characterized the experience of the Greek *polis*. Arendt strongly opposes the understanding of politics as a problem-solving technique that aims at conforming the social reality to a predetermined standard, which science should be able to dictate. Politics, according to this framework, should be a matter only for experts who have been taught how to implement the common good. This technocratic conception of politics has become quite commonly held. We see, in Arendt's words «the body of peoples and political communities in the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administra-

tion of housekeeping»². Echoes of this vision can be easily found in the rhetoric of 'there is no alternative'³ that is often employed nowadays to defend (and to put outside of a serious debate) neoliberal-oriented policies: governments, in order not to fail, should do 'homework', take advice from commissions of 'wise men', and follow prescribed 'recipes' and 'cures'. The most important decisions, as a much celebrated former Italian Prime Minister once stated, must be «protected from the electoral process»⁴.

Far from being just the product of the recent circumstances, this approach to politics has a very long history. Arendt's genealogical account traces it back to Plato: by showing that this conception of politics originated from a serious misunderstanding of the peculiar status, meaning and goals of the human affairs, Arendt wishes to rehabilitate a different understanding of politics⁵, which was experienced in the life of the Greek *polis* (and, in modern times, in sporadic resurgence of participative experiences during revolutions). Politics was not meant to be a profession exercised by an *élite* of skilled technicians, but was conceived as the possibility of every citizen to realise himself as an individual recognised by a community of peers. Such an experience could be secured only by the participation to public life, where men could manifest themselves as free individualities able to display their differences on a ground of equality.

2. The Stages of the Human Condition

We can have a better understanding of these statements by keeping in mind Arendt's phenomenology of practical life as she describes it in her magnum opus, *The Human Condition* (1958). For Arendt practical life is made up of three different categories which reflects all the possible interactions men can establish between them, nature and the world: labour, work and action.

1) With labour Arendt means the activities required for the self-preservation and reproduction of human life. Through labour, men struggle to satisfy their needs through in order to simply preserve their biological functions as other animals do. They act as slaves of a natural necessity. Their life is entirely spent in the meaningless cycle of a process which alternates «toiling and resting, labouring and consuming, with the same happy and purposeless regularity with which day and night and life and death follow each other»⁶. Thus, everyone simply behaves as a member of an animal species, to the point that Arendt employs the expression *animal laborans* (labouring animal) to define this way of life.

The forms of organisation established with the purpose of securing the survival and the propagation of the species presuppose from the beginning a hierarchical structure and the division of roles. This was the case of family, which Aristotle defined as the first natural society: men are supposed to earn nourishments and women to generate and raise children, and for this reason, women must be subordinated to men⁷.

2) But human life is not entirely determined by nature: the form of intercourse between man and nature does not consist just in toil and consumption, but also in a purposive transformation of the environment and in the construction of lasting items, which allow us to emancipate ourselves from the rhythms dictated by nature itself. Men can, for example, build shelters and walls to protect themselves from bad weather and wild animals. Against the instability of a cyclical nature, which destroys everything it gives life to, the *homo faber* edifies a stable and solid reality where human existence can safely take place. Unlike animals, men are able to build tools and artefacts to serve their purposes. The fabrication process involves the transformation of matter according to projects, models and purposes, which the artisan has in mind. He begins with an idea and ends with a product as compliant as possible to the imagined object. While the *animal laborans* is slave of necessity, the *homo faber* is fully master of himself and of his work, which follows directly from his plan. Matter can be employed as a means to craft instruments, and these instruments, in turn, can serve our purposes. Nature is shaped by the *homo faber*, «lord and master of the whole earth»⁸ unto a world of items which have for us a signification as employable tools.

Although the *homo faber* can give purpose to the world, he is still unable to find a meaning for himself: the categories of instrumentality and of utility, through which he interprets things, suggest a *regressio ad infinitum* in the search of a final end, which should not become, in turn, a means for something else. *Homo faber*'s mind-set cannot provide this final end: he can employ his creative force either to empower the *animal laborans*, by offering him the instruments to increase his productivity and to make him dispose of more and more consumption goods, or to predispose the stage on which the last component of the human condition can take place: action.

3) While in the sphere of labour men simply behave like all the other animals, and in the domain of work they are barely executors of plans whose ultimate goals remain unknown and unquestioned, in the sphere of action they can finally appear as individuals, equal and different at the same time. Once they are emancipated from the tyranny of natural needs and protected from a hostile environment, men can finally reunite as equals in a community where nobody has to govern or be governed. Now existence receives a meaning in so far as each man is recognised by others not merely as something fungible and interchangeable, but as a peculiar individual, bearer of a unique point of view upon a common reality⁹. According to Arendt, men are not instantiations of a common human nature, but, when they are freed from natural necessity and do not act in an exclusively instrumental behaviour, a plurality of persons, whose difference emerges because they act and talk differently from each other. In being not qualified by properties or skills, individuals can reveal

themselves only through what they do and say. Action is the power that enables each and every man to start something new, unexpected and unpredictable, and which makes history irreducible to a set of laws or to a predetermined process:

The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. With respect to this somebody who is unique it can be truly said that nobody was there before¹⁰.

While the effect of work is always predictable, an action never completely reflects the intentions of the agent because it immediately falls «into an already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions».

Since action is unpredictable, we can just form an opinion on what is actually happening and going to happen, without any possibility to appeal to an apodictic certainty and truth. We can judge situations only from our point of view, which is also unique as our faculty to act. We can only form opinions (*doxa*, from *dokei moi*, 'it seems to me') about social facts: the same reality can actually appear very different to different observers. Our perspective can be enriched only by the confrontation with others by means of speech, which becomes crucial for a better understanding of the social. As Kant already observed¹¹, freedom of thought without freedom of speech would be meaningless:

Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the stand-points of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. [...] The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusion, my opinion¹².

In absence of an unequivocal truth, we lack of a criterion to impose our point of view to others: we can just try to persuade them by «courting their judgment», Arendt says quoting Kant's *Critique of Judgment*¹³, namely by suggesting that our perspective can better reflect the state of things we are both observing, but without being able to offer a definitive proof¹⁴. In so far we treat men as human beings, and not as tools, we cannot use neither logic (obviously as long as we are discussing human affairs and not mathematics and natural sciences) nor violence to make them agree with us, but we have to persuade them. Influencing people through persuasion is the essence of power, which is therefore the opposite of violence. If men were all the same, Arendt argues, there would be no need to communicate our thoughts nor to act in order to show others who we are:

Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and

those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood¹⁵.

Deeds and speeches cannot for Arendt be reduced to mere instrumental or strategic behaviour: in that case, she says, they would be easily replaced by violence and by a purely symbolic and formalized language. We engage in them because they allow us to reveal ourselves, and in this consists for Arendt the greatest self-fulfilment men can achieve: «we believe that the joys and gratifications of free company are to be preferred to the doubtful pleasures of holding dominion»¹⁶.

The distinction between work and action, *poiesis* and *praxis* lies, as Aristotle said, in the fact that the first is persecuted in order to achieve something else, the second for its own sake. We can renounce to labour (the citizens of the *polis* could do this thanks to the institution of slavery), and to work and still be considered proper human beings, but a life deprived of the faculty to act and talk does not differ from the life of a beast or the functioning of a machine. The Greeks understood the necessity of action for a meaningful life and instituted the *polis* as public space for this purpose. The Greeks considered as really human only those who, despising their natural existence, «prefer immortal fame to mortal things». The others «content with whatever pleasures nature will yield them, live and die like animals». Politics was the realm where everyone could reveal himself and achieve immortality through great deeds and speeches, thus artificially securing for the individual what nature had reserved only for the species. For the Greeks the *polis* was «first of all their guarantee against the futility of individual life, the space protected against this futility and reserved for the relative permanence, if not immortality, of mortals»¹⁷. Men could show themselves only in the stable background edified by the *homo faber*, and then be remembered by another kind of *homo faber*, the author of poems and songs about the glory of heroes.

The civic virtue which deeds and speeches can express was well distinguished from a technical skill or a particular knowledge, and regarded as a possession of every man, as it is well attested by the myth told by Protagoras in the homonymous platonic dialogue, where Zeus recommend Hermes to give everybody the political art¹⁸.

Plurality, unpredictability of human action, the epistemological status of political judgments, the consensual nature of power, the use of persuasion in order to achieve it and the quest for immortality through action are thus the characteristics of the political life Arendt traces in the *polis*. Plato would have waged war against these features of public life in his project of a philosophical reform of politics, a war which was indeed well motivated by the peculiar status of the contemplative life philosophy had discovered and by the relation it had to engage with practical life.

3. The Nature of Philosophy

Philosophy was born for Arendt, which follows

Plato's and Aristotle's own account of the origin of this discipline, out of an act of wonder in respect of the existence of things. It is a solitary act through which the thinker confronts himself with the meaning of the whole universe. Philosophy begins with an awareness of this invisible harmonious order of the *kosmos*, which is manifest in the midst of the familiar visibilities as though these had become transparent¹⁹. The philosopher suddenly realises that existence of things requires a necessary and eternal ground, otherwise it would be impossible. The task the philosopher decides to accomplish is to make this necessary ground, which Parmenides first called Being, accessible to reason. But in order to do this, the philosopher has to turn away from the world of the simple opinion, which accept appearances as such, without questioning them and without needing an ultimate ground to justify them. He must turn his gaze to what is eternal and to what is closer to eternity: the cyclical motions of celestial bodies and the unchangeable necessity of mathematical objects. The philosopher's gift, writes Plato, is to grasp «the eternal and unchangeable», while the others keep wandering «in the region of the many and variable»²⁰.

The philosopher discovers another way to secure immortality that is not exposed to the risk of being forgotten, unlike the memory action leaves before itself. He will reject the glory the city is able to grant to those who contribute to its common life and will try to assimilate himself to the eternity of the highest realities.

While the agent aspires to leave a mark into the world history, to impress the seal of his linear existence into the cycle of nature, the philosopher completely annihilates his individuality to become one with the universal order. He accepts it as it is, and glorifies it as necessary. Instead of the instable motion and unpredictability of action, he chooses the everlasting quiet that is proper of contemplation.

Differently from *doxa*, truth requires no collective effort in order to be discovered, and it cannot be subject to any protestation: it requires the individual capacity to see things as they are and necessarily are (something which imposes itself as self-evident), and to make logical inferences starting from it.

Plato and Aristotle knew for sure that the world of human affairs was rooted in opinion and contingency: because of this Plato held it in low consideration, and Aristotle distinguished between *theoria*, the capacity to contemplate things as they are, and *phronesis*, practical wisdom. Assuming the incompatibility between common sense and the «world turned upside down», that the philosopher discovers through contemplation, we could therefore imagine that thinkers could simply decide to abstain from politics in order to freely pursue their *bios theoretikos*.

Heraclitus, for example, renounced his aristocratic rights in favour of his brother in order to undertake his philosophical research without constraints. Aristotle clearly acknowledged the uselessness and unsuitability of the philosopher for public affairs²¹. Then, why did Plato feel the need to interfere with public life? An easy answer could lie in the episode of Socrates' death and in the need of the philosopher to protect himself from the crowd by making the city the most suitable place for his contemplation.

Plato was indeed shocked by the public condemnation of his greatest teacher, but it would be a mistake to interpret the Republic as a reaction to the hostility of the city towards contemplative life:

There are hardly any instances on record of the many on their own initiative declaring war on philosophers. As far as the few and the many are concerned, it has been rather the other way round. It was the philosopher who of his own accord quitted the city of men and then told those he had left behind that, at best, they were deceived by the trust they had put in their senses, by their willingness to believe the poets and be taught by the populace, when they should have been using their minds, and that, at worst, they were content to live only for sensual pleasure and to be glutted like cattle.²²

Socrates, whom Plato had seen as the proof of the hostility of the city towards the thinker, never thought of himself to possess wisdom of the kind philosophers usually claimed for themselves. For Arendt his vocation was a political one. He questioned everybody's opinions, not to destroy them or to replace them with truth, but to verify their coherence and test their resistance to discussion:

The role of the philosopher, then, is not to rule the city but to be its 'gadfly', not to tell philosophical truths but to make citizens more truthful. The difference with Plato is decisive: Socrates did not want to educate the citizens so much as he wanted to improve their *doxai*, which constituted the political life in which he too took part. To Socrates, maieutic was a political activity, a give and take, fundamentally on a basis of strict equality, the fruits of which could not be measured by the result of arriving at this or that general truth.²³

Socrates still saw the root of all possible truths in *doxa*: in his admission to know only that he knew nothing «he had accepted the limitations of truth for mortals, its limitations through *dokein*, appearances, and because he at the same time, in opposition to the Sophists, had discovered that *doxa* was neither subjective illusion nor arbitrary distortion but, on the contrary, that to which truth invariably adhered». He was sentenced to death not because he tried to divert men from their affairs in order to lead them towards the truth, but because he tried to awake in the people a moral conscience (the maxim to act in order to be always in harmony with ourselves) which could exhort to disobey the laws and not to respect the opinions commonly shared by the city. In contrast, Plato, who believed in the existence of an eternal truth to be grasped through philosophy, refused to value opinion at all: God, and not men, should be the measure of all things²⁴. Still believing in the public role of the philosopher, as his master did, he nonetheless introduced a highest goal for his existence which was different from the self-fulfilment in the public space (which Socrates, according to Arendt, never questioned): the assimilation to the divine reality.

By doing this, Plato was forced to redefine the end of politics itself. Since the only possibility to have a meaningful life consists in the vision of truth, politics must be degraded to a means, whose goal should be to secure that the life of the philosopher does not meet any obstacle. Like the man of action is not able to understand the end and meaning of the contemplative life because he keeps judging it within the standards of politics, in the same

way the philosopher's transfigured mind becomes unable to recognise any intrinsic value in political action. This insurmountable misunderstanding is fairly depicted in Plato's famous myth of the cave. The only occupation which the cave dwellers are able to undertake is contemplation, although not of things as they really are, but just of shadows, which they try to guess what they stand for:

It belongs to the puzzling aspects of the allegory of the cave that Plato depicts its inhabitants as frozen, chained before a screen, without any possibility of doing anything or communicating with one another. Indeed, the two politically most significant words designating human activity, talk and action (*lexis* and *praxis*), are conspicuously absent from the whole story. The only occupation of the cave dwellers is looking at the screen; they obviously love seeing for its own sake, independent from all practical needs. The cave dwellers, in other words, are depicted as ordinary men, but also in that one quality which they share with philosophers: they are represented by Plato as potential philosophers, occupied in darkness and ignorance with the one thing the philosopher is concerned with in brightness and full knowledge. The allegory of the cave is thus designed to depict not so much how philosophy looks from the viewpoint of politics but how politics, the realm of human affairs, looks from the viewpoint of philosophy.²⁵

From this perspective, the cave dwellers must be seen as fully incapable of successfully accomplish what they are supposed to do (knowing), and the philosopher must feel entitled to offer them guidance to the vision they couldn't obtain in any way, except under his leadership. Everybody (in the philosopher's eye) desires, without knowing it properly, the same good the philosopher has been able to find. Men living according to opinion are compared to people on a ship who are looking for a good captain but do not acknowledge that this role requires a great amount of competence²⁶.

The city must be then modelled by the philosopher and made conform to the eternal reality he is able to grasp. This is actually the *modus operandi* of work, which in this way takes the place of action as key category of political philosophy. Men, like the clay employed by the artisan, must be shaped according to the idea of justice and of good in order to reproduce in the city the same harmony which inhabits the whole *kosmos*. Men must be forced, for their own good, to accept it, either after being instructed to see the same truth philosophers see (or a surrogate of it), or through violence or menaces of punishment in the afterlife like those Socrates employs in the concluding myths both of the Republic and Gorgias. The same discipline the philosopher must impose upon himself in order to be apt to contemplate, by subjugating body and desires, must be replicated in bigger scale in the city by subjugating the citizens who are unable to reach the truth: philosophers must give order or institute laws. In other words, they must become kings.

In the *Laws*, indeed, Plato more prudently opted, instead of the direct rule by philosopher-kings, for «the construction of the public space in the image of a fabricated object», where «the compelling factor lies not in the person of the artist or craftsman but in the impersonal object of his art or craft»²⁷. The core moment of politics, rather than debate or common commitment to the same cause, becomes legislation according to a concept of a

human nature which should allow to know, foresee and manipulate human behaviour. This step will have lasting effect in the political thought, even after the meaning of a contemplative life went completely lost with the scientific revolution and the advent of modernity.

Politics continued to be seen as a means for a superior end, even by philosophers who, like Aristotle, clearly distinguished between the life of the philosopher and the one of the politician. Also for him the main feature of politics is the difference between those who govern and those who are governed. The superior end assigned to politics can change with the ages or with the personal understanding of the philosopher, but the paradigm remains unchanged: in the Middle-Age we find politics to be a means for the salvation of souls, for safety in Hobbes, for protection of life and property rights in Locke and in the liberal tradition, for the enhancement of productivity and progress in the contemporary political economy.

Also in modern times politics kept being identified with the art of governing men through laws. For example in Hobbes' *Leviathan* the sovereign is identified with the legislator, be it a monarch or an assembly, in Rousseau's social contract the main aim of the general will is also legislation, and politics' goal is to reunite men under laws. For both Rousseau and Kant liberty consists in obedience to the same laws we have given consent to. The paradigm Arendt criticises, pertains thus both to antiquity, where laws were modelled on the immutable structure of *kosmos*, and modernity, where laws are the result of procedures developed by man himself.

Not less ubiquitous between antiquity and modernity is the need to evade from this paradigm in order to recover a meaningful existence outside theoretical life (which has for Arendt become impossible in our modern conception of the physical world, which is no more seen as a self-structured order, but as a mathematical construction superimposed over an otherwise chaotic reality) and the simple and meaningless reproduction of the biological process in a consumerist life.

Despite being ignored by theory, the experience of an authentic public life has for Arendt temporarily re-emerged after classical antiquity in the revolutionary movements starting from the XVIII century (the American and the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, the experience of the Soviets during the Russian Revolution, the movement of Resistance against Nazism during the Second World War, the Hungarian Uprising, the Protests of 1968), in a spirit of participation and commitment to a common enterprise through the constitution of councils, assemblies and other forms of public debate²⁸. This 'lost treasure of revolutions' certainly testifies the importance of positive liberty as condition for a meaningful life, and its rehabilitation by Arendt is crucial in our times, where a technocratic conception of politics, this time dictated (as Arendt had already recognized) no more by philosophers but by political economists, holds sway.

Nevertheless, Arendt seems to ignore that the sphere of *praxis* is not self-subsistent, but requires a well-articulated institutional and social context which allows people to become individuals and not to remain victims of natural needs and of alienated work; otherwise political freedom is doomed to disappear in a very short time (as in the revolutionary experience) or to remain a privilege of a

number of happy few, like in the Greek *polis*.

Arendt's condemnation of the efforts to secure social justice (which, she believed, could be reached only through the development of technical progress) together with freedom, proves itself to be absolutely superficial and naive, especially when she has to recognise that even the American Revolution, which she has exalted for being free from that concern, has failed to achieve a durable republican and truly participative spirit²⁹.

For us who live in a deeply impolitic age, our commitment must be the one of the *homo faber* aiming at looking for the necessary conditions which can make liberty something lasting. The problem of the institution of a true and lasting participative freedom cannot be thought outside the 'Platonic' (and Hobbesian) framework: as a matter of establishing ends and individuating adequate means which can make life worth living. A political thought for 'dark times' cannot be emancipated from this tradition because the freedom, Arendt rightly asks for, requires a foundation which only legislation and a fair socio-economic environment can grant and ensure. The Greeks were well aware of this, as Arendt shows:

Before men began to act, a definite space had to be secured and a structure built where all subsequent actions could take place, the space being the public realm of the polls and its structure the law; legislator and architect belonged in the same category.³⁰

Politics, as Arendt conceived it, will be possible only in a more just and equal social order which is our task to think and project. Politics as legislation and social struggle can still have a value if it is thought as means for the advent of a stable public life, namely the 'kingdom of freedom', which also a good part of the philosophical tradition acknowledged to be situated beyond the borders of the simple wellbeing we can enjoy in private life and to be found in a shared enterprise.

I obviously do not mean to rehabilitate an authoritarian government, neither by philosopher-kings nor by a revolutionary avant-garde, in order to secure this objective. A rehabilitation of reason, not as thought of Being or as source of eternal truths, but as the power to create a meaning for our being in the world (as Arendt praises it in *The Life of the Mind* by drawing from Kant the opposition of thinking and knowing³¹), could be enough. Such a reason, as a point of view of the whole humanity, should be able to think a more just and equal social order and to remind mankind that the human condition does not exhaust itself in the present state of things. To those who object that every change is impossible because man is bound by an unchangeable nature or is the result of historical necessity, we must be able to answer in the same way Kant did in *Toward Perpetual Peace*:

Such a pernicious theory itself produces the trouble it predicts, throwing human beings into one class with other living machines, which need only be aware that they are not free in order to become, in their own judgment, the most miserable of all beings in the world³².

The recollection which Arendt accomplishes in her account of the Greek *polis* and also of the revolutionary tradition in Modern Age, can prove us that the current situation of the human affairs is nothing definitive, and that

history has been populated by examples of other possibilities, however ephemeral and imperfect they might have been. Through historical reconstruction, we give life again to these possibilities, and perhaps, can inspire a transformation of reality. In absence of any alternative, such thought proves itself to be the most political act we are able to perform.

Notes

¹ On Arendt's reading of Plato and, more generally, on the relationship between philosophy and politics, see M. ABENSOUR, *Against the Sovereignty of Philosophy over Politics: Arendt's Reading of Plato's Cave Allegory*, in *Social Research*, vol. 74, n. 4 (Winter 2007), pp. 955 – 982; D. VILLA, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995; B. PAREKH, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy*, Macmillan, London, 198; F. M. DOLAN, "Arendt on Philosophy and Politics", in D. VILLA, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001.

² H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958, p. 28.

³ For a survey, see A. O. HIRSCHMAN, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*, The Belknap Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991.

⁴ M. MONTI, *Intervista sull'Italia in Europa*, Laterza, Bari, 1998, p. 84.

⁵ Arendt's conception of politics has been the subject of a great number of studies. Among them, see C. CALHOUN, J. MCGOWAN, eds. *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997; M. CANOVAN, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, J. M. Dent, London, 1974; S. DOSSA, *The Public Realm and The Public Self: The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt*, Wilfred Laurier University Press, Waterloo, Ontario, 1988; M. GOTTSEGEN, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 1993; M. PASSERIN D'ENTREVEVES, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt*, Routledge, New York and London, 1994; E. YOUNG-BRUEHL, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1982.

⁶ H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, p. 106.

⁷ ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, I, 1252a.

⁸ H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, p. 139.

⁹ See P. BOWEN-MOORE, *Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Natality*, Macmillan, London 1989.

¹⁰ H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, p. 178.

¹¹ I. KANT, *Was heißt sich im denken orientieren*, in KANTS *gesammelte Schriften*, Bd 8, hrsg. von der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, G. Reimer, Berlin, 1923, p. 8.

¹² H. ARENDT, Truth and politics, in *The New Yorker*, February 25, 1967, Daniel REMNICK, New York, p. 54. On this topic see also L. BRADSHAW, *Acting and Thinking: The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1989.

¹³ I. KANT, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in KANTS *gesammelte Schriften*, Bd 5, hrsg. von der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, G. Reimer, Berlin, 1913, p. 237.

¹⁴ Arendt's reading of Kant's theory of reflexive judgment as fitter than his political thought for evaluating politics was developed in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1982. See G. KAPLAN, C. KESSLER, eds., *Hannah Arendt: Thinking, Judging, Freedom*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989; J. NEDELISKY, R. BEINER, eds, *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, New York, 2001; M. PASSERIN D'ENTREVEVES, *Arendt's theory of Judgment*, in D. Villa, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001

¹⁵ H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, p. 175.

¹⁶ H. ARENDT, *Truth and Politics*, p. 62.

¹⁷ H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, pp. 45 – 46.

¹⁸ PLATO, *Protagoras*, 322 b – e.

¹⁹ H. ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, Harcourt, Orlando, 1977 – 1978, p. 143.

²⁰ PLATO, *The Republic*, 484b.

²¹ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141b.

²² H. ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 81.

²³ H. ARENDT, *Philosophy and Politics*, p. 81.

²⁴ PLATO, *The Laws*, 716 c – d.

²⁵ H. ARENDT, *Philosophy and Politics*, p. 96.

²⁶ PLATO, *The Republic*, 488 d – 489a.

²⁷ H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, p. 247.

²⁸ Arendt's account of this resurgence in modern times is to be found in *On Revolution*, Viking Press, New York, 1973. See also S. BENHABIB, *The reluctant modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Sage Publications, London, 1996; J. ISAAC, *Arendt, Camus and Modern Rebellion*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992; A. WELLMER, *Arendt on Revolution* in D. VILLA, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001.

²⁹ For criticism, see for example H. J. HOBBSAWN, *Hannah Arendt on Revolution*, in Id., *Revolutionaries*, The New Press, New York, 2001.

³⁰ H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, pp. 194 – 195.

³¹ H. ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, pp 53 – 68.

³² I. KANT, *Zum ewigen Frieden*, in KANTS *gesammelte Schriften*, Bd 8, hrsg. von der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, G. Reimer, Berlin, 1923, p. 378; *Toward Perpetual Peace*, in *Practical Philosophy*, translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.

Leo Strauss on Returning: Some Methodological Aspects

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Abstract: Leo Strauss (1899-1973) was but one out of a number of German-Jewish thinkers emerging around 1930 who sought to return to the ancients, but no one expressed this idea more radically and with greater vigor. This paper examines Strauss's project of returning as it was formed around 1930 and subsequently clarified and expanded. The focus on "methodological" aspects indicates that the concern is not only with the question of *why* such a return seemed necessary for Strauss, but also *how* he sought to do it. After providing an outline of his principal considerations and their respective theoretical contexts, then, the article also seeks to examine the philosophical thinking and writing in action. The body of writings to be examined include two lecture manuscripts of 1930 and 1931, with a brief view towards Strauss's early master work *Philosophy and Law* (1935) and his lecture "Jerusalem and Athens" (1967).

Keywords: Political philosophy, ancients vs. moderns, sociology of knowledge, reason and revelation, philosophy of culture

1. Introduction: Strauss and the German-Jewish Return to the Ancients

Leo Strauss was but one out of several German-Jewish thinkers around 1930 who fancied a return to the ancients, but no one expressed this idea more radically and with greater vigor than Strauss. Strauss has been compared with Karl Löwith in this respect, but the two knew well about the fundamental difference. Strauss did not merely propose to revisit or re-read the tradition of Platonic philosophy but to return to Platonic philosophizing altogether. From around 1930 onwards he worked out a philosophical and scholarly project showing that it is actually possible to return; or at least that the reasons that seemed to speak against the possibility of returning were based on unwarranted assumptions. As he wrote to Löwith in 1933: "The abstract historicist objections are known to me – but I believe that in the end they present themselves differently than at the beginning. To cut a long story short: I must see whether I 'get through' (*ob ich 'durchkomme'*)."¹

One reason why Strauss stands out here is that he coupled the underlying distinction between ancients and moderns with the renewal of the quarrel between Jerusalem and Athens. The return to the ancients therefore comes with a simultaneous return to the quarrel between

reason and revelation as the principal topic of philosophy.² Another, more obvious reason is his anti-historicism. Rather than as a historical reminiscence, returning to antiquity was conceptualized as an actual possibility, or as Strauss explained to Löwith, "an *eternal* possibility."³ But it also seemed as a necessity, as the only viable alternative to the unviable modern political ideas: "I *really* believe – although that apparently seems fanciful to you – that the perfect political order as sketched by Plato and Aristotle *is* the perfect political order. Or do you believe in the world state?"⁴

Löwith, too, sought to return to antiquity. He imagined this return as a cosmic "eternal recurrence" that was in principal agreement with his taste for the 19th century (Kierkegaard, Burckhardt, Nietzsche, and others). In other words, he was much more than Strauss in principal agreement with modernity. But undoubtedly they had something in common. To generalize the matter a bit with regard to the circle of Strauss, Löwith, Klein, Jonas, Arendt, Krüger and Gadamer: to a different degree they were all Nietzscheans and Heideggerians around 1930. The will to return to the ancients had been fueled by Nietzsche and Heidegger, and the return was to be carried out on the philosophical basis of Nietzsche and Heidegger. To give a quote from Strauss's "Unspoken Prologue" to Jacob Klein: "Heidegger had opened [a possibility] without intending it: the possibility of a genuine return to classical philosophy, to the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato, a return with open eyes and in full clarity about the infinite difficulties it entails."⁵ Later they all wrestled with the problem of philosophy and politics as posed by Heidegger's affiliation with National Socialism; but that problem had not yet begun to play out in the formation of their philosophical projects.

The option for Heidegger entailed a turn against neo-Kantianism. The quarrels during the Weimar Republic between neo-Kantians and their increasingly radical opponents are legendary. One focal point of the turn against neo-Kantianism in the 1920s was the opposition against the neo-Kantian interpretation of Plato and Aristotle. The event that triggered this opposition was Heidegger's early Aristotle lecture, by which he established his reputation as an excellent interpreter of classical philosophical texts.⁶ This intensive interpretation came to be seen as the opposite to the neo-Kantian reading of Plato as a proto-Kantian that was codified in Paul Natorp's *Platos Ideenlehre* (1903).

The entire polemics against the waning neo-Kantianism in the 1920s came with a radical break from

the philosophy of culture. There are quite some inner-philosophical reasons for the discontent with philosophy of culture, but the German-Jewish philosophers around 1930 had good reason to register the changes in the understanding of culture very sharply. That reason was the looming failure of German-Jewish assimilation, with its promise of *Bildung* and *Kultur*. The crisis of culture was accompanied by a double reawakening of religion (Rosenzweig and the return to Judaism) and the political (the exposure to anti-Semitism and the increasing plausibility of the Zionist option). German-Jewish philosophy around 1930 was largely situated in the force-field of culture, religion and the political. Strauss came closer than any other of these philosophers to a theoretical outline of this force-field. He is the principal critic of “culture” here, and his methodology of returning is first and foremost designed as a departure from the latent culturalism of his contemporaries.

2. Progress or Return?

The shifts in the understanding of culture also came with ever-increasing doubts in the idea of progress, both in the sense of the perfectibility of man and of social progress toward a world society in which, among other aspects, the Jews would no longer be discriminated against. Strauss spelled out the consequence most clearly: The limits of progress allowed for the first time to consider the possibility of returning.

Strauss’s notion of “returning” had a much wider spectrum than the return to the ancients. That was best explained in his 1952 lecture “Progress or Return?,” which was meant to explain the “contemporary crisis of Western civilization” to a Jewish audience and with regard to the problem of Jewish modernity. The text starts with the marvelous statement “that progress has become a problem – that it could seem as if progress has led us to the brink of an abyss, and it is therefore necessary to consider alternatives to it.”⁷ Spoken seven years after the end of WWII, these words are little spectacular with regard to the diagnosis. Progress *had* become a problem even for the most hard-boiled progressivists. The surprise is in the suggestion that it might therefore be useful to “consider alternatives” to progress: Whereas many of his colleagues sought to convince their audiences that the abyss of progress demanded an unabated and often radicalized commitment to the principles of a *true* progress (which had unfortunately not yet begun), Strauss suggested that it might be better “to stop where we are, or else, if this should be impossible, to return.”⁸

Strauss emphasized the religious meaning of the term, its origin in the Hebrew notion of *teshuva*. This notion of *teshuva* is still employed today when formerly orthodox people who had abandoned Judaism return or seek to return to the Jewish creed, with all the psychological and social hardships that come with it. Strauss emphasized this meaning of returning as repentance; or the acknowledgment that one had once been on the right way and then turned to the wrong way. In other words, he discussed the fate of Western civilization within a framework borrowed from orthodox Judaism, to which he himself did not belong. In that framework the progress that had led to the

brink of an abyss came to be seen as abandonment; and abandonment in the sense of deviation or sin had again to be abandoned to allow for redemption and restoration. This appropriation of that orthodox narrative was both playful and serious. It was playful in the sense that some random elements of orthodoxy had become disposable for a non-orthodox philosophical purpose, almost as in post-modernism. It was serious in the sense that it outlined a way to disentangle oneself from the modern assumptions of history and progress. The position of orthodoxy provided a critical standpoint from which modernity, and in particular modern philosophy with its proclivity toward irrationalism, could be judged of.⁹

To make sense out of Strauss’s notion of “return,” then, I suggest that the contrast between modernity and antiquity creates a tension within the modern world, and that this contrast is primarily a *critical* difference introduced by Strauss into 20th-century philosophy. Whereas for some of his contemporaries, modernity was to be judged by its socio-economic flipside, for Strauss modernity was to be tried in a “pre-modern court.”¹⁰ It was this idea that made Straussian political philosophy the principal alternative to the latent progressivism of 20th-century thought. Strauss was immensely concerned with the question of why it is necessary and how it is possible to return, and perhaps this is what he will stand for once he will be more properly situated in the overall history of 20th-century philosophy. The idea of return is a challenge here, because it is easily exposed to the objection of historicism: One cannot turn back the wheel of history, or go back in time. And indeed, how could a return-to-whatever seem to be a viable solution? But if the suggestion is right that the primary purpose of returning was to gain an outside perspective on the present, then Strauss’s project of returning is actually rather simple and entirely realistic. It was merely too far away from the consensus to be easily digestible for his colleagues. He needed to start from the ground up to explain it to them.

His writings from 1930 onward contain numerous methodological reflections and textual strategies pertaining to the proper way of returning. These reflections involve criticism against scientific methodologies, but they also carefully outline and exemplify a methodology of political philosophizing. The crucial aspect of returning was the *transition* from the modern assumptions to the respective subject matter as it was originally understood. Strauss was aware that the political understanding he sought to arrive at was not evident from the beginning, so he needed to *lead* from the seemingly evident premises to the premises of political thinking. For this reason he was immensely occupied with the starting point, the proper way to begin. Methodological reflections are chiefly concerned with this starting point. Therefore one must read the beginnings of Strauss’s texts with disproportionate care.

3. A Double Return: Leo Strauss around 1930

By Strauss’s own testimony, his early book on Spinoza (completed in 1928, published 1930) “was based on the premise, sanctioned by powerful prejudice, that a return to pre-modern philosophy is impossible.” As he de-

clared, the ensuing “change of orientation” had “found its first expression, not entirely by accident,” in his review article on Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political* (1932).¹¹ The much-quoted statement has often been understood to mean that the “change of orientation” was due to the encounter with Carl Schmitt; this encounter has henceforth been cast as the foundational event of Strauss’s political philosophizing. Given these far-reaching conclusions drawn from a late recollection, then, it is extremely important to locate the “change of orientation” more precisely in his writings around 1930. The “Notes on Carl Schmitt” was the first *published* article that expressed the idea of returning, but that idea had floated around in several earlier lecture manuscripts and drafts. These texts, which in the meantime have been published in English, provide a micrological view into the genesis of the idea and its initial contexts.

The first outline of the idea of returning is to be found in the text “Religious Situation of the Present,” a lecture manuscript for a camp of the Zionist student group Kadi-mah in December 1930. Here Strauss presented the idea of returning as an alternative to Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge, on whom he had also penned a masterful polemical essay a year earlier.¹² This starting point was “not entirely by accident,” too.¹³ It was the highly advanced and entirely formalistic methodology of modern social science provided by Mannheim that led Strauss to describe the necessity to stop and return: Strauss outlined the return to premodern philosophizing as a principal alternative to the sociology of knowledge.

The choice of Mannheim as a scapegoat was not entirely arbitrary. He is no longer well known today, but after his master work *Ideology and Utopia* (1929) he was supposed to be the next big thing in academic and wider public discussions.¹⁴ The book was reviewed by Hannah Arendt, Max Horkheimer, Paul Tillich and Herbert Marcuse and others. As Strauss quipped, Mannheim belonged to the “most progressive” and “most expert” part of the German-Jewish intelligentsia.¹⁵ It was a matter of up-to-dateness to take on his master book, but Strauss also needed to defend his own work against its pretension: If the sociology of knowledge were able to provide a consistent answer to “the question,” as Strauss rephrased the concern with the situation of the present, then his own scholarly project would be entirely useless.

His conclusion was that Mannheim’s teaching is “sophistic,” and this claim was itself a blend of modern and premodern perspectives. First, it was built upon the Socratic premise of a categorical difference between sophists and philosophers. Second, this difference was not limited to the temporal and spatial setting of Greek philosophy. Just like the “real philosophy” of antiquity, so its counterpart of sophistry was an “eternal possibility.”¹⁶ The larger article on Mannheim that never came to life was to be named “Sophistry of our time.”¹⁷ Strauss also continued his studies on Florian Znaniecki in the early 1940s under the same working title, but he never published these studies either.¹⁸ He sometimes suggested that modern philosophy and social science as such were sophistic, but the sociology of knowledge was the principal and most elaborated spokesman for modern sophistry. The sociology of knowledge embodied the modern know-it-all scholarly habit, whereas “real philosophy” was

based on knowing to know nothing. As such, the sociology of knowledge was a serious competitor for Strauss, although this concern did not translate much into his publication record. The principal commentary on the matter is his ironic appropriation of the term “sociology of knowledge” at the beginning of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952). One could be tempted to understand this commentary as an example of Strauss’s mastery of esoteric writing – but he did everything completely in the open, and not “between the lines” (as the famous metaphorical expression of esoteric writing goes).

Strauss criticized the sociology of knowledge for its failure to account for the difference between “everything that pretends to be knowledge” and “genuine knowledge,” and between intellectuals and philosophers.¹⁹ The strategic link here is between “intellectuals” and sophists. The sophist as understood by Strauss (following Plato) “contents himself with appearances with regard to being and to the true,”²⁰ and that seemed to count for the sociologist of knowledge more than for any other current teaching. Strauss presented his own “sociology of philosophy” ironically as a “province” or “subdivision” of the sociology of knowledge; but actually he sought to outline the fundamental difference between the two: “Sociology of knowledge emerged in a society which took for granted the essential harmony between thought and society or between intellectual progress and social progress. It was more concerned with the relation of the different types of thought to different types of society than with the fundamental relation of thought as such to society as such.”²¹ As Strauss added, sociology of knowledge regarded the different philosophies as “exponents of different societies or classes or ethnic spirits.” It thereby disregarded the tension between philosophy and society, or as Strauss put it: “the possibility that all philosophers form a class by themselves.” Strauss further explained that this failure was due to the fact that the sociology of knowledge knew only of 19th and 20th-century Western thought. The tension between philosophy and society could only be understood by turning “to other ages” and “other climates.”²² His own sociology of philosophy was built upon the medieval Islamic and Jewish Enlightenment; and there he famously found “a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all things is presented exclusively between the lines.”²³

To return to Strauss’s early criticism of the sociology of knowledge: “Conspicivism,” as he called the attitude of Mannheim and others, was the epitome of a pseudo-comprehensive view, based on the methodological abstractions of sociological value relativism. It sought to arrive at a scientific understanding of the current situation through a synthesis, or a synopsis, of the present-day viewpoints. The task of the sociologist of knowledge was to synthesize the plurality of ideologies and standpoints into a unified theory of the present. This solution was open to the objection that not all of these views were worthy of being synthesized, or that all these views might be fundamentally wrong. As Strauss declared: “Can the possibility ruled out from the start that all these interpretations may be blind to the same fundamental facts; that one thus never even encounters these fundamental facts if one orients oneself from the beginning only by these viewpoints?”²⁴

The argument against Mannheim's social science teaching can be summarized as follows. First he argued, to come to know the present just as it *is* one must become free of the present, and this freedom must be won. Second he argued that it was not so clear whether the task of understanding really was to know "the situation of the present"; for mankind has always had a present, but why need one be concerned with it in the first place? Third, Strauss explained the difficulties of understanding by way of the Platonic allegory of the cave. He referred to this allegory as a description of the *natural* difficulties of philosophizing, adding that the problem of a plurality of opinions was merely a by-product of these natural difficulties. Fourth, Strauss added a non-natural difficulty of philosophizing, referring to Maimonides's discussion in the *More Nevuchim* of Alexander of Aphrodisias. According to Maimonides, Alexander of Aphrodisias added a fourth reason to the three natural difficulties of philosophizing, and that is the "habituation to writings in which they [the multitude] firmly believe and to which they are habituated." In Strauss's words, the fourth reason is given "by the fact that a tradition resting on revelation has entered the world of philosophy," and hence "the freedom of philosophizing is fundamentally limited."²⁵

The argument certainly became more powerful in later versions. But it seems worthwhile to follow the movement indicated by these four steps: from the obsession with the present situation to a step back from the present situation, to the natural situation of philosophizing, and at last to the unnatural difficulty of philosophizing added by the fact of revelation. Strauss had thereby *led* the reader from the sociological preoccupation with the present situation into the fundamental tension between reason and revelation as the principal problem of philosophical thought. This movement from the most obvious things to the most important things forms a recurring pattern in Strauss's methodology of returning to the ancients. It was also a return from the unnatural difficulties of philosophizing to the natural difficulties, as depicted in the allegory of the *second* cave, from which one must free oneself in order to climb back at least to the Platonic cave.²⁶ No matter whether Schmitt or Mannheim (or Ebbinghaus) was the first target of Strauss's criticism, and no matter whether this criticism came as a polite scholarly argument or a polemical attack – the starting point for Strauss's notion of returning to the ancients is to be found in the antinomies of the moderns, and in particular of his contemporaries. In his polemical interventions he was immensely concerned with the possibility of finding a viewpoint that would not merely add to the "anarchy of opinions" (Mannheim) or the irreducible plurality of viewpoints. According to Mannheim, this plurality was to be reached by way of a synthesis. According to Carl Schmitt, it was to be shattered by the force of a sudden, arbitrary decision between friend and enemy.

It was the quest for a viewpoint beyond the plurality of current viewpoints that made the appeal to the ancients necessary for Strauss. He had been searching for a comprehensive viewpoint from early on. His early writings in the context of German Zionism feature a heterogeneous field of positions and critical strategies, but they lack a clear focus that would have organized these positions into a coherent view. He saw the "intellectual situation" as a

battlefield of culture, religion and the political, but his own positions – particularly in the quarrels between orthodoxy and political Zionism – were almost interchangeable. The only stable element was the recurring polemics against the notion of "culture." The return to premodern philosophizing provided this critical work in the forcefield of culture, religion and the political with a clear focus and purpose.

The first to note the similarity of Strauss's "method of critical argumentation" in the two essays on Mannheim and Schmitt was Karl Löwith. He conceded that the reasoning was impressive, but he sought to evade the consequence that the criticism applied to his own philosophical endeavor, too. As Löwith argued, even if he was indeed caught up by historical relativism, he could not overcome it by *not* starting from the (necessarily polemical) situation of the present.²⁷ But Strauss, too, started from the situation of the present. The question was how to proceed from there, and how to become free from the starting point. Löwith noticed that Strauss argued from a different position. An expression in Strauss's texts of the early 1930s captures this difference well: It was all about a "horizon." In the Mannheim critique the task was to gain "the horizon" in which radical questions and answers are alone possible. In his *Comments* on Carl Schmitt he announced right at the beginning the need for "a horizon beyond liberalism." As he explained: "[Schmitt's] critique of liberalism occurs in the horizon of liberalism; his unliberal tendency is restrained by the still unvanquished 'systematics of liberal thought.'"²⁸

4. Returning to Maimonides

Strauss subsequently gained a better understanding of this new horizon through his main scholarly project at the time, a new interpretation of the Islamic and Jewish Enlightenment of the Middle Ages, which found its first literary expression in 1931 and eventually morphed into the early master work *Philosophy and Law* (1935). He presented some of his findings in his Berlin lecture of 1931, "Cohen and Maimonides." A brief look at the introduction is helpful.

Strauss's copious explanation of the "and" in the title demonstrates the reorientation in the most literal sense: It entailed a change of perspective. As he explained, the "and" between Cohen and Maimonides "gives the impression that we, as if sovereign spectators or even judges, wanted to allow both these outstanding men to *pass before* us."²⁹ This procedure would be appropriate, not only for the sociologist of knowledge, but basically for all "theory"-led approaches that are certain of their own epistemic superiority. Strauss started from the premise that Maimonides was inaccessible for current readers. He wanted "to gain access to Rambam [Maimonides] by starting with Cohen: Cohen is to open for us the access to Rambam." As he repeated: "Cohen is to lead us to the understanding of Rambam."³⁰ But what was the obstacle to the understanding of Rambam? In Strauss's words: "*How is it that our understanding of Rambam is in need of guidance?* Because *initially* he is *not* accessible to us. He is not accessible to us because we live in a *totally different world*: in the world of 'modern culture,' as Cohen

likes to say.”³¹ Strauss’s task was therefore to lead from a cultural understanding to “an original understanding of Rambam.”³² The real obstacle, after all, was “our becoming enlightened,” and Cohen the enlightener provided the means to grasp the principles of the Enlightenment and uproot them. As Strauss hastened to add, he would thereby “have to criticize Cohen. That is why the discussion will be more about Cohen than about Rambam, although for us it is first and last a matter of understanding Rambam.”³³

The remark makes intelligible a crucial trait of many of Strauss’s early writings: the glaring disproportion between the copious methodological introductions with their detailed analyses of sometimes rather innocuous *contemporary* writings, and the brief sketches – often dispersed over the texts – of the topic that really mattered. Returning to the ancients was all about gaining a proper viewpoint, and this viewpoint needed to be won in an explicit and transparent turn away from the presuppositions of the moderns. This methodological preoccupation also prevailed in *Philosophy and Law*, but the argument was built differently there.

This is not the place for a deeper analysis of *Philosophy and Law*, a highly complex study with a peculiar form or dramatic character. This form is highly relevant with regard to the methodology of returning. In other words, we must come to a better understanding of how the book works as a book. There has been some debate on whether the heterogeneous text, with its introduction and three chapters, is actually a book or merely a collection of essays. In fact, however, despite the complicated genesis, with various chapters having been written over the course of several years and being compiled literally at the last minute in early 1935, it has a very clear plan. It is an early example of what Strauss later called the “argument and action” of a philosophical book, which means that the argument is contained to some extent in the action.³⁴ This interplay between propositional content and dramatic form precedes and partly explains Strauss’s later discovery of esoteric writing, but in itself there is nothing esoteric about it. *Philosophy and Law*, in particular, has often been misunderstood as an early indication of esotericism, but the inner workings of the book clearly show otherwise.³⁵ The following remarks pertain only to the beginnings of the introduction and the first chapter, which has the function of a second, methodological introduction. We may then refer to the introduction proper as the thematic introduction that situates medieval rationalism in the contemporary quarrel between orthodoxy and the Enlightenment.

The first two paragraphs of the introduction follow a unique argument and action of their own. Strauss opposed two types of rationalism to exemplify his thesis that it is actually possible to return to the position of Maimonides. He confronted modern rationalism with medieval rationalism by enacting the argument between both as a contest among equals: He juxtaposed two rationalisms and asked “which of the two opposed rationalisms is the true rationalism.” The surprising answer is that modern rationalism is a “sham rationalism”³⁶ leading to the self-destruction of reason, whereas Maimonidean rationalism is the “natural model,” the “standard” of rationalism.

One can hardly overemphasize the exceptional character of this starting point, in which a five-year long process of “reorientation” came to a simple and elegant formulation. Citing “the freedom of the question,” Strauss demonstrated the extent to which he had moved away from the common understanding of things past.³⁷ According to the assumption of “historicism” in the broadest or most basic sense, medieval rationalism was superseded or “overcome” by the early modern rationalism of Descartes and Hobbes, and this rationalism was in turn overcome by another rationalism etc. For this historical understanding Maimonidean rationalism could not possibly be true for the mere fact that it was superseded by another doctrine. Furthermore, Maimonidean thought was bound to the outdated Aristotelian cosmology and the allegorical method of interpretation.³⁸ By 1935 Strauss had relegated these and other objections to modern prejudices. He simply compared and confronted the two rationalisms with each other as if they were coeval or simultaneous, and, even more importantly, as if medieval rationalism could be as true as modern rationalism.

The further course of the introduction moved to the modern era. Strauss staged an appeals court in which the Enlightenment case against orthodoxy is being retried, and he insinuated that some Nietzschean “atheism from probity” would serve as the “the heir and judge of the belief in revelation.”³⁹ That discussion has sparked sharp controversy, and this is due to the fact that Strauss’s own position remains wholly ambiguous. Scholars have particularly stumbled upon the question of whether the voice in the text is his own at this point or rather mimics the voice of Nietzsche, the quintessential figure standing at the peak of modernity. Judging from the scholarly dispute over the closing pages of the introduction, the riddle cannot be solved by way of an unequivocal argument. At least this seems so if one does not bother too much with the thesis on Maimonides, as many have done. But the riddle – and the demonstration that the riddle cannot be solved on the basis of the modern premises – was constructed to motivate the return to Maimonides in the first place. Strauss acknowledged that the situation is “unsolvable,” but it is so only on the basis of “the modern premises.” As he wrote: “This situation not only appears insoluble but actually is so, as long as one clings to the modern premises.”⁴⁰ That sentence is the clearest outline of where Strauss actually stood, but no one believed him because no one imagined that he might actually be serious about returning to Maimonides. At this point where Strauss has led the reader all the way into a truly intricate situation, he suggested that Enlightenment is not necessarily modern Enlightenment, and the medieval Enlightenment of Maimonides and his Islamic predecessors might be the best available option.⁴¹

The second task was to make sure that the medieval solution, the solution of Maimonides, would not again be automatically interpreted within a modern framework. This is the function of the first chapter, or the second, methodological introduction to medieval Jewish philosophy. To explain what methodology means here, there is a notion of direction in his arguments: they are designed to lead from the seemingly evident premises to the premises of political thinking. For this reason Strauss was immensely occupied with the starting point, the proper way

to begin. The most obvious starting point for his contemporaries, he suggested, was to understand the respective matter in terms of “culture,” but its original meaning could only be understood in “political” terms. The purpose of the methodological introduction, then, is to lead from a “cultural” understanding to a “political” understanding of medieval Jewish philosophy.

In order to follow this directional argument in the text, one must pay attention to a nearly unknown *systematic* discussion. The inconspicuous topic of that discussion is the place of a doctrine within the division of philosophy. Major philosophical insights are often described with regard to a seemingly insignificant shift in the systematic disposition of a concept or doctrine. One can follow this discussion through *Philosophy and Law* and virtually all of Strauss’s later writings on Maimonides, Farabi and others.

5. Uprooting the Philosophy of Culture

A second source for Strauss’s occupation with the division of philosophy was his early acquaintance with neo-Kantian philosophy of the Marburg School. Despite many polemical remarks on Hermann Cohen, Paul Natorp and Ernst Cassirer in his works, Strauss’s philosophical project was not only a radical departure from that tradition, but paradoxically also its continuation. His discussions of the problem of political philosophy often evoke the framework of the prior debate on the systematic place of religion within the neo-Kantian division of cultural philosophy. This debate had been inaugurated by Cohen in *Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie* (1915) and the introduction to *Religion der Vernunft* (1919/1929).

The initial problem faced by Cohen around 1915 pertained to the place of religion within the systematic division of philosophy. The question in short is as follows: If philosophy remains within the confines of the triadic Kantian structure of epistemology, ethics and aesthetics, where does religion belong to? Can religion be adequately described as a part of ethics? That was Cohen’s earlier solution in the *Ethics of the Pure Will* (1904). Does it require doing away with the Kantian triadic structure and allowing for a fourth pillar of the philosophical system? Cohen tried this for a while with the addition of a “psychology.” Or does the problem of religion actually destroy the Cohenian system altogether, as suggested by Franz Rosenzweig? Rosenzweig maintained in his introductory essay to Cohen’s *Jüdische Schriften* that religion could not at all be located in the system, but that it gained “systematic omnipotence.”⁴²

The reemergence of religion and the precise way it relates to the philosophical system has been a major issue in Cohen’s late work; it became a bone of contention in the quarrels in German-Jewish philosophy of the 1920s on the canonization of Cohen’s philosophy; and one can clearly show that Strauss was well familiar with the matter. One of his lasting contributions was to transfer the systematic problem to the new context of political philosophy. Eventually he also came to discuss the problem of “the political” as posed by Carl Schmitt within the conceptual framework that was build and prepared in the

prior discussion on the place of religion within the neo-Kantian system of philosophy. Religion *and* the political became recognizable through this discussion as the paradigmatic non-cultural phenomena, which therefore did not fit into the system of philosophy that was erected within the framework of neo-Kantian philosophy of culture.

Accordingly, there are two different concerns with the systematic division of philosophy here, and both are from a very different theoretical context. The place where they come together for the first time is the first chapter of *Philosophy and Law*, a biting review of Julius Guttman’s *Philosophy of Judaism* (1933). The overall strategy at the beginning of the first chapter is to situate Guttman’s study within the framework of neo-Kantian philosophy of religion, and then to show how this framework is in conflict with the subject matter of medieval philosophy. Strauss sought to demonstrate that Guttman could not understand the original problem of religion because he was trapped in the assumptions of the philosophy of culture; but as he argued “religion cannot be rightly understood in the framework of the concept of ‘culture.’”⁴³

First, culture is to be understood as the spontaneous product of the human spirit, while religion is *given* to man. Second, culture is to be understood as a set of “domains of validity,” each constituting “partial domains of truth,” while religion makes a claim to universality. In a next step Strauss rephrased these two incompatibilities as a contradiction of two oppositional claims to universality: “The claim to universality on the part of ‘culture,’ which in its own view rests in spontaneous production, seems to be opposed by the claim to universality on the part of religion, which in its own view is not produced by man but *given* to him.” With their respective claim to be universal, culture and religion do not coexist peacefully side by side, they clash with each other and seek to submit each another to their respective semantic structure. In Guttman’s *Philosophy of Judaism* religion wins the fight against culture. As Strauss described the outcome of the quarrel, Guttman “finds himself driven to a remarkable distancing from philosophy of culture by the fact of religion as such, which thereby proves to be one crux of philosophy of culture.”⁴⁴

There is much more in this beginning. In particular, Strauss did not only describe the conflict between religion and culture but added an inconspicuous third which he named “the fact of the political,” referring to Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political* once again. With this addition the conceptual framework of culture, religion and the political was completed; and it is this framework in which Strauss described the modern situation with its insoluble conflicts. We can trace the framework through a variety of his writings, including his late master lecture “Athens and Jerusalem” (1967). The text has two chapters, both of which start with a refutation of philosophy of culture. Athens and Jerusalem could only be understood (and returned to) if they were no longer misrepresented as “two cultures.” Strauss started by characterizing the position of cultural anthropology and its problematic stance toward Western cultures; and in the second part he returned to Hermann Cohen to address the possibility of understanding Jerusalem and Athens as the two sources of modern culture.

By the 1960s Strauss had two critiques of culture; one was concerned with culture as in philosophy of culture; the other was concerned with cultures, with the discovery of the infinite plurality of cultures and the infinite plurality of ideas about right and wrong. That is the *other* problematic aspect of culturalism as we know it today, with its peculiar mixture of cultural relativism and absolutism. Such negotiations in the interplay of plurality and unity – and the textual strategies he had at hand – suggest that Strauss's "return" was not just somehow philosophically backward, there is also something entirely new and unheard-of in it.

Notes

¹ L. STRAUSS, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, ed. H./W. Meier, Metzler, Stuttgart/Weimar 1996, p. 621.

² See most recently J. A. BERNSTEIN, *Leo Strauss on the Borders of Judaism, Philosophy, and History*, SUNY Press, Albany 2015.

³ L. STRAUSS, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, p. 661.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 662.

⁵ L. STRAUSS, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. K. H. Green, SUNY Press, Albany 1997, p. 450.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ This notion of Jewish orthodoxy was of course a fiction, because in fact there never was an orthodoxy outside of history and modernity. Strauss turned orthodox Judaism into a transhistorical principle, but in reality, orthodoxy was an invention of the 19th century that came up as a response to Jewish modernity.

¹⁰ L. STRAUSS, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and his Predecessors*, trans. E. Adler, SUNY Press 1995, Albany, p. 52.

¹¹ L. STRAUSS, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, Schocken, New York 1965, p. 31.

¹² L. STRAUSS, *Conspicivism*, in M. D. Yaffe/R. S. Ruderman (eds.), *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, Palgrave/Macmillan, New York 2014, pp. 217-224; *Religious Situation of the Present*, *ibid.*, pp. 225-235. Strauss planned to rework the earlier essay into a larger article that would also incorporate the theses from the lecture manuscript (cf. *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, pp. 383-84), but the plan never materialized. Possibly Strauss no longer followed the idea upon the completion of his Schmitt article.

¹³ See however Timothy W. BURNS, who conceded that the text was "explicitly directed against [...] Karl Mannheim," but nevertheless situated Strauss's talk in the critique of Heidegger. (T. W. Burns, *Strauss on the Religious and Intellectual Situation of the Present*, in Yaffe/Ruderman, *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, pp. 79-113: 80) I suggest to disentangle Strauss's criticism against Mannheim from the topic of Heideggerian historicism.

¹⁴ K. MANNHEIM, *Ideologie und Utopie*, Friedrich Cohen, Bonn 1929.

¹⁵ L. STRAUSS, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, p. 228. In a 1932 letter to Gerhard Krüger he counted Mannheim among the "idiots" ("Spranger, Maier, Mannheim, auch Höningwald ..."); *ibid.*, p. 408; cf. p. 449.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 661.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

¹⁸ See Strauss's handwritten notes in the Leo Strauss Papers, The Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, box 6 folders 3 and 9.

¹⁹ L. STRAUSS, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London 1988, p. 7.

²⁰ L. STRAUSS, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London 1966, p. 144n1.

²¹ L. STRAUSS, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, p. 7.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁴ L. STRAUSS, *Conspicivism*, in *Reorientation*, p. 222.

²⁵ L. STRAUSS, *Religious Situation of the Present*, in *Reorientation*, pp. 231-32.

²⁶ Cf. L. STRAUSS, *Besprechung von Julius Ebbinghaus, Über die Fortschritte der Metaphysik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, pp. 437-39: 439.

²⁷ L. STRAUSS, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, p. 615.

²⁸ L. STRAUSS, *Notes on Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political*, in H. Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London, pp. 91-119: 119.

²⁹ L. STRAUSS, *Cohen and Maimonides*, in K. H. Green (ed.), *Leo Strauss on Maimonides: The Complete Writings*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London 2013, pp. 173-222: 174.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 175, 177.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 178.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 175 (trans. altered).

³⁴ L. STRAUSS, *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws*, Chicago 1975.

³⁵ Cf. P. VON WUSSOW, *Leo Strauss and Julius Guttman: Some Remarks on the Understanding of Philosophy and Law*, in *Idealistic Studies*, 44 (2015) 2-3, pp. 297-312.

³⁶ L. STRAUSS, *Philosophy and Law*, p. 22 (trans. altered).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴¹ Chapters two and three of *Philosophy and Law* are devoted to the elaboration of this option in terms of medieval philosophy. The limits of the present article forbid to do more than hint at a forthcoming larger interpretation of these chapters.

⁴² F. ROSENZWEIG, *Einleitung*, in: H. Cohen, *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 1, Schwetschke, Berlin 1924, pp. xiii-lxiv: xlvi.

⁴³ L. STRAUSS, *Philosophy and Law*, p. 42.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Back to the Roots. The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Jacob Klein

David Janssens

Abstract: This paper will explore the correspondence between Leo Strauss and Jacob Klein, two thinkers of Jewish origin with a keen interest in Greek origins. Besides being close friends, both were engaged in an attempt to recover the roots of Greek philosophy. The first section (I) briefly addresses the way in which Strauss and Klein responded to contemporary political developments. The second section (II), discusses some of the most striking elements in Strauss' rediscovery of political philosophy, ancient and modern, as they become apparent in his letters to Klein. The third and final section (III) focuses on Klein's recovery of Greek philosophy.

Keywords:

Strauss, Klein, Art of writing, Roots, Politics, Science

Introduction

When Martin Heidegger delivered a series of seminars on Plato's *Sophist* in the early 1920s, most of those attending soon realized they were witnessing something remarkable. Bracketing several centuries of scholarly commentary, Heidegger chose to confront the dialogue in its own terms, reading Plato as a contemporary who had something worthwhile to say about questions of the utmost importance.¹

For many of his students, the seminars on the *Sophist* gave the decisive impulse for their own philosophical projects, either as a continuation of the path broken by Heidegger, or in critical deviation from it.² Two students in particular, however, chose to remain as close as possible to the original impulse itself. As one of them later noted "[Heidegger] intended to uproot Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle, but this presupposed the laying bare of its roots, the laying bare of it as it was and not just as it had come to appear in the light of the tradition and of modern philosophy."³ Thus, Leo Strauss, speaking for himself and for his friend Jacob Klein, summed up the profound effect of Heidegger's teaching.

This is substantiated when we turn to the correspondence they held for four decades, and which was published in the third volume of Strauss' *Gesammelte Schriften*.⁴ The exchange provides us with some invaluable pieces of information about Strauss's thought. In his letters, he pronounces on some of his basic views, both philosophical and political, with rare clarity and candor. In addition, the correspondence enables us to determine what may have

been Strauss' intellectual *akmè*: the letters written between 1938 and 1939 – not surprisingly his most prolific period as a letter-writer – are a breath-taking report of his rediscovery of medieval and classical thought and its art of writing.

My discussion in this paper is divided in three parts. The first section (I) briefly addresses the way in which three salient features of contemporary politics come to light in the correspondence: the Jewish Question, the rise of Nazism, and political Zionism. The second section (II), discusses some of the most striking elements in Strauss' rediscovery of political philosophy, ancient and modern. The third and final section (III) focuses on the philosophical relationship between Strauss and Klein, their differences and agreements, as well as their mutual criticisms.

I.

Reading those letters that deal specifically with politics, one cannot help noticing the dark shadow of persecution. In March 1933, only days after Hitler forced the Enabling Act on the Reichstag, Klein notes: "There will never again be a parliamentary democracy in Germany – this much is certain." (GS III 461) At the same time, however, he is still convinced that, in spite of growing anti-Semitism and the lack of effective organized response from abroad, "The Jewish Question is not essential." (Ibid.) Seven months later, when the first concentration camps are already operative, his perception appears to have changed little. Noting that "The Nazis are up and about to compromise *everything* that really matters", he still does not believe that "the catastrophe will happen right now", nor that "the present form of government in Germany will endure" (GS III 478). As for the Jewish Question, although it remains for him essentially a paradigm of the plight of humanity as a whole, his concern has acquired an almost religious tone: "in my old age, I may become pious again..." (Ibid.)

By June 1934, shortly before the Night of the Long Knives, the blinders have fallen off. In a letter written from Denmark, Klein dramatically corrects his own previous view of Nazism as part of a more general anti-liberal movement: "National Socialism has only one founding principle: anti-Semitism." (GS III 512) Interestingly enough, he presents this fundamental opposition in a theological cast: "It is indeed the first *decisive* battle between that which from of old bears the name of God and

godlessness ('Gott-losigkeit'). There's no doubt about that. The battle is decisive, because it takes place on a battleground determined by *Judaism*: National Socialism is "perverted Judaism", and nothing else: Judaism without God, i.e., a true *contradictio in adiecto*" (GS III 512-513).

In the light of the predicament thus understood, Klein goes on to criticize Zionism for its pedestrian nationalism and its refusal to come to terms with the question of its own Judaic origins. This assessment provokes a spirited response from Strauss: although he agrees that Nazism is secularized Judaism, he rebukes his friend for his "theistic" turn (GS III 527), insisting that "there is no need to 'crawl back to the cross', I mean, to speak of 'God'" (GS III 516). Subsequently, he goes on to outline his position vis-à-vis Jewish orthodox faith with remarkable frankness:

And even if we were to be huddled into the ghetto once again and thus be compelled to go to the synagogue and to observe the law in its entirety, then this too we would have to do as philosophers, i.e., with a *reserve* (*Vorbehalt*) which, if ever so tacit, must for that very reason be all the more determined. (...) That revelation and philosophy are at one in their opposition to sophistry, i.e., the whole of modern philosophy, I deny as little as you do. However, this doesn't change anything regarding the fundamental difference between philosophy and revelation: philosophy, while it may perhaps be brought under one roof with faith, prayer and preaching, can never be brought into agreement with them. (GS III 516)

In the same letter, this distinction is subsequently reiterated on a different plane. Rejoining Klein's critical remarks on Zionism, Strauss appears to indicate that philosophical reserve regarding religious orthodoxy necessarily finds its counterpart in adherence to "strictly political Zionism":

It is not without good reason that I have always been a "Zionist". In its motivation, Zionism is (...) the most *respectable* Jewish movement - and, for that matter, only political Zionism, not 'cultural' Zionism. And, in this respect, there is only one alternative: political Zionism or orthodoxy. (GS III 517)

In this last remark, Strauss rehearses a thesis he had vigorously defended in a number of publications written at the end of the 1920s, to wit that "political Zionism is the organization of unbelief within Judaism", and that "Political Zionism, wishing to ground itself radically, must ground itself as unbelieving (*sich als ungläubig begründen*). The conflict between political Zionism and its radical opponents can only be conducted as a battle between belief and unbelief."⁵ Thus, it is hardly surprising that his Zionist writings of the 20s often voice sharp criticism of contemporary Jewish orthodoxy.⁶

Taken together, both passages make it clear that philosophic *unbelief* underlies both Strauss's thought and his action. Moreover, as the first passage shows, this unbelief must be distinguished from the unbelief characteristic of modern philosophy, which is disparaged as "sophistry". In spite of their forcefulness, however, these assertions leave at least two questions unresolved. To begin with, Strauss' insistence that there is no need to speak of God in addressing the Jewish Question stands in contrast to his own Zionist publications of the 1920's, many of which deal with the theological-political problem explicitly and at considerable length. Second, and more important, it is

not clear how his allegiance to un-modern unbelief correlates with his adherence to a political movement that, as his own study of Spinoza's *Critique of Religion* had led him to conclude, is heir to modern unbelief and "sophistry".⁷

Apparently, Strauss soon became aware of this latter problem. In *Philosophy and Law*, published in 1935, he characterizes political Zionism as "a resolution that is indeed highly honorable but not, in earnest and in the long run, adequate".⁸ Not surprisingly, this dismissal is welcomed by Klein, who had remained unconvinced by his friend's earlier statement.⁹ Zionism, Klein had upheld, was incapable of facing "the problem of the uniqueness of the Jewish people", a problem that could not be understood "without the history of the Jews and thus without - 'God'" (GS III 519). It is not clear whether this remark had any influence on Strauss's eventual change of perception. However this may be, it is perhaps not amiss to point out that in the autobiographical writings of the mid-'60's, Strauss's critique of political Zionism uses arguments reminiscent of Klein's initial objections.¹⁰

Moreover, in his epistolary comments on *Philosophy and Law*, Klein provides an important clue to the understanding of a book that is now generally recognized as a turning point in Strauss' intellectual odyssey. Referring to the introduction, where Strauss points out the Enlightenment's failure to decisively refute revelation, Klein asks: "In any case, *following* your presentation, one could come to the result: why not orthodoxy?" (GS III 539) That, indeed, is the question bound to arise from Strauss's key contention in *Philosophy and Law* that the "intellectual probity" which he identifies as the "ultimate justification" of the Enlightenment, is at the same time the fateful heir of biblical morality.¹¹ If the conflict between orthodoxy and Enlightenment ultimately presents us with the choice between biblical faith and its rebellious derivative, why not choose the original?

In his letter, Klein, however, immediately goes to some length in answering his own question, by pointing to a "very, very important" distinction, made by Strauss in a footnote, between "the new probity" and "the old love of truth" (Ibid.) In the same footnote, Strauss stresses: "if one makes atheism, which is admittedly not demonstrable, into a positive dogmatic premise, then the probity expressed by it is something very different from the love of truth".¹² Although the "old love of truth", curiously enough, is not mentioned anywhere else in the book, its inconspicuousness belies its importance.¹³ If anything, it indicates that Strauss envisages a third way besides the impossible alternative of orthodoxy or dogmatic atheism. In this respect, his choice of words deserves our attention, especially in a book devoted entirely to unearthing the connection between medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy and Plato. Having abandoned his adherence to the modern unbelief of political Zionism, and seeking to uphold his un-modern unbelief and "zetetic" scepticism in the face of orthodoxy and the dogmatically conscientious atheism of modern philosophy, it seems that Strauss is seeking to recover the *eros* of ancient, Platonic-Socratic philosophy.¹⁴

II.

This impression is reinforced when we turn to consider the development of Strauss's scholarly research as it is reflected in the exchange with Klein. At the moment of their debate on Nazism, Judaism and Zionism, Strauss is living in England and studying Hobbes. In his reports to Klein, he argues that Hobbes should be considered equal or even superior to Descartes as a founder of modernity: he surpasses his French contemporary in radicalness and originality, insofar as his critique of aristocratic virtue supplies the moral and anthropological basis to Descartes' theoretical revolution. In support of this claim, Strauss advances the well-known thesis which is developed at length in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*: the foundations of Hobbes's political philosophy were laid long before his espousal of the Cartesian scientific paradigm, and involved a momentous turn to history in the interest of the applicability of the philosophical precepts inherited from the Aristotelian tradition.¹⁵

However, the correspondence throws additional light on Strauss's intentions with regard to a point that is never made fully explicit in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*. As Klein recognizes, the probing quest for the roots of Hobbes's thought is conducted with the aim of reaching the fundamental level where a direct confrontation becomes possible between Hobbes and *Socrates*, between the father of modern political philosophy and the father of pre-modern political philosophy.¹⁶ In the book this confrontation is replaced by a confrontation between Hobbes and *Plato* (and, to a lesser extent, *Aristotle*). A closer look at the argument, however, reveals that Plato's position is identified by questions that are unmistakably Socratic: the question of "what is good and fitting", as well as the question "as to the aim of the State".¹⁷ As a result, the conclusion of this confrontation can be transposed in terms of the confrontation as it was initially intended: Hobbes attempted to repeat the Socratic founding without understanding the full depth and complexity of the underlying Socratic question regarding the right way of life and the best state.

Of course, this criticism implies that, at this point, Strauss has already developed something like a new and unconventional interpretation of the Socratic-Platonic position. This, indeed, becomes apparent from a letter to Klein: just as in the case of Hobbes, he held it possible to gain access to Hobbes's thought as a whole by starting from his politics, he now asserts: "I believe that the question regarding the right way of life and the right state, as well as the answer to it, does not depend on answering the question regarding the being of the Ideas (...)." ¹⁸ Furthermore, he suggests that understanding Socratic-Platonic politics requires recognition of its pre-modern, undogmatic character, as well as a careful reading of the Platonic dialogues: "In any case, I believe it to be an essential part of Plato's concept of Sophistry that the dogmatic denial of cosmic order is the basis of all sophistic politics, while the right politics is not based on the *pre-supposition* of cosmic order (compare the plan of *Protagoras* with the plan of the *Ti-maeus*)." (GS III 529)

Other letters of the same period (1937-1938) confirm the impression that Strauss has begun to rediscover

Plato's art of writing as the key to understanding his dialogues.¹⁹ This breakthrough, moreover, is accompanied by a similar revolution in his understanding of medieval philosophy, especially Maimonides. Earlier on, in *Philosophy and Law*, he had concluded - albeit hesitatingly - that the Platonism of the *falasifa* lacked the "sharpness, originality, depth and - ambiguity of Platonic politics".²⁰ As he interpreted their position at that time, they held that prophecy - ultimately superior to philosophy - had answered and fulfilled the Platonic requirement of an ideal law, thereby blunting the "questioning inquiry" underlying that requirement.

With the incipient recovery of exotericism, however, his view has completely reversed. Instead of blunting and modifying it, he now finds, the *falasifa* actually *preserve* and *continue* the Platonic inquiry and its equivocality. Writing from New York, where he has travelled from England to explore job opportunities at the beginning of 1938, he informs his friend:

Maimonides becomes ever more exciting. He was truly a free spirit. (...) The crucial question for him was not creation or eternity of the world (for he was convinced of the eternity of the world), but rather, whether the ideal lawgiver must be a prophet. And this question, he answered - in the negative, as did Farabi before him and Averroes at the same time. (GS III 545)

Like Farabi and Averroes, Maimonides availed himself of Plato's rhetoric in order to conceal and protect his philosophical unbelief. In the letters following this initial avowal, Strauss reports with mounting enthusiasm and admiration about his exploration of the *Guide*, in an amazing crescendo of discoveries. "You cannot imagine the infinite cunning and irony with which Maimonides treats 'religion'." (GS III 549) In this respect, Maimonides is even seen to surpass the hero of Strauss's youth: "The *Guide* is the most extraordinary book I, at least, know. That which N[ietzsche] had in mind in writing the *Zarathustra*, namely a parody of the Bible, M[aimonides] has accomplished on a much grander scale." (GS III 553)

At the same time, Strauss is well aware of the controversy his interpretation is bound to stir up: "When I let this bomb explode in a few years (...) a great battle will flare up" (GS III 550). The stakes involved, he notes, are momentous. Reflecting on Maimonides's stature for contemporary Judaism as a mediator between the biblical and the philosophical tradition, he notes: "the demonstration that Maim[onides] was *simply* not a Jew in his faith - [will turn] out to be of considerable significance for the present: the fundamental irreconcilability of philosophy and Judaism (expressed "clearly" in the second chapter of *Genesis*) will be demonstrated *ad oculos*" (Ibid.). In view of the possible consequences, it does not come entirely as a surprise to see Strauss entertaining second thoughts concerning his own strategy, perhaps comparing it to Maimonides's Platonic tactic. Reverting to Nietzsche's equally Platonic query - "when I hold the truth in my fist, may I open the fist?" - , he observes: "our situation becomes ever more medieval, the difference between freedom of thinking and freedom of expression ever more visible. That is a kind of "progress"" (Ibid.).²¹ At any rate, the prospects are not entirely bleak, he notes not without a

touch of ironic self-pity: ‘In short, I often shudder at what I have brought about by my interpretation. The end of it will be that I, poor devil, must ladle out the broth that diabolical magician of the 12th century has poured out for me’ (GS III 554).

This, however, is only the beginning of what soon turns out to be a consummate banquet. In rapid succession, Strauss begins to uncover the art of writing in a host of Greek writers, not only in philosophers such as Plato and Xenophon (as well as Aristotle), but also in historians like Herodotus and Thucydides, as well as in comic, tragic and epic poets, such as Aristophanes, Sophocles, Parmenides, Hesiod and even Homer. In a postscript, he tells Klein: ‘I begin to have an inkling of how *misunderstood* (‘unverstanden’) the ancients are’ (GS III 558). To give a detailed account of his findings is beyond the scope of this paper; moreover, many elements can be found in his works and need not be repeated here. Hence, I will limit myself to one or two points that remain somewhat oblique or ambiguous in his publications.

Compared to his published interpretations, to begin with, Strauss’ reports to Klein are far more candid regarding the unorthodox and irreverent perspective of the said authors. What unites the latter, as they emerge in his investigations, is a veiled but deeply critical view of political life, its characteristic ideals of courage (*andreia*) and gentlemanliness (*kalokagathia*), and its concomitant understanding of the Beautiful, the Just, and the Good. By means of ironic presentations of speeches and deeds, they reveal to the perceptive reader the lack of wisdom and moderation evinced by major political actors and dignitaries such as Pericles and Cyrus. Surreptitiously counteracting the sway of opinion, law and myth through the judicious use of opinion, law and myth, each in his writings aims at providing a true education (*paideia*) to wisdom.²²

Nevertheless, the correspondence leaves many questions unanswered regarding Strauss’ understanding of the quarrel between philosophy and poetry. Though he recognizes the implicit claim of the *Symposium* that Socratic-Platonic philosophy merges tragedy and comedy in a way that transcends and surpasses both, he argues the basic identity of the Platonic and the Xenophontic Socrates by approximating both to the wily Odysseus.²³ The fundamental question of how the origins of Socratic philosophy are related to pre-Socratic poetry, especially Homer and Hesiod, has been explored with great competence and acumen by one of Strauss’ most gifted pupils, Seth Bernardete. The latter, in a tribute to his teacher, called this question “the most puzzling as well as the most unexpected aspect in Strauss’ recovery of Plato and philosophy”.²⁴ In fact, Strauss himself had provoked this puzzlement and surprise, when he wrote the following to Bernardete: “Some day my belief that Homer started it all and that there was a continuous tradition from Homer to the end of the 18th century will be vindicated.”²⁵

III.

In Bernardete’s account, we also find the following remark: ‘There was at least one contemporary of Strauss who had an equally uncanny eye for the unnoticed but significant detail - what he noticed was surprisingly dif-

ferent from what Strauss did’.²⁶ Although the contemporary remains nameless, the index of the book teaches us that Bernardete is referring to his other teacher, Jacob Klein.²⁷ His judgment, moreover, is certainly pertinent: Klein’s talent as an interpreter of pre-modern philosophy and poetry is beyond question, as a brief look at his books suffices to show. While Plato takes pride of place, we also find careful and penetrating readings of Aristotle, Homer, Virgil, and Dante.²⁸ In addition, we owe to Klein a number of treatises on the problem of speech and the art of writing that are a valuable complement to Strauss’ observations.²⁹

However, Bernardete is equally justified in stressing the difference between the two friends as to the yield of their interpretations, in particular with regard to Plato. A curious division of labor seems to exist between the two friends: whereas Klein’s published interpretations include the *Meno*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Parmenides*, *Philebus*, *Ion*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*, Strauss’ printed studies are devoted to the *Laws*, *Republic*, *Statesman*, *Minos*, *Euthydemus*, *Crito*, *Apology*, *Euthyphro* and *Symposium* (the latter two, admittedly, were not prepared for publication). As one can see, the only dialogue that would allow a comparison of their interpretations is the *Statesman*.

Regardless of whether this division of labour was in any way intentional on the part of both friends or not, it does allow a preliminary determination of the difference in their respective approaches of Plato. While Strauss’ focus is clearly on the ‘political’ dialogues, Klein concentrates on those dialogues that, for want of a better term, one might call ‘scientific’, as they are traditionally understood to deal mainly with cosmology, mathematics, ontology and metaphysics. In this respect, the strongly divergent ways in which they approach the Platonic doctrine of Ideas are illustrative. Klein, who devotes considerable energy to elucidating the problem of *methexis* [partaking] and of the *koinonia tôn eidôn* [community of Ideas], proceeds mainly within the horizon of mathematics and, guided by Aristotle’s critical comments, interprets it as an ontology.

Strauss, on the other hand, raises this topic only with great caution and reticence, giving precedence to the Socratic question regarding the best life and the best state.³⁰ Earlier on, I quoted his assertion to Klein ‘that the question regarding the right way of life and the right state, as well as the answer to it, does not depend on answering the question regarding the being of the Ideas (...)’ (GS III 529). Klein, at any rate, seems to have held a direct approach to the latter question to be both possible and preferable. This difference recurs more conspicuously when Klein’s study of *Greek Mathematical Thought* is published in 1934. In a letter praising the work, Strauss concedes that his friend’s ontological interpretation renders problematic the ‘political’ reading of Plato. However, he immediately qualifies his assent unequivocally:

In my view, you understand the “Good” too neutrally, too “philosophically”. More important than disagreements about great and small, hard and soft etc. are disagreements about the just and the unjust etc. Just as the latter are the primary impulse (*Ansatz*) of philosophy, so the Idea of the Good is the principle that must be interpreted starting from this impulse. (GS III 534)

Strauss, it appears, is more persistent than Klein in reading Plato's dialogues in the light of Socrates' second sailing, his turning away from the direct study of nature to the study of nature as it is reflected in human opinion about the most pressing human issues. Thus, two years later, in his book on Hobbes, he asserts that Plato 'opposes to "physiology" not an "ontology" but dialectic'.³¹

This difference between a 'political' and a 'scientific' orientation recurs when we turn to their respective understanding of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. For example, it is striking to see Klein and Strauss viewing one and the same problem - the importance of optics for Hobbes and Descartes - from different perspectives, mathematics and physics on the one hand, anthropology and politics on the other.³² Accordingly, Klein's view of the modern side of the quarrel focuses on the founders of modern natural science (e.g. Descartes, Leibniz, Copernicus, Stevin, Vieta, Brache), whereas political philosophers (Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, and Rousseau) are predominant in Strauss' outlook.

In spite of these differences, however, their accounts of the quarrel are in profound agreement on at least one decisive point: modern philosophy was founded on and in opposition to pre-modern philosophy on the basis of an insufficient understanding of the latter. In his book on Hobbes, Strauss attempts to show that the latter, deluded by the tradition, took for granted the possibility of political philosophy and thus failed to regain the level of Socratic inquiry, where this possibility is the object of permanent re-examination. Similarly, Klein, in his study of Greek mathematics and afterward, never ceases to point out that the founders of modern science, deluded by the tradition, took for granted the possibility of science as they opposed what they considered to be their new and true science to what they disparaged as the old and false science. In modern science, he notes:

(...) the "natural" foundations are replaced by a *science already in existence*, whose principles are denied, whose methods are rejected, whose "knowledge" is mocked - but whose place within human life as a whole is placed beyond all doubt. *Scientia* appears as an inalienable human good, which may indeed become debased and distorted, but whose worth is beyond question.³³

Moreover, in the same context, Klein provides a memorable characterization of pre-modern science, as well as an outline of his task as a philosopher and historian in recovering it by reopening the quarrel. Without doubt, his friend was in full agreement:

Here science stands in original and immediate opposition to a nonscientific attitude which yet is its soul and in which it recognizes its own roots. In attempting to raise itself above this nonscientific attitude, science preserves intact these given foundations. It is therefore both possible and necessary to learn to see Greek science from the point of view of this, its "natural" basis. In its sum-total Greek science represents the whole complex of those "natural" cognitions which are implied in a prescientific activity moving within the realm of opinion and supported by a preconceptual understanding of the world.³⁴

Whether in the guise of the natural cosmic order or in that of natural right, what binds Klein and Strauss is the problem of nature in all its attractive elusiveness. In all of their interpretations of pre-modern and modern thinkers - but also in their shared preoccupation with the question of liberal education - both are constantly mindful of it. That is how they pay their respects to the importance of returning to the beginnings of science. Although this importance had been first impressed upon them by the phenomenology of Husserl and his radical pupil Heidegger, its full dimensions only became visible to them through Plato.³⁵ In this respect, Klein beautifully and truthfully seizes the heart of their friendship in the dedication he added to Strauss' copy of *Greek Mathematical Thought*: beyond their agreements and disagreements, he writes, is the certitude that 'Plato's dialogue leads us out of the darkness and into the light' (GS III 532).³⁶

Notes

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Plato's Sophist* (tr. by R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer), Indiana University Press 1997.

² See Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Lowith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse*, Princeton University Press, 2001.

³ Leo Strauss and Jacob Klein, "A Giving of Accounts", *The College* (Annapolis and Santa Fe) 22, no. 1 (Apr.), 2. Cf. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, New York: Schocken, 1965, 10: "with the questioning of traditional philosophy the traditional understanding of the tradition becomes questionable".

⁴ Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3: Hobbes politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften - Briefe*, edited by H. and W. Meier, Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler 2001. References to this volume are marked with the abbreviation "GS III". References to vol. 1 and 2 of the *Gesammelte Schriften* are marked with "GS I" and "GS II", respectively. All translations are the sole responsibility of the present author.

⁵ Cf. GS I 445, 433.

⁶ Cf. "Ecclesia militans" and "Biblische Geschichte und Wissenschaft", in GS II 351-356 and 357-361.

⁷ Cf. Strauss's Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. See also 'Das Testament Spinozas', GS I 415-422.

⁸ Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors* (tr. E. Adler), New York: State University of New York Press, 1995, 38.

⁹ GS III 539.

¹⁰ Cf. Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 141-143 and 319-320.

¹¹ Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 37-38.

¹² Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 37, n. 13. See also letter 25a to Krüger, GS III 414.

¹³ Cf. GS III 538.

¹⁴ To Krüger, Strauss writes '... that I cannot believe, [and] that therefore I must search for a possibility to *live* without faith. There are two possibilities of this kind: the ancient, i.e., Socratic Platonic, and the modern, i.e., that of the Enlightenment (...)' (GS III 414). Cf. GS III 380. Cf. GS II 610.

¹⁵ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1936, 81-85. Cf. GS III 494, 517-518, 528.

¹⁶ Cf. GS III 420. This is rendered with full clarity in Strauss's correspondence with Gerhard Krüger (cf. letters 13, 21, 21a, 25c, 25d). See also Strauss, *Die Religionskritik des Hobbes*, GS III 270-274.

¹⁷ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 152-153.

¹⁸ GS III 529. Cf. GS III 527.

¹⁹ Cf. GS III 536; 542.

²⁰ Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, p. 75.

²¹ Compare the introduction to *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1952. See also GS III 586.

²² Cf. GS III 560, 561-562, 567-568, 569, 574, 576, 580, 582-583, 584, 586. Regarding the *Republic*, he acquaints Klein with his discovery 'that its actual theme is the question regarding the relationship between the political life and the philosophical life, and that it is devoted to a radical critique and rejection of political life' (GS III 568).

²³ Cf. GS III 574, 576.

²⁴ S. Benardete, *The Argument of the Action: Essays on Greek Poetry and Philosophy* (ed. R. Burger and M. Davis), Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2000, 415-416. See also, by the same author, *The Bow and the Lyre: A Platonic Reading of the Odyssey*, Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield 1997.

²⁵ Quoted in M. Davis, *Wonderlust: Ruminations on Liberal Education*, South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2006, 136

²⁶ Benardete, *The Argument of the Action*, 408.

²⁷ Benardete, *The Argument of the Action*, 428.

²⁸ J. Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno*, The University of North Carolina Press 1965; *Plato's Trilogy: Theaetetus, the Sophist, and the Statesman*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1977; *Lectures and Essays* (ed. R. B. Williamson and E. Zuckerman), Annapolis, MD.: St. John's College Press 1985. Klein's study of Plato and Aristotle already began in the 1930's, as becomes apparent in his first book, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origins of Algebra*, Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press 1968, originally published between 1934 and 1936.

²⁹ Cf. 'The Problem and the Art of Writing' and 'Speech, Its Strength and Its Weaknesses', in *Lectures and Essays*, 139-156 and 361-374.

³⁰ Cf. Strauss, *The City and Man*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, 119.

³¹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 145.

³² Cf. GS III 496-497, 498, 526-527.

³³ Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, 119. Cf. *Lectures and Essays*, 5: 'The claim to communicate true science, true knowledge, necessarily took its bearings from the firmly-established edifice of traditional science'. Cf. *ibid.*, 10, 64, 84.

³⁴ Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, 119.

³⁵ Compare their respective critical tributes to Husserl: Klein's 'Phenomenology and the History of Science', in *Essays and Lectures*, 65-84, and Strauss's 'Philosophy as a Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy', in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (ed. with an introduction by T. L. Pangle), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 29-37.

³⁶ I am indebted to Robert Howse and Daniel Tanguay for valuable comments and remarks on previous drafts of this paper.

Repetition of Antiquity at the Peak of Modernity as Phenomenological Problem

Iacopo Chiaravalli

Abstract: One of the distinctive features of Modernity is that Modernity represents in itself a problem for philosophers, who have called themselves modern. If this is true for philosophers proud to be modern such as Descartes, Kant or Hegel, this is even truer for those thinkers, who see in Modernity the cause of the contemporary Western cultural crisis. The latter is the case of Jacob Klein, whose reflection will be the subject-matter of the present work. In particular, what I want to point out is: a) the role of the idea of a “natural” way of dealing with the world in Klein’s first masterpiece *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origins of Algebra*, and b) its origin in Edmund Husserl’s and Martin Heidegger’s phenomenological thought. My ground thesis is that there is a strong connection between Klein’s analysis of Modernity and the phenomenological tradition.

Keywords: Husserl, Heidegger, Klein, Antiquity, Modernity, Naturality, modern Science

1. Husserl’s Phenomenology and the natural world¹

In order for a philosophical analysis to be called phenomenological, it has not to hide experience with concepts. Particularly famous is Husserl’s formula *zu den Sachen selbst!*² taken from the *Introduction* to the *Logical Investigations*. Unfortunately this expression has been totally misunderstood. It has been interpreted by scholars as a plea for absolute idealism that, attempting to open consciousness to the world, closes the world into consciousness. In order to avoid such a misleading, but in any case so commonly accepted, interpretation, I think we had better read another passage if we want to understand what phenomenology is. In the *Preface* to the *Logical Investigations*, in a little biographical sketch, Husserl explains how and why he came to be interested in the logic: «... sah ich mich in immer steigendem Maße zu allgemeinen kritischen Reflexionen über das Wesen der Logik und zumal über das Verhältnis zwischen der Subjektivität des Erkennens und der Objektivität des Erkenntnisinhaltes gedrängt»³. These words are at the very beginning of Husserl’s first masterpiece, in the only passage in the whole text in which Husserl speaks of himself. Actually Husserl is defining here the programme and the aim of his work, that I could resume as: how is it possible that from subjective representations we gain knowledge of objects, such as mathematics and science in general, totally inde-

pendent from us? This question lies at the very heart of *Logical Investigations*, determining their structure as well as their contents. Husserl’s great discovery at the end of 19th century was not phenomenology, but the independence of the laws of logic from the process of knowledge acquisition. The *Prolegomena zu einer reinen Logik* are in this sense the most important part of the work, since in them Husserl tries to show – against psychologism – that objective truths are possible and necessary in every epistemological strategy. Phenomenology arose from Husserl’s concern with the issue of proving our access to objective truths. Far from being the source of his criticism of psychologism, it was rather its consequence. Only after the publication of *Logical Investigations* (more or less from 1904) Husserl realized that he had discovered a new way of dealing with consciousness: from that moment on, phenomenology takes the central role that will keep till the *Crisis of European Science*.

The central change in Husserl’s thought follows a change in his understanding of the meaning of experience. This concept assumes its real phenomenological aspect in the 1907 lectures on constitution of space. In that context, Husserl undertakes a criticism of another way of understanding experience: that of Neo-kantians⁴. Cohen in particular had proposed a notion of experience based on the possibility to comprehend the perceptual given inside scientific laws. From the Neo-Kantian point of view, the perceptual multiplicity of the world cannot be intended as an object unless it is ordered through scientific categories, i.e. through reason in its historical objectivity. Representations have to be part of a conceptual construction and only insofar as they are constructed by concepts they could be objects for us. Construction is not a casual word here. It derives specifically from Cohen’s interpretation of Kant’s *Critique of pure Reason*. In fact in the second edition of his *Kant’s Theory of Experience*, Cohen uses construction to refer to every possible activity of transcendental thought. In so doing, he makes construction the peculiar feature of criticism and, consequently, of all modern philosophy⁵.

Criticizing Neo-kantians means for Husserl criticizing this notion of construction as the source of objectivity⁶. According to Husserl, the weak point in the Neo-Kantian epistemological theory is the idea that the given needs a concept in order to be considered an object. This stems from the fact that Neo-Kantians equate things with objects, without noticing that in order to be an object a thing has to undergo an extremely complicated process of con-

stitution. Since experience has in itself the conditions for its own constitution sense data are not just raw material for a synthetizing concept. The Neo-Kantian account remains bound to the everyday account of the world, according to which our environment is full of things. This presupposition, that of presupposing the existence of the world as a world of things, is what Husserl calls from the first volume of the *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* on natural attitude⁷. Natural attitude is the basic component of our world. Our everyday life is grounded in the unmade decision of trusting the existence of the world, i.e. that the world and the objects in it have existence independently from any consciousness whatsoever. Natural attitude makes it possible for us to live a life; more radically, it is the very basis of any activity in the world.

Particularly important in this sense is the fact that every scientist has the natural attitude as his way of life. But that is not all about science. In an extremely interesting chapter of the second volume of his *Ideas*, Husserl points out that within natural attitude there are two main possibilities of dealing with the world: the personalistic and the naturalistic attitude⁸. I am interested in the latter. Naturalistic attitude is that of a scientist that presupposes nature as a separate field of reality, that we can know through mathematical formula and physical laws. At every moment, a scientist must presuppose not only the existence of a world of things, but a specific kind of reality: a mathematized nature. Both natural and naturalistic attitude share the same approach to reality: they do not look directly at experience, but projects concepts on it, and, in so doing, they remain always alone with themselves. Natural or naturalistic thought is a thinking closed in its products, according to which truth is just what thought is able to construct. Modern tradition is essentially committed to this tantalizing predicament: a mythology of construction which can never grasp the ultimate layer of immediate experience. Grasping such layer is the aim of phenomenology.

Overcoming natural attitude means in this sense overcoming Modernity as a whole. Phenomenology must put aside the basic presupposition of modern tradition, i.e. leave the presupposition of the existence of a world of things as starting point of philosophical reflection. Husserl's methodological strategy is well-known and it consists in transcendental reduction. This is an imaginative work of the philosopher⁹, in order to put aside all the concepts normally covering experience "as a dress", as Husserl would say¹⁰. When Husserl speaks of bracketing the objects what he means is just a process, through which our presupposition of the existence of the world becomes no longer important for us. We look at the world as if its existence would have no importance for us, and in so doing we discover the reign of transcendental subjectivity. This is the layer of the original self-constitution of the object. It is important to properly understand what Husserl means with the notion of "self-constituted object". Insofar as they are *self-constituted*, they have in themselves the figurative structure that ensures their unity and recognition and insofar as they are *self-constituted*, they need the recognition of the sense-giving attention of a consciousness. Husserl's rigorous science aims at describing the ways in which the processes of self-

constitution of the objects take place; consequently, it can grasp a layer of experience totally prelogical and so not conceptual.

2. Heidegger and the Greek world as natural world

Heidegger's first philosophical interest was not the problem of being, but the epistemological question about the reality of the world, that is, the quarrel between idealism and realism. This is the background of Heidegger's early thought and the basis for his early phenomenological conception of the relation between experience and concept. The discovery of Husserl's phenomenology reveals to Heidegger the impossibility of solving the problem of the existence of the world in Neo-Kantian terms. Thanks to phenomenology Heidegger understands that the idealism-realism problem is not a real problem. This means that it is not a problem born in the concreteness of experience, but a question raised by the modern world and therefore inevitably bound to the modern epistemic forms of knowledge: realism and idealism are products of Galilei's intellectual revolution in the XVII century¹¹. Mathematical physics determines each and every philosophical approach grown up in modernity. This means that every approach (including Husserl's phenomenological method) is determined by modern scientific conceptuality, and therefore it is what Heidegger calls *das Theoretische*. But if all modern philosophy is a product of the modern scientific world, how is it possible to realize a real phenomenology of experience, i.e. a consideration of the world able to grasp the *Vortheoretische*, that establishes the possibility of every conceptual approach? Husserl's answer to that problem was transcendental reduction, but from Heidegger's point of view transcendental reduction is not a way free from modern prejudices. Actually, through reduction Husserl aims to grasp the *Urfaktizität* of consciousness, i.e. the phenomena in their *Selbstgebung*. So *Gegebenheit* is the pillar of every strategy within the Husserlian method, but – as Heidegger notices – the fact that something is given to a consciousness implicitly presupposes the distinction between subject and object, which is a typical modern approach to epistemological questions. But if phenomenological ontology has to make no use of transcendental reduction, which way is left open to Heidegger in order to grasp Being in its authenticity? In order to answer this question I have to say something more about Husserl.

As is well-known, the subject-matter of the first logical investigation is a phenomenological account of the relation between sign and its meaning. Before dealing with meaningful language, Husserl draws an all-important distinction between *Ausdruck*, expression, and *Anzeige*, indication. The difference is that only in the first case the sign has a meaning in a proper sense. If I say "book" these four letters refer to a sense that is their proper sense, while I presuppose a conceptual link between the sign and its meaning. In opposition to expression, indication has not a proper meaning. What is peculiar about an indication is its capacity to show an object without the help of a conceptual framework. In the relation between a flag and a nation there is no concept, but an immediate reference.

While Husserl was interested in expression, indication gains a central methodological role in Heidegger's early writings in the form of what Heidegger calls *formale Anzeige*. Formal indication makes it possible to refer to experience through a linguistic structure which has nothing to do with concepts and consequently with construction¹². A peculiar feature of formal indication is worth noting: it must refer directly to experience. Otherwise it would not be what it is, i.e. what can bring us in contact with the original experience of being-in-the-world. Therefore no concept elaborated by Modern philosophy can be used as formal indication leading to immediacy. On this point Heidegger follows Natorp's interpretation of the history of philosophy, according to which the peculiar feature of modernity is the absolute sovereignty of construction over every other form of objectivity. From a neokantian point of view this is the great theoretical achievement of Modernity over Antiquity; on the contrary, Heidegger inverts the perspective. Construction is precisely the problem of modernity that must be overcome, and only ancient wisdom offers us such a possibility. As Heidegger writes in a 1921 lecture:

Das Echte ist immer neu, weil das Alte immer in irgendeinem Sinne für uns unecht geworden ist. - Ich finde das Echte nur, sofern das Alte mir dabei ist, eine Strecke weit in Rückgang von ihm mitgeht. Es ist als Vollzugsmäßiges Motiv im Philosophieren immer irgendwie in existentieller Notwendigkeit da¹³.

Modern scientific revolution built itself on an already present cultural paradigm, that of Greek science. Being modern, we understand science as a theoretical construction through concepts. In opposition to modern, the ancients understood the world in its immediacy. In this sense Plato's or Aristotle's comprehension of the world was founded immediately in a direct world-experience; this is the reason why their texts pave the way for discovering the authenticity of original being. Greek philosophy originates from an original and non-conceptual look at the world in its worldliness and therefore it is *natural*. In Heidegger's early reflections the word natural has a great importance, because it justifies the attention Heidegger devotes to Plato and Aristotle, but its meaning is far from being clear. What is clear is that natural is the direct opposite to construction as the following passages states: «So wie nun das erste εἶδος der τέχνη bzw. die ποιήσις, einen Ausblick auf das Verständnis von οὐσία gewährte und uns die Gelegenheit gab, den natürlichen – konstruktionsfreien – Sinn von Sein bei den Griechen herauszuheben, [...]»¹⁴.

But the real problem is: which place is actually that of Greek natural consciousness in the construction of metaphysics, so which kind of interpretation of being did the Greeks have? Explaining Aristotle's conception of being, Heidegger says: «Der fundamentale Wert dieser Analysen liegt darin, daß *Aristoteles gegenüber irgendwelchen theoretischen Konstruktionen ausgegangen ist von dem, was man zunächst sieht*»¹⁵. First of all it must be said that the Greeks are always seen in opposition to the moderns and so if Heidegger speaks positively about them is always in order to bring to light modern conceptual roots. But that does not mean that Greeks are the right side of history and they are not, precisely because of their im-

mediate naturalty. Our surrounding world is a world of objects and their naturalty is to be used by human beings. Therefore, man naturally looks at the world as a world of objects to be used. An object can be used only if it becomes an instrument and it can be understood as such if and only if it is present. The Greek world is the world of daily life experience, and that's why it is called natural. It is exactly what Husserl would have called the natural attitude toward the world and existence. We saw that Husserl intended with naturalty an attitude toward reality that presupposes the presence of reality as being independent from consciousness. Like the Husserlian natural attitude, Heidegger's greek natural consciousness takes the world for granted as a presence and it is the ground for every philosophical position in Antiquity. In this sense it could be said that Heidegger uses Husserl's transcendental concepts as a set of historical descriptive categories.

The Greek natural world is the basic level of Greek daily life experience and Greek philosophy tries again and again to overcome this natural attitude, but in so doing it remains bound inevitably to the naturalty of its starting point. More specifically if the natural world of Greeks sees beings as present instruments for our daily life, Greek philosophy interprets being as presence. This justifies the aim of Heidegger's phenomenological strategy in interpreting Greek texts. What he is interested in is not a reconstruction of the Greek mind (as could be the case with Jaeger's work on Aristotle's development), but the discovery *through* Greek concepts used as formal indication of the basic categories of existence. If Greeks are not the original itself, they are the door to originality.

3. Klein and Heidegger

It seems trivial to say that there is a relation between Heidegger's phenomenology and Jacob Klein's critique of modern symbolic mathematics, but actually we have no sure evidence about this matter. It is really difficult to determine which among Heidegger's lectures Klein actually attended to and so, even if a debt with Heidegger is evident, it is really complicated to state it historically and conceptually. What we can take for granted is that Klein attended to Heidegger's lectures in 1924, in particular the course about the basic concepts of aristotelian philosophy¹⁶. Klein studied at Marburg-University until 1924, when he came back to Berlin. But he continued to attend lectures in Marburg until the end of twenties. I assume it to be very probable that Klein was in Heidegger's classroom until 1927-28. In my opinion what can be affirmed about the Heidegger-Klein relationship is that Heidegger taught Klein how to read a greek text without modern prejudices against it. First of all this means that we have to find evidence that Klein was attracted by Heidegger's approach to ancient philosophy and that Heideggerian phenomenology is the point of view from which Klein learns to see the Greeks.

As far as I can see, we have three main statements about this point. The first is by Klein himself. In a letter to Strauss, Klein says:

Du wirst wahrscheinlich fragen: aber die Arbeit [*Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*] war doch schon

vor einem Jahr fertig? Ja und nein. Damals war der ganze antike Teil schon *vorhanden*, der in sich ein abgeschlossenes Ganze darstellte. Inzwischen ist das 16. Jahrh. hinzugekommen. Und damit erst der Sinn des Ganzen¹⁷.

This statement says just that the first part of *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origins of Algebra* was the first to have been written, but the word *vorhanden* leaves open the possibility that its content has roots in Klein's first reflection about the history of mathematics.

The second evidence I want to examine is a passage from an unpublished interview to Klein's wife, where she says:

Q [W. Allenbrook]: He must have been doing all the reading and work for the *The Origins of Algebra* all during the late '20's.

Dodo [Klein's wife]: Yes. That was the result since he entered ...¹⁸

Heidegger's most famous lectures about greek philosophy in Marburg were delivered from 1924 to 1927. If Klein began to write his work at the end of twenties, this was after having attended Heidegger's lectures. But the problem now is to show why Klein's interest in Greek philosophy is bound to Heidegger's lectures. On this point Strauss' statement about Klein is decisive: «Klein was more attracted by the Aristotle brought to light and life by Heidegger than by Heidegger's own philosophy»¹⁹. I think that this statement by Strauss makes it very probable that Heidegger's lectures on Aristotle are the basis for Klein's analysis of Greek thought. But why should a young and brilliant student find it interesting to speak about Aristotle or Greek in general? Again it is Strauss who can give us answer to this question:

Klein alone saw why Heidegger is truly important: by uprooting and not simply rejecting the tradition of philosophy, he made it possible for the first time after many centuries – one hesitates to say how many – to see the roots of the tradition as they are and thus perhaps to know, what so many merely believe, that those are the only natural and healthy roots ... Above all, his intention was to uproot Aristotle: he thus was compelled to disinter the roots, to bring them to light, to look at them with wonder²⁰.

Obviously this is Strauss' interpretation of Klein's debt to Heidegger, but I think we can trust it and I want to give a particularly eloquent example of the direct connection between Heidegger's lectures on greek philosophy and Klein's investigation on greek mathematics. In an extraordinarily interesting passage of his lectures about Plato's *Sophist*, delivered in 1925, Heidegger gives a brief account of what Greek thought and in particular Aristotle understood with ἀριθμός:

Das ὅλον im Sinne des Umgreifenden und Zusammenhängenden, sofern es *nach seinem Wieviel betrachtet* wird, ist [...] ein πᾶν, ein Gesamt, eine Allheit. [...] Die letzte Bestimmung des πᾶν ist die auch für die Zahl in Anspruch genommen wird: καὶ ἀριθμός πᾶν μὲν λέγεται, ὅλος δ' ἀριθμός οὐ λέγεται [...]. Der ἀριθμός, das Gezählte, die Summe, wird πᾶν, Gesamt, genannt, nicht aber ὅλον, Ganzes²¹.

Heidegger's interpretation of the Greek concept of number is very clear: number is the product of an addition and

the sum is derived from the process of numbering. Now, one of the most peculiar theses of Klein's interpretation of Greek mathematics is surely his interpretation of the ancient concept of number and – I would say – this is the very heart of his work. He says:

The fundamental phenomenon which we should never lose sight of in determining the meaning of *arithmos* (ἀριθμός) is counting, or more exactly, the *counting-off*, of some number of things. [...] The word which is pronounced last in counting off or numbering, gives the "*counting-number*", the *arithmos* of the things involved. [...] Thus the *arithmos* indicates in each case a *definite number of definite things*²².

In opposition to the modern number, which is a symbol used just for referring to the concept of general quantity, the ancient *arithmos* refers immediately to the subjective operation of numbering a set of things. Heidegger stated that the Greek number is a *Gezählte*, i.e. the numbered of numbering, and Klein also sees the ancient concept of number as totally dependent from the operation of counting.

4. Nature and History in Klein

The origin of *arithmos* from the process of counting is a good example to explain what Klein intends when he speaks about the naturality of Greek science²³. The ancient concept of number born from an original non-scientific experience of the world. The central aim of Greek philosophy is to demonstrate the insufficiency and the inadequacy of the δόξα, of the human natural way of being in the world and with others. Scientific and philosophical concepts stem from a perpetual critique against the daily life of men, but – in so doing – Greek concepts remain inside that natural perspective they wanted to criticize. In this horizon Klein shows the importance of the concept of ἀριθμός for the Greek science. It is the basic concept of every way of finding an order in the world. The Pythagoreans discover the number as the ontological principle of being and make it part and origin of ontology. But if we say that a particular kind of quantity is the principle of things, it is necessary to say that things are in a numerical relations with themselves. Ontology of numbers permits Pythagorean and Plato to discover the necessary relation between good, number and being. Something is just because it is countable; something is countable just because it stays in a numerical relation with other things and this relationship is well ordered; again something is good if it is part of being, it is countable and it stays with other things in a numerical relation. From the Greek point of view, mathematics, ethics and ontology speak about the same thing: *the principles of a well-ordered world*.

In opposition to Antiquity, Modernity is no longer a continuous critique to the world of daily life experience, but against Greek and Medieval science. That means that the bases of modern cultural system are not in the world, but in another cultural system. This relation to a previous cultural system could be intended in two different ways. First of all modern science could not exist without its critique against medieval science. Anyone who reads Des-

cartes, Bacon, Galilei could find unending pages spent criticising scholastic knowledge and – I would say – this is the very core of their own arguments in favour of new science. I mean: modern science affirms itself just because medieval science could no longer solve problems and therefore the new science was born from a critical attitude towards the old one. The second kind of relationship is that with ancient science. The critique against scholasticism had a very brilliant argument in saying that medieval science had hidden the true science of antiquity. The moderns take themselves as the renewers of ancient wisdom, but – in so doing – they deeply modify the ancient comprehension of mathematics, of science in general and consequently of the world. When Viète thinks of renewing Diophantus' technique to resolve equations, instead of following Diophantus, who proposes just particular solutions for particular equations, he invents a general method able to *non nullum problema solvere*, i.e. able not to leave problems unsolved. This deep change is founded in the passage from the ἀριθμός to the modern concept of number. In opposition to the former, the letter is no more an ontological property of a definite amount of things, but a symbol referring to the general concept of quantity. When I write “x” in an equation, I mean that the value of that “x” could be any possible number, so what I refer to, is no more a definite quantity, but the abstract and general concept of quantity. The number has nothing more to do with a way of being, but it is transformed in an operational function of a symbol inside a general framework of axioms. For although moderns understand themselves as the real renewers of antiquity, they do not notice this great difference and this is the most peculiar mark of modern science. Because of this, the new science of Galilei and Descartes understands itself as natural and thinks of its products as an ontological basis of reality, but – as many moderns have said – there is no longer a place for ontology in the modern world.

Klein's analysis of history points out three main steps (the world of daily life experience, Greek science as natural comprehension and modern symbolic mathematics) that are really similar to Heidegger's organization of phenomenological history as corruption from the ancient natural understanding to the modern construction and, in my opinion, this common account of a solution to the problem of the relationship between antiquity and modernity is evidence of the fact that Klein has the same problem in common with phenomenological tradition. Husserl's, Heidegger's and Klein's common problem was that of avoiding the resolution of reality and values in products of individual prejudices. Natural experience is not something, that can be destroyed in subjective representations, but is common to every man and so offers the same basic phenomena. From Klein's point of view phenomenology is the only possibility in order to dismiss modern prejudices, according to which there are no common values, no common experience, no universal structure. Historicism resolves the humanity of man in his history and this destroys every possibility of something in common between us and our ancient roots. Escaping from psychologism Husserl discovers a new possibility of seeing the world, Heidegger shows how this same possibility can be used in order to uproot our modern understanding of the world and Klein does exactly the same.

The great differences between Husserl, Heidegger and Klein is neither the problem nor the methodical presuppositions, but the way of solution. Husserl's reply to psychologism is transcendental phenomenology and its account of a pure experience given in phenomenological reduction. Heidegger opposes Husserl and historicism the possibility to obtain the existential categories of being from Greek philosophy. And Klein? What about Klein's solution? It may be doubted there is a really coherent solution to this problem in Klein's writings, but I think that Klein had one. The peculiarity of Greek thought was – according to Klein – the conjunction between good, order, number and being. This conjunction was founded on the possibility of giving an ontology of the natural world. In this sense the peculiar feature of modernity is the impossibility of furnishing an ontology²⁴ and without ontology the world is just a plurality of events determined by scientific laws²⁵. The modern universe is no more a κόσμος and a τάξις, but a regular sequence of temporal and spatial phenomena in causal relation to one other. Having said this, we can understand that repetition of antiquity in Klein's thought means a renewing of ontology and the discovery of a new κόσμος. This does not mean that we have to rewrite platonic dialogues. This would be impossible. The natural world is totally lost for the modern, for us²⁶. But if we cannot build an ontology, how can we “repeat antiquity”? Is it possible to have an ontology without being? Klein answers in a very important letter to Gerhard Krüger:

However, while on the one hand methodical progress causes the ordered world to dissolve itself, unawares a *new* “world”, the *historical world* builds up itself – within the categories of this very methodic-systematic thought. Self-knowledge becomes possible only in a historical manner – as the attempt, pushed further and further, to suppress self-alienation. [...] The decisive character of the modern “historical consciousness” is the “wordliness” of the history meant by this consciousness. In Hegel the sameness of the *world* of the Spirit and of the history of the Spirit incorporates itself immediately²⁷.

History is the only possibility to bring the roots of human culture to new life. In fact, modern thought has always to do with its concepts and never with the world. Such concepts cannot have a being in the sense of an objective being, i.e. an existence independent from the process of their generation. Their way of being corresponds to the way of their genesis as historical construction. In this sense if we want to know the *nature* of the modern world, i.e. of modern conceptuality, we have to write its history. In so doing, history is our only possibility of giving new life to ontology, but in a really different manner: an ontology without being.

Notes

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to Roberto Gronda, Lorenzo Serini and Susan Owen for checking the final version of my English text.

² Literally this expression sounds: “Wir wollen auf die “Sachen selbst” zurückgehen”, see E. Husserl, *Gesammelte Werke* (from now on Hua.), Martinus Nijhoff (than Kluwer), Den Haag (than Boston), Bd. XIX/1, 10.

³ Hua. XVIII, 7. My emphasis.

⁴ See the *Introduction to Thing and space*, Hua. XVI, 4.

- ⁵ See M. Ferrari, *Il giovane Cassirer e la scuola di Marburgo*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 1988.
- ⁶ See I. Kern, *Husserl und Kant, Eine Untersuchung über Husserls Verhältnis zu Kant und zum Neukantianismus*, Martinus Nijhoff, Den Haag, 1964;
- ⁷ See Hua. III /I, 10-13.
- ⁸ See Hua. IV, 203.
- ⁹ On this topic see P. Ricoeur, *A l'école de la Phénoménologie*, Vrin, Paris, 1993.
- ¹⁰ See E. Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil*, hrsg. von L. Landgrebe, Meiner Verlag, Hamburg, 1999 (first edition: Academica, Prague, 1939), p. 42.
- ¹¹ See M. Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* (from now on GA), Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, Bd. LVI-VII, 82-84.
- ¹² See *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, GA LX, 55: «Den methodischen Gebrauch eines Sinnes, der leitend wird für die Phänomenologische Explication, nennen wir 'formale Anzeige'. Was der formal anzeigende Sinn in sich trägt, daraufhin werden die Phänomene angesehen».
- ¹³ GA LIX, 29.
- ¹⁴ GA XIX, 303.
- ¹⁵ GA XIX, 113.
- ¹⁶ Klein mentions Heidegger's lectures on Aristotle in his essay *Aristotle, an introduction*, in J. Klein, *Lectures and Essays* (from now on LE), edited by R.B. Williamson and E. Zuckerman, St John's College Press, Annapolis, 1985, p. 171.
- ¹⁷ L. Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg von H. Meier, Metzlersche J.B. Verlag, Berlin, 2013, Bd. III, p. 499.
- ¹⁸ I am really thankful to prof. B. Hopkins of Seattle University, who gave me the opportunity to read this interview. This quotation comes from page 14.
- ¹⁹ L. Strauss in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. by K.H. Green, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1997, p. 562, quoted in R. Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2011, p. 6.
- ²⁰ L. Strauss, *An Unspoken Prologue to a Public Lecture to Saint John's*, in *Interpretation*, 7 (3), 1978, p. 2.
- ²¹ GA XIX, 81-2.
- ²² J. Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origins of Algebra* (from now on GMOA), translated by E. Brann, Dover publications, New-York, 1992, p. 46.
- ²³ In general see on this topic B. Hopkins, *The Origin of the Logic of Symbolic Mathematics: Edmund Husserl and Jacob Klein*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2011.
- ²⁴ See GMOA, 184: «From now on the fundamental ontological science of ancients is replaced by a symbolic discipline whose ontological presuppositions are left unclarified». In addition to this see GMOA, 192.
- ²⁵ See J.Klein, *The World of Physics and the 'Natural' World*, in LE, 33.
- ²⁶ About this see *Ausgewählte Briefe von Jacob Klein an Gerhard Krüger. 1929-1933* (= BKK), hrsg. Von E. Patard, in *New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, 1 (6), 2006, pp. 308-329: 328
- ²⁷ BKK, 329.

Progress as a Problem: Strauss and Löwith in Dialogue between Antiquity and Modernity

Anna Romani

Abstract: In this paper I will make a comparison between the position of two thinkers of the 20th century on a specific issue, that is, the crisis of the modern idea of progress. These two German philosophers of Jewish origins were both educated in Weimar Germany, and they both were forced to flee from the Nazi-German persecution. They look at the problems of their present with a critical eye oriented towards the research of their origins and they both find, in a certain retrieval of the ancient thought, a way out from the contradiction of Modernity. In the first part I will show the analysis proposed by Leo Strauss and Karl Löwith of a shared problem: the modern idea of progress. They both give an analytical insight of a concept that, otherwise, could be understood in a generic way. Furthermore, they both refer to the contemporary crisis of this idea and propose different ways to tackle philosophically the problem. In the second part I will articulate their respective criticisms to the *belief* in progress through the reference to the ancients. In the first place I will go back to their sources, then I will analyze the different meaning attached to their “antiquity turn”: hermeneutical radicality on the one hand, sense of limit and measure on the other¹.

Keywords: Progress, Strauss, Löwith, Return, Antiquity

1. The crisis of the modern idea of progress

After the historical trauma of the Second World War, philosophy was challenged to understand the roots of this tragedy and to inquire into the mistakes made by Modernity in its self-knowledge. One of the main features of modern thought is the idea of progress which, for centuries, inspired and guided philosophy, science and common understanding. Both Strauss and Löwith start their inquiry from a statement of fact: the crisis of the modern idea of progress, a problem that philosophy cannot ignore anymore².

In his lecture *Progress or Return?* Strauss begins abruptly as following:

The title of this lecture indicates that progress has become a problem - that it could seem as if progress has led us to the brink of an abyss, and it is therefore necessary to consider alternatives to it. For example, *to stop* where we are or else, if this should be impossible, *to return*.³

This quotation is already a strong position followed by an alternative regarding the issue of progress: the idea of progress led to disastrous consequences in human history, and we have to decide whether to stop where we are or to return. As we will see, this alternative expresses the positions of the two thinkers here in comparison.

In his *The fatality of Progress* Löwith gives a voice to a similar description of the matter: «In the general conscience the faith in progress has been put in doubt only after the First World War»⁴. In fact «the moment when the first atom bomb has been dropped no one can avoid the fatal dilemma of progress»⁵. We can express this dilemma as follows: «The question is whether there is an instance that can limit the unlimited progress or if it is inevitable that *man does anything that he can do*»⁶.

According to the two authors, thanks to modern science man has improved his power and control over nature to an unprecedented point. Nonetheless, his «wisdom and goodness»⁷ did not grow accordingly, and man revealed blind to the good or bad use of his potentialities. This kind of blindness appears a consequence of the gradual substitution of the distinction «good-bad» with the distinction «progressive-reactionary»⁸. But historical experiences proved the content of the idea of progress to be wrong, thus revealing its fideistic nature. The observation of this shift in the consideration of the idea of progress already dominated the academic debate, as Strauss wrote:

A generation or so ago, the most famous study on this subject was entitled *The Idea of Progress*. Its opposite number in present-day literature is entitled *The Belief in Progress*. The substitution of belief for idea is in itself worthy of note.⁹

The idea of progress, which has been the pivotal idea of modern Western civilization, appears in a crucial crisis: in order to criticize it, a full account of its elements is needed.

Strauss and Löwith's essays show a useful and meaningful analysis of the elements of the modern idea of progress, showing its fideistic implications and with a substantial agreement in their analysis. However, their discussions of the concept differ slightly in that they put different emphasis on particular aspects of the modern idea of progress, and this affects their subsequent interpretations. It is now convenient to schematize the results of the analysis given by the two authors to spur the similarities and the differences in their understanding of the concept.

According to Strauss, we can summarize the elements characterizing the modern idea of progress as follows¹⁰:

- Progress is change towards an end. This end is conceived as a certain kind of intellectual perfection. The very model of the movement towards the future perfection of the understanding is given by the improvement made by the arts and crafts from the beginning of human existence onwards. This improvement provides also the idea of the very imperfect beginning of human condition. To sum up: progress is a movement towards a future perfection of human understanding.
- The entire development of human thought is conceived as a progressive one.
- Modern thought, from XVIIth century on, represents an absolute progress: Modernity conceives itself as a break from the past and looks backwards aware of its own superiority.
- There is a fundamental and necessary parallelism between intellectual and social progress¹¹.
- Intellectual and social progress knows no limits.
- Infinite intellectual and social progress is actually possible.
- Every stage of development reached by humankind represents a secured acquisition, beneath which it is impossible to fall¹².
- There is a close connection between the idea of progress and that of conquest of nature: nature has to be subjugated to the power of men, in order to improve their existence on Earth. The model of this kind of attitude is Francis Bacon¹³.
- The best way to tame nature is natural science, which gains honor and importance over all the other kinds of knowledge. As a result, philosophy has lost its preeminence and its authoritative role.

In *The Fatality of Progress* Karl Löwith's analysis offers some additional elements:

- There is a conceptual distinction between development and progress. Development is defined as a natural change towards a fixed goal (*télos*), as it is the case of biological development of an individual from birth to adulthood. Progress, instead, is defined as change without a fixed end, or with an indefinite end: this kind of open change typically belongs to the human world and it is a product of culture.
- The peculiarity of progress stems from human natural tendency towards the modification and appropriation of nature. According to Strauss this tendency evolves in modern times into the progressive domination of nature.
- Modern progress has its peculiar rhythm: every new acquisition becomes soon something given for granted, and the longing for new acquisitions immediately moves forwards the process. Like desire, progress wants always *more*, for its very constitution prevents itself from resting quietly in what it acquires. This almost neurotic movement onwards and the characteristic addiction to the products of progress are connected with the economics at the basis of their diffusion: the liberal and capitalistic economy¹⁴. In this scenario «the longing for progress becomes, in turn,

progress»¹⁵. In short, we can define the features of progress as an example of bad infinity.

- The willingness of progress is combined with the fatalistic sense of its unavailability and with a blind hope in its continuous improvement¹⁶. This observation is connected with the interpretation, given by Löwith, of belief in progress as a part of a larger philosophy of history, according to which «history in itself and as a whole performs a continuous movement onwards as progress towards a goal»¹⁷. Löwith sharply criticizes this conception, which for him characterizes the entire Western thought from the Christian era onwards.

To sum up, the modern belief in progress is oriented to the future and open to an infinite movement towards a better state. It also involves the belief in the possibility of realizing such an open goal and it is willing to pursue it. The modern belief in progress involves a fatalistic certainty that this kind of infinite improvement is actually unavoidable. This kind of acritical certainty towards the idea of progress shows the fideistic nature of the idea itself. According to the modern belief in progress, there is a necessary link between progress in scientific and technical knowledge and progress in the social conditions. To conclude, modern belief in progress involves the optimistic certainty of the stability of men's accomplishments.

Both Strauss and Löwith open to an answer to this philosophical question by addressing the ancient thought. To understand better the meaning of such a move, it is necessary, in the first place, to highlight their sources.

2. Back to the Ancients?

In dealing with the problem of modern faith in progress Strauss and Löwith both invoke the ancient thought. This operation is twofolded: in the first place, they investigate the ancient meaning of the concept of progress, highlighting this way its distance from the modern idea of progress. Secondly, the two authors advance a retrieval of the ancient way of thinking as an alternative from the crisis of Modernity. The problem is that they both give very few references and they use very large generalization, leaving the reader the task to specify their references. It is thus necessary to make some clarifications regarding their sources, in order to better understand the philosophical meaning of their proposal.

In discussing the characteristics of the ancient concept of progress, Strauss refers directly to just two passages of Aristotle *Politics*. In addition, he only mentions Seneca and Lucretius, sparing himself the quotation of precise passages¹⁸. The first reference to Aristotle refers to the possibility of an infinite progress within the *technai*:

[...] the art of medicine is without limit in respect of health, and each of the arts is without limit in respect of its end for they desire to produce that in the highest degree possible, whereas they are not without limit as regards the means to their end for with all of them the end is a limit to the means.¹⁹

According to Strauss, the same idea is to be found in Seneca and Lucretius. It is possible to spur referencens regarding this topic scattered in the work of Seneca, for example in his *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*:

Hence I worship the discoveries of wisdom and their discoverers; to enter, as it were, into the inheritance of many predecessors is a delight. It was for me that they laid up this treasure; it was for me that they toiled. But we should play the part of a careful householder; we should increase what we have inherited. This inheritance shall pass from me to my descendants larger than before. Much still remains to do, and much will always remain, and he who shall be born a thousand ages hence will not be barred from his opportunity of adding something further.²⁰

As far as Lucretius is concerned, the reference is the fifth book of the *De rerum natura*, in which the progress of men on the path of civilization is presented up to the «highest pinnacle» of the development of arts and techniques:

All these [arts] as men progressed gradually step by step were taught by practice and the experience of the active mind. [...] For they saw one thing after another grow clear in their minds, until they attained the supreme pinnacle [*summum cacumen*] of the arts.²¹

Löwith too invokes Lucretius, although he disagrees with Strauss regarding the possibility to find there the concept of an *infinite* progress in human knowledge, given the fact that their limit is given precisely by the supreme pinnacle or *summum cacumen* named in the last line of the quotation above²².

As we have seen, Strauss highlights, on the one hand, the presence of the idea in the Ancient thought of an infinite progress in human knowledge, gradual and sometimes open to an indefinite movement onwards. He also makes a general reference to Plato, according to which «the fulfillment proper, namely full wisdom, is not possible but only quest for wisdom which in Greek means philosophy»²³. But, on the other hand, there is a substantial difference between *technai* in general and the *politiké téchne*. This difference, which is crucial in the characterization of the Ancient way of thinking in comparison to the modern one, is stressed by Strauss by turning once again to Aristotle. The latter discusses the opportunity of making changes in the laws and the institution to improve them, i.e. to realise better the purpose of the *politiké téchne*. However

[...] to change the practice of an art is a different thing from altering a law; for the law has no power to compel obedience beside the force of custom, and custom only grows up in long lapse of time, so that lightly to change from the existing laws to other new laws is to weaken the power of the law.²⁴

Strauss adds another element to the ancient understanding of the concept of progress, namely the common belief according to which the world is periodically subjected to natural cataclysms, an idea shared by the authors quoted above²⁵.

As we have already seen, the main references in Löwith's essay are Lucretius and the myth of Prometheus. In both cases the philosopher finds a general awareness of

the progress made by men in the fields of the *technai* and of the social organisation. However, those progresses are not systematized into a more general conception of a movement of history towards improvement: instead, they are simply observed as a characteristics of human existence. Löwith stresses in particular the ancient awareness of the perils brought about by every new discovery. In other words, the ancients were aware of the other side of the coin of every innovation, regarding which they had no illusions. We can find a statement of this sentiment in Lucretius' work:

So man in vain futilities toils on / Forever and wastes in idle cares his years/Because, of very truth, he hath not learnt / What the true end of getting is, nor yet / At all how far true pleasure may increase. / And 'tis desire for better and for more / Hath carried by degrees mortality / Out onward to the deep, and roused up / From the far bottom mighty waves of war.²⁶

But for Löwith the best exemplification of this kind of awareness in the Ancient thought is given by the myth of Prometheus. In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus speaks about the knowledge and gifts he gave to humans beings, stressing the fact that they don't suffice in protecting him and humans from gods' anger and Fate: «Skill is weaker by far than Necessity»²⁷. As Löwith states, «In Greece there has never been blunt exaltation of technical power»²⁸.

It is clear that, for both Löwith and Strauss, addressing the ancients involves the grouping of considerations taken from authors, who are very distant in time and space, in order to create a general thought on the matter. From this point of view, the analysis does not aim at a detailed historical account: what really matters is the creation of a contrast between Antiquity and Modernity. This contrast aims to be specular to the one that is characteristic of the self-understanding of Modernity, although in the case of Strauss and Löwith the Antiquity ought to emerge as the positive term of comparison.

Both the accounts of Strauss and Löwith show a substantial agreement on the general understanding of a certain kind of progress by the ancients. Briefly, a concept of progress is to be found in the Antiquity, but this concept does not imply the belief in progress. Accordingly, in the ancient thought there is the conscience of progress in knowledge and even of an infinite one, at least potentially. This kind of progress in knowledge and understanding is, however, limited to the sphere of some *technai*. Also, the idea of the development of mankind from the early stages of the primitive state towards civilization is a common place in the ancient thinking. Thus, in denying, as the two authors do, that the ancients had the idea of progress does not mean to deprive them of conscience of the gradual development of mankind in knowledge and civilization²⁹: instead, it means that these elements do not combine with the other features of the modern idea of progress, thus implying the *faith* in progress³⁰.

By making reference to Aristotle's *Politics*, Leo Strauss stresses the absence of the link, which is crucial for the modern belief in progress, between technical-scientific and social progress: according to his interpretation of *Politics* 1268 b 26 ff., the *polis* needs stability, not inno-

vation, therefore it is not obvious to state an analogy between the other *technai* and the *politiké techné*.

As far as Löwith is concerned, he highlights the Hellenistic ideal of measure and limit in opposition to the infinite movement of the modern belief in progress. Sir Francis Bacon expressed his preference for *plus ultra* as the new guiding maxim of the new era against the old delphic motto *non plus ultra*³¹ inherited from the Ancients: on the contrary, to Löwith is precisely the instance of limit that has to be recovered from the Antiquity.

Both for Löwith and Strauss the ancient concept of progress has to be understood together with a general understanding of human nature as a stable entity, which is conceived as only a part of a larger whole, that of a *kosmos* where mankind has no infinite time to pursue its enterprises: the world is subject to recurrent natural disasters that cyclically interrupt the path of the alleged progress, and that periodically force humanity to start over and over from an earlier stage of achievements³².

At this point of my analysis, two questions have to be raised: which kind of Antiquity is the one evoked by the two authors? What is the philosophical meaning of their turning to the Ancient thought? It is easy to see that their generalization of Antiquity³³ could very well be criticized by using different references from those they refer to. But the value of this generalization lies precisely in its capacity to encompass a very large period, separated from the following times by an epochal change. The more general issue here is the rupture represented by Christianity and the modifications it involved in the image of man and his relationships with Nature and Cosmos. After the irruption of Christianity on the scene of history and thought, man has begun to look at himself as the center of creation, a creation that is meant to be at his disposal. In what precedes this epochal hiatus, man was conceived as an indifferent being for the whole of *kosmos*, and this view provided him with a very different attitude towards his behaviour and expectations³⁴.

In the following section, I will try and show the way in which this very general view on the matter acquires a more specific meaning for the two authors.

Besides the similarities in the analysis of Strauss and Löwith, there are important differences in the way they conceive the philosophical meaning of taking back the ancient thought into consideration. Their disagreement on the matter is a recurrent topic of their correspondence: as Strauss wrote to Löwith, «it is astonishing that, beyond a certain point, we understand each other so badly, when until that point we understand each other so well»³⁵.

What are the reasons of this mutual misunderstanding? ³⁶ In the first place, we can find in Strauss an attention to the peculiar declination of the idea of progress in the Jewish context, which is foreign to Löwith's interests³⁷. In this context, progress has a meaning related to the idea of critical detachment from the Jewish tradition and of assimilation: this process was presented as a progress compared to tradition, but the very idea turned out to be a fatal deceit, as Strauss points out in quite the same terms as Gershom Scholem³⁸. This particular case of the general crisis of the belief in progress offers Strauss a critical concept in opposition to the idea of progress: the Jewish concept *T'shuvah*, repentance. Twisting this concept, Strauss deprives it of its religious meaning and in-

terprets it as "return", specifically return from a wrong path to the right one. "Return" implies, in opposition to the idea of progress, the superiority of the beginnings over what follows. If in the religious sphere this conception entails the superior authority of the theological tradition, in the philosophical field one should rather go back to a certain way of *questioning* the tradition, namely the Socratic attitude towards the traditions and beliefs of the common way of thinking.

In his essay on Collingwood's *The Idea of History*³⁹, Strauss states that in taking the ancients into consideration one should also allow for the possibility that they had a proper understanding of the «fundamental problems», an understanding we have lost⁴⁰. This lack of understanding is for Strauss a sign of intellectual decline, made worse by the fact that this age considers this loss a progress. In such a condition, the only progress available to these times would be going back to an understanding of the ancient thought without the burden of contemporary assumptions, an understanding able to disclose the fundamental questions and to show their value, independently from the historical periods⁴¹.

Thus, the reference to the concept of *T'shuvah* is not simply an additional element to the Straussian reasoning: instead, it represents the philosophical usage of a category of the Jewish faith, understood as a return to an ancient path: a path of reasoning, not a religious one. This is a conceptual tool taken from a completely different context; Strauss uses it as an alternative to the modern idea of progress. However, it is possible to spur a residual trace of repentance in the concept of *T'shuvah* as return: something went wrong, because we have forgotten the right path. This is what we ought to admit in the first place to regain what we have lost. The philosophical process of returning to the Ancient thought changes those who enact it: it is not a blunt restoration, but a return from another place which enriches those who undertake the quest, giving them a point of view from which they can truly criticize the present time. As Strauss wrote:

By the very fact that he seriously attempts to understand the thought of the past, he leaves the present. He embarks on a journey whose end is hidden from him. He is not likely to return to the shores of his time as exactly the same man who departed from them. His criticism may very well amount to a criticism of present day thought from the point of view of the thought of the past.⁴²

There is a double movement working here: returning to the ancient way of thinking, in the one direction, and back to the present time in the other. The possibility to enact such a radical kind of hermeneutics, with the opposition between return and progress, is a matter of debate between Strauss and Löwith. Discussions about this subject appear all over the entire correspondence between Strauss and Löwith since the 30s, showing the crucial importance of this problem for the two thinkers.

By taking the ancients into consideration Löwith looks for a conception of time as "eternal present", as opposed to the look towards the future typical of the entire understanding of history which, in his interpretation, we have inherited from Christianity. Löwith finds this kind of awareness in the composure of Hellenistic philosophies.

The problem of how one conceives time intersects that of the conception of nature. From the Christian and post-Christian point of view, nature is something humankind can dispose of, which for Löwith is a disastrous way of thinking, because it provides no limits to the modern appropriation of nature by men⁴³.

In contrast, Löwith aspires to

reach one day [...] the old manner of Late Antiquity (stoic-epicurean-skeptical-cynical), a life-related, really viable wisdom, to reach the “close things” and not the far ones, which are the object of dreaming of history, in the future as well in the past. However, the German and the Jews lack the sense of the present – of the *nunc stans* – of “noon and eternity”.⁴⁴

But what moves this research of a quiet detachment, of a wise retirement in imperturbable calm, is actually a fierce polemic against the present point of view and the tradition that gave birth to it. This unilateral negation falls again, or at least risks falling, into the same conceptual scheme it breaks from. This kind of polemical moderation is connected with the sense of an impossible detachment from one’s historical situation. This, in turn, entails the idea that philosophical problems bring their historical collocation:

You are [...] wrong, if you think that Nietzsche, or any of us “modern”, can simply leave aside his “being conditioned by modern premises” and so – in principle – can “repeat” *ancient antiquity*.⁴⁵

In Strauss’s eyes this idea is typical of the historicist understanding, which he criticizes in all his philosophical production. In turn, the Straussian return to the Ancients is for Löwith a philosophical extremism, something close to a «*pseudotheology of the origin*»⁴⁶: against this extremism Löwith rises the Hellenistic ideal of «measure»⁴⁷. On the other hand, those ellenistic philosophical schools are for Strauss a kind of dogmatism, for they never discuss the doctrines of their founders, whereas their “progenitor”, Socrates, was not a dogmatist at all⁴⁸.

3. Conclusion

The latest observations allow us to suggest a few answers to some of the questions raised above.

In the first place, the field to which the two authors refer when speaking of “Antiquity” narrows accordingly to the latest considerations: if the two authors share a broad meaning for the term, which encompasses the entire philosophical thought preceding the Christianity, this meaning seems to specify for Strauss in the person of Socrates (in his ineludible connection with Plato, but also Xenophon and Aristophanes) and for Löwith in what one could call the spirit of the Hellenistic schools. In the second place, the common problem raised by the two authors, that of the crisis of the modern belief in progress and, in turn, of the crisis of Modernity itself, has different answers according to the different questions that spur the reflection of the two.

The appeal to the sense of measure that a vision of cosmos as eternal present is able to inspire against the be-

lief in progress has for Löwith a specific meaning related to his broad interpretation of the modern view of history as oriented to the future. This view represents for Löwith an outcome of Christian millenarism and it is able to induce a certain kind of historical blindness, as tragically manifested by the events in 20th century world history, thanks to the fatalistic attitude of acceptance of what comes to the fore.

If Löwith’s problem is the problem of history, and his answer is a moral – and still historicist – one. He seeks a point of view outside the movement of a history conceived as an infinite improvement in the future in order to judge the present times. However, Löwith seems to be pessimistic in this respect, since we always remain rooted in our times. Things are different for Strauss, whose polemical target is historicism. This does not mean to put history aside: on the contrary, he precisely seeks a correct historical understanding of ancient thought. For Strauss historicism means at least two things: first, every age has its own issues, its own answers and its own way to understand itself, which are not accessible to other ages; secondly, Modernity represents an overall improvement compared to what precedes it. To conclude, Modernity is capable of understanding the authors of the past better than they understand themselves. According to Strauss, this idea can easily lead to a dangerous mixture of relativism and absolutism or dogmatism: the merits of the past are relativized in respect to the absolute superiority of the present time⁴⁹.

To these perspectives Strauss opposes the alternative of a return, understood as a radical and incessant research. This research does not exclude *a priori* the ancient questions and the one who undertakes it does not presume to find final answers. Moreover, for this research is necessary to make those ancient questions again, opening to a critical view on the present time, which could not be reached starting from the elements of the present itself:

Let’s start really *before* the alternative atheism-theism, let’s start really from the beginning and the origin and let’s see if from our efforts there emerges something that “has not already been” or something remote or maybe also something that “has already been”. This is how a skeptical should really express himself, a man who expresses a critical point of view [...].⁵⁰

The alternative between sense of limit and return in respect to the issue of the modern belief in progress, originates from these two different perspectives of inquiry.

Notes

¹ During my presentation, I will mainly refer to the following texts: L. Strauss: *Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization*, lecture given at the Hillel Foundation at the University of Chicago on November 5, 1952, in «Modern Judaism» Vol. 1, 17-45; L. Strauss: *On Collingwood’s Philosophy of History*, in «The Review of Metaphysics», Vol. V, No.4, June 1952; L. Strauss, K. Löwith, *Korrespondenz: Leo Strauss-Karl Löwith*, in *Leo Strauss Gesammelte Schriften Band 3: Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften – Briefe*, ed. H. and W. Meier, J. B. Metzler Verlag, Stuttgart 2001, pp. 607-697; my quotation are referred to the italian translation: *Oltre Itaca. La filosofia come emigrazione. Carteggio (1932-1971)*, ed. by C. Altini, M. Rossini, Roma, 2012; K. Löwith, *Das Verhängnis des Fortschritts*, in H. Kuhn, F. Wiedman, *Die Philosophie und die Frage nach dem Fortschritt*, Munich, A. Pustet, 1964; italian translation: *La fatalità del progresso*, in *Storia e fede*, Roma-Bari, 1985 [*The Fatality of Progress*]. I

wasn't able to find an English version of this text, so I refer to the Italian edition.

² For a general overview on the evolution of the concept of progress, its connection with the idea of history and the difference between the ancient and the modern concept of progress, with a focus on its political implications, see C. Meier, R. Koselleck, *Fortschritt*, in R. Koselleck, W. Conze, O. Brunner, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Bd. 2, Klett Cotta, Stuttgart 1975.

³ L. Strauss, *Progress or Return?*, cit., p.17, emphasis mine.

⁴ K. Löwith, *La fatalità del progresso*, cit. p. 152.

⁵ *Ivi*, p. 165.

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 167, emphasis of the author.

⁷ L. Strauss, *Progress or return?*, cit., p. 27.

⁸ *Ibidem* and K. Löwith, *La fatalità del progresso*, cit., pp. 154 f.: Löwith localizes this passage in the 1830s, in the aftermath of the industrial revolution with its material benefits.

⁹ L. Strauss, *Progress or return?*, cit., p. 24. Strauss refers here to the following texts: J. Bury, *The Idea of Progress. An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth*, Macmillan and co., London 1920 and J. Baillie, *The Belief in Progress*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1951.

¹⁰ L. Strauss, *Progress or return?*, cit., pp. 24-29.

¹¹ This parallelism, which in 1750 was still an open issue, was the target of the critiques made by Rousseau in his *First Discourse*. See J.-J. Rousseau, *Discours sur les sciences et sur les arts*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by B. Gagnebin et M. Raymond, t. III, Paris, Gallimard, 1964.

¹² The modern confidence in the conquests of rationality has been bitterly proved wrong in the last works of Ernst Cassirer, where he discusses the problem of the exploitation of mythical forms of conscience in Nazi politics and propaganda. See in particular E. Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1946 and Id., *Symbol, Myth and Culture. Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935-1945*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1979.

¹³ See K. Löwith, *La fatalità del progresso*, cit., p. 157 and p. 161.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 155-156.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 156, emphasis of the author. Löwith wrote his essay in 1963, in the middle of the cold war. Looking at his historical situation, he observes that the strive for progress becomes coercion in the case of the arms race, when the two enemies are «forced to a progressive duty of progress», *ivi*, p. 166.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p.166 s.

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 149. See also K. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, Chicago-London 1949. Löwith understands progress through his idea of the secularization of Christian eschatology, thus enlightening the fideistic aspect of the idea of progress. H. Blumenberg criticises the interpretation given in *Meaning in History*, because the two conceptions are heterogeneous: according to Christian eschatology, which is a theological category, there will be a final closure of history in Doomsday; moreover, in this religious conceptual frame, the motor of the entire historical process, God, is outside the process itself. Things are different in the case of progress, which is conceived as an immanent force of history; moreover, history has an infinite time at disposition for its movement. Thus, there is a conceptual tension between the idea of infinite improvement within history and the final closure of history in Christian millenarism. See H. Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1966. See also R. M. Wallace, *Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate*, «New German Critique», n° 22, Special Issue on Modernism, Winter, 1981, pp. 63-79.

¹⁸ See L. Strauss, *Progress or Return?*, cit., p. 24.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1257 b 25-28, in *Aristotle* in 23 Volumes, Vol. 21, transl. by H. Rackham. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA; William Heinemann Ltd, London 1944.

²⁰ Seneca, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, VII, 64, *On The Philosopher's Task*, in *Moral letters to Lucilius*, in 3 volumes, translated by R.M. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library, London-Cambridge, MA 1920-1925; see also *ivi* V, 45, *On Sophistical Argumentation*: « But whatever the quality of my works may be, read them as if I were still seeking, and were not aware of, the truth, and were seeking it obstinately, too. For I have sold myself to no man; I bear the name of no master. I give much credit to the judgment of great men; but I claim something also for my own. For these men, too, have left to us, not positive discoveries, but problems whose solution is still to be sought». See also Seneca, *Quaestiones Naturales*, VI, 31, in *Physical science in the time of Nero; being a translation of the Quaestiones naturales of Seneca*, transl. by J. Clarke, Macmillan and co., London 1911: «Many discoveries are reserved for the ages still to be, when our memory shall have perished».

²¹ Lucretius, *De rerum naturae*, V, 1452-57, transl. by W.E. Leonard, E.P. Dutton and Co., J.M. Dent and Sons, New York 1916.

²² See K. Löwith, *La fatalità del progresso*, cit., pp. 149 f.

²³ See L. Strauss, *Progress or Return?*, cit., pp. 24 f. As it often happens in straussian text, one ought not to underestimate the importance a reference for its brevity.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1269 a 20 ff, cit.

²⁵ Cfr. *ivi*, 1269 a 5-8, p. 54; see also Plato, *Laws*, 676 a- 677 b and *Tiamaeus* 22 c; see also Seneca, *Quaestiones Naturales*, III, 27. The idea of the limitedness of the time of the world and of men within it is a recurring theme in Lucretius' poem.

²⁶ Lucretius, *De rerum naturae*, V, 1430-1435, cit. See G. Sasso, *Il progresso e la morte. Saggi su Lucrezio*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1979, pp. 252-267, for an enquiry of the issue of progress in Lucretius. According to Sasso, who focuses his interpretation on the fifth book of the poem, Lucretius looks at progress as an unavoidable and irreversible process, one that have increased the sufferings of humans while improving their knowledge and material conditions. Sasso argues that from the awareness of these sufferings there arises in Lucretius a nostalgic sentiment towards a primitive condition, more indigent but also less unhappy. Lucretius never proposes to go back to this primitive condition, and from this ambivalent sentiment stems, according to the interpreter, the «contradiction of progress» in the work of the latin author.

²⁷ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, transl. by H.W. Smyth, W. Heinemann, London 1922-26. We can compare this idea with the concern towards the possibilities disclosed by knowledge and techniques in the first stasimon of Sophocles' *Antigone*, quoted above. Hans Jonas analyses these verses in his *Das Prinzip Verantwortung: Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1979. Like Strauss and Löwith, Jonas declares to be one of those who think that «there is still something to learn from classical philosophy» regarding the way of thinking and posing questions; see H. Jonas, *Dem bösen Ende näher. Gespräche über das Verhältnis des Menschen zur Natur*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1993.

²⁸ See K. Löwith, *The Fatality of Progress*, cit., p. 167.

²⁹ This is a very discussed point in the debate on this concept. In his introduction to his work on the ancient idea of progress, L. Edelstein criticises those who deny the presence of a progressist perspective in Antiquity, referring in particular to J. Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, cit. See L. Edelstein, *The Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity*, Baltimore, John Hopkins Press, 1967.

³⁰ See L. Strauss, *On Collingwood's Philosophy of History*, cit., p. 570: «[...] there was a greater awareness in Greece than elsewhere of the essential difference between the ancestral and the good. On the basis of this insight there existed in classical Greece "a historical consciousness", not merely of "catastrophic changes" but also of changes for the better, of progress, and this consciousness was a consciousness not merely of progress achieved but also of the possibility of future progress».

³¹ See J. Bury, *The Idea of Progress*.

³² For an analysis of this idea in Lucretius see G. Sasso, *Il progresso e la morte. Saggi su Lucrezio*, cit., p. 253. See also K. Löwith, *Meaning in History*. The author contrasts the idea of history in the ancient historiographers Herodotus, Tucidides and Polybius, which includes the alternance of fortunes and misfortunes for different people, with the idea of history oriented toward future improvement, characteristic of modern philosophies of history.

³³ This kind of generalisation regards also the conception of Modernity.

³⁴ See L. Strauss, K. Löwith, *Oltre Itaca*, cit., not dated, p. 87: according to Strauss, Nietzsche re-uses the idea of the indifference of cosmos regarding human beings, i.e. the standing point of pre-Christian philosophy. However, he gives to this idea a particular pathos, alien to the idea itself. See Lucretius, *De Rerum Naturae*, V, 156-165, cit. for an instance of the ancient idea of the indifference of cosmos: according to the poet, it is madness to think that gods have created world and nature out of benevolence towards human beings. He thus shows his opposition against anthropocentrism and the teleological view of the world.

³⁵ *Ivi*, 20th August 1946, p. 144.

³⁶ To be fair, from Strauss's point of view it seems to be more of Löwith's difficulty to understand what Strauss means rather than a mutual problem.

³⁷ *Ivi*, 15th April, 1935, pp. 110-112: «I grew up so little Jewish from the very beginning that I can understand only with great effort and through different paths - and actually *not* come to terms with - how is it possible to be so *rational* and *ethical* as are, substantially, all the Jews that I know, even the ones who are assimilated, and that thanks to their tradition. [...] The dilemma "Orthodox Jew" or "enlightened political zionist" has never been a problem to me»; see also *ivi*, 25th September 1962, p. 191: «Without Hitler, I would probably never realized that I am Jewish».

³⁸ Cfr. G. Scholem, *Vom Berlin nach Jerusalem. Jugenderinnerungen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1977; L. Strauss, *Why we remain Jews*.

Can Jewish Faith and History still speak to us?, in *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, ed. K.L. Deutsch and W. Nicgorski, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham–London 1994; id. *Korrespondenz Leo Strauss-Gerschom Scholem*, cit.

³⁹ See R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1946. Arnaldo Momigliano, in his *Ermeneutica e pensiero politico classico in Leo Strauss*, in *Pagine ebraiche*, Einaudi, Torino 1987, pp. 189–199, summarises the position of the english scholar as follows: «Collingwood [...] asseriva che ogni periodo storico ha un pensiero storico che gli corrisponde e che vale assolutamente per quel periodo: riteneva poi che ogni ricerca storica fosse relativa al presente, cioè a qualcosa per definizione estraneo agli interessi presenti agli uomini del passato», *ivi*, p. 190.

⁴⁰ L. Strauss, *On Collingwood's Philosophy of History*, cit., pp. 585 f.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ivi*, p. 583.

⁴³ K. Löwith, *La fatalità del progresso*, cit., pp. 169 f. With a similar awareness, Hans Jonas expresses the urgency to modify the consideration of the natural environment and to assign to men the responsibility of its protection. *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, cit.

⁴⁴ See L. Strauss, K. Löwith, *Oltre Itaca*, cit., 15th April 1935, p. 112.

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, 13th July 1935, p. 124.

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, 2nd August 1933, p. 92: «what I think is wrong [in Heidegger's *The Self Assertion of the German University and What is Metaphysics?*] it is something that you share with him: the *pseudotheology of the "origin"*, to which one has to lead back the secularized original sin, which is fulfilled in the faith in "destiny". From *here* originates the entire ambiguity of his [Heidegger] claim to the beginning and the origin, as justification of the end and the present "instant"».

⁴⁷ *Ivi*, 13th July 1935, p. 124.

⁴⁸ *Ivi*, 23rd June 1935, p. 118. An example of Strauss's concern is given by the role of Epicurus' philosophy in Lucretius.

⁴⁹ This mixture of relativism and dogmatism can be observed also in the logical circle of historicism as Strauss understands it. See C. Altini, *Storia della filosofia, storiografia e storicismo in R.G. Collingwood, L. Strauss e A. Momigliano*, «Anuari de la Societat Catalana de Filosofia», XVI, 2004/2005, p. 32: «[...] ogni verità è valida solo nel proprio periodo storico [...] lo storicismo manifesta, in modo autocontraddittorio, il proprio carattere metastorico e dogmatico: nell'affermare l'essenziale storicità del pensiero, lo storicismo afferma la propria storicità e quindi il carattere provvisorio della propria validità». A.M. Iacono observes in his forthcoming *Storicismo e storia della filosofia* that for Strauss historicism makes every truth and even men's freedom relative to the historical context and it culminates in nihilism: «mettendo al centro il tema del mutamento, scardina il problema filosofico di ciò che è permanente ed eterno».

⁵⁰ L. Strauss, K. Löwith, *Oltre Itaca*, cit., 5th September 1933, p. 95.

Naturalness and Historicity: Strauss and Klein on the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns*

Danilo Manca

Abstract: In the current article I discuss the different ways in which Leo Strauss and Jacob Klein interpret the need of reopening the hoary quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. Their task is to respond to the crisis of reason characterizing European thought and the style of life after the First World War. This provides me with the opportunity to address the issue of how philosophy should face the problem of its naturalness and historicity. I argue that Strauss's position can be understood as the mirror-image of that of Klein. Strauss thinks that the return to the ancients could overcome the historicist approach to fundamental issues characterizing modern philosophy, and consequently arise the problem of the nature of things over again. Klein thinks that the return to the ancients can lead modern man back to the hidden roots of its typical philosophical approach. The model for Strauss's approach to philosophical eternal issues is the medieval commentary. On the contrary, Klein holds that the philosopher should devote himself, or herself, to doing history of philosophy, by reconstructing how philosophical paradigms change over the centuries.

Keywords: Leo Strauss, Jacob Klein, historicity, naturalness, the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns

1. Introduction

The quarrel between the ancients and the moderns is not only a debate that heated up and shook the *Académie française* in the early 17th century. It can also be considered a strategy through which modern philosophy strove to circumscribe its epoch and to define its way of thinking. Thinkers such as Galileo, Descartes and Hobbes spent time and filled pages to mark the difference between their worldview and that of Aristotle and the Scholastics. Thinkers such as Schiller and Hegel delve deeper into the difference between the ancients and the moderns in order to acquire awareness of its epoch and foster a revolution of it.

The quarrel was intentionally reopened in the 20th century by some Jewish native thinkers who studied with Husserl and Heidegger and appreciated Nietzsche. Such an operation constitutes their response to the crisis of reason in their time. Leo Strauss and his lifelong friend Jacob Klein were two supporters of this operation¹. In the following article, I will focus on the different ways in which

Strauss and Klein interpret this quarrel, since this provides me with the opportunity to address the issue of how philosophy should face the problem of its naturalness and historicity.

2. Historicity and Naivety in Modern Philosophy

At the beginning of his article on *Political Philosophy and History*, Strauss claims that “political philosophy is not a historical discipline.” In his view, the philosophical questions concerning the nature of political things and the problem of the best political order are fundamentally different from historical questions, “which always concern individuals: individual groups, individual human beings, individual achievements, individual ‘civilizations’, the one individual ‘process’ of human civilization from its beginning to the present.”²

Strauss distinguishes the questions of political philosophy from those of the history of political philosophy. Political philosophy seeks the essence of political things. On the contrary, the history of political philosophy focuses on “how this or that philosopher or all philosophers have approached, discussed or answered the philosophic question mentioned.”³ Yet, this does not mean that the political philosophy is absolutely independent of history. According to Strauss, the history of philosophy contributes to the development of political philosophy in two ways. Firstly, it represents a preliminary activity without which political philosophy cannot comprehend its essential task: “Without the experience of the variety of political institutions and convictions in different countries and at different times, the questions of the nature of political things and of the best [...] political order could never been raised.”⁴ In other words, it is after having realized that political forms and political opinions are many, that we ask what is the best or the most worthwhile political order. Secondly, the history of philosophy is auxiliary to political philosophy: “Only historical knowledge can prevent one from mistaking the specific features of the political life of one's time and one's country for the nature of political things.”⁵

Strauss stresses that the history of political philosophy “does not form an integral part” of political philosophy, since it is necessarily concerned with the contingent aspects of the philosophical questioning activity.

At the beginning of his article, Strauss does not specify whether his position on the role that the history of philosophy plays in the philosophical activity is valid at any time. But, after a few pages, we understand that he was exclusively referring to the ancient state of affairs. Indeed, from his perspective, we routinely take for granted that “historical knowledge forms an integral part of the highest kind of learning.”⁶ However, if we look back to the past, we realize that “when Plato sketched in his *Republic* a plan of studies, he mentioned arithmetic, geometry, astronomy,” but “he did not allude to history.” And still, Aristotle, who “was responsible of the most outstanding historical research done in classical antiquity,”⁷ saw poetry as more philosophical than history. In the ancient and medieval ages “history was left to antiquarians rather than to philosophers.”⁸

The situation changes in the 16th century when history becomes a specific field, “a world of its own fundamentally different from, although of course related to, that other ‘field’, ‘Nature’.”⁹

When history became an object of knowledge, the dream of a “philosophy of history” arose. In other words, many thinkers entertain the idea that the historical becoming follows an order which can be explored and reduced to some categories. Furthermore, although the universal issues of traditional philosophy were not abandoned, they were integrated with a concern for the influence that a historically determined culture within which a philosopher was born has exercised on his thought and method. Hence, any attempt to address the universal issues of traditional philosophy must now be considered historically conditioned. Such a changement led to historicism: “‘History’ itself seems to have decided in favour of historicism.”¹⁰

At the end of his article, Strauss proposes applying historicism to itself. Historicizing historicism means to acknowledge that the success of historicism depends on a peculiar character of modern philosophy, which Strauss outlines as follows:

Modern political philosophy or science, as distinguished from pre-modern political philosophy or science, is in need of the history of political philosophy or science as an integral part of its own efforts. For historicism asserts that the fusion of philosophic and historical marks in itself a progress beyond ‘naïve’ non-historical philosophy, whereas we limit ourselves to asserting that that fusion is, within the limits indicated, inevitable on the basis of modern philosophy, as distinguished from pre-modern philosophy or ‘the philosophy of the future’.¹¹

By assuming to be the only acceptable approach to philosophy, historicism overlooks its limits and misses an important point: once it claims that all answers to philosophical questions are necessarily historically conditioned, it has to accept that this claim, too, is subject to the context from which it comes about. In other words, the idea that philosophical questions are one with historical questions should be considered a historically conditioned truth in turn. The philosopher who catches this point is already out of historicism. The philosopher who holds that the history of philosophy is an integral part of philosophical activity only in the modern age has already reopened the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. More specifically, this philosopher is spontaneously

driven to bracket the idea according to which the modern fusion of philosophical and historical questions is in itself a progress. The general aim is to understand what kind of difference there is between “pre-modern non-historical philosophy” and the modern historical one¹².

Strauss explains this difference by saying that pre-modern philosophy is intrinsically “naïve,” whereas modern philosophy “consists to a considerable extent of inherited knowledge.”¹³ These assertions are strictly connected with each other: inherited knowledge cannot be naïve; rather, it has to be taken as acquired knowledge. Strauss distinguishes inherited knowledge from independently acquired knowledge. By inherited knowledge, he means “the philosophic or scientific knowledge a man takes over from former generations, or, more generally expressed, from others”¹⁴; by independently acquired knowledge, he means “the philosophic or scientific knowledge a mature scholar acquires in his unbiased intercourse, as fully enlightened as possible as to its presuppositions, with his subject matter.”¹⁵

In Strauss’s view, modern political philosophy inevitably keeps a specific form of dependence on classical philosophy. More specifically, it appears as a modification of, and even in opposition to, an earlier political philosophy. Hence, modern political philosophy has only two chances: it can remain an inherited knowledge, unaware of the tradition from which, and in opposition to which, it was acquired. Alternatively, it can be transformed into genuine knowledge “by re-vitalizing its original discovery, and to discriminate between the genuine and the spurious elements of what claims to be inherited knowledge.”

In light of this, my questions are now the following: by “genuine elements” does Strauss mean that part of classical thought which is kept sedimented in modern thought? If so, should we draw the conclusion that modern thought is not genuine in itself? Is it necessarily derived? I am convinced that Strauss’s conclusion is more articulated than that could seem to be reached here. First of all, he is inclined to think that is that modern political philosophy could be said to be genuine, but is in no way natural.

Strauss spells this out by quoting Hegel and by referring to Jacob Klein. In particular, he quotes the following passage taken from Hegel’s foreword in *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

The manner of study in ancient times is distinct from that of modern times, in that the former consisted in the veritable training and perfecting of the natural consciousness. Trying its powers at each part of its life severally, and philosophizing about everything it came across, the natural consciousness transformed itself into a universality of abstract understanding which was active in every matter and in every respect. In modern times, however, the individual finds the abstract form ready made.¹⁶

Strauss identifies “the natural consciousness” with the pre-philosophical one. From this perspective, the final results of the philosophic efforts of classical antiquity would represent the starting point of modern thought. Whether the results of antiquity were taken for granted or consciously modified, modern political philosophy cannot be described as simply emerging from the “natural consciousness.” In fact, it does not arise from a direct refer-

ence to political phenomena as they are accessible to a pre-philosophical thought in daily experience. But this does not imply that modern philosophy cannot be said to be genuine. It is genuine insofar as it recognizes the gap and the specific relation of “dependence” that it maintains with classical philosophy. Put differently, modern philosophy can be genuine, but in no way natural. Its starting point is the result of a tradition, therefore it cannot in any way be naïve. And if a modern philosopher thinks himself naïve, then he is simply taking for granted the work of generations of pre-modern thinkers.

In a note to Hegel’s quote, Strauss invites us to consider Jacob Klein’s *Die griechische Logistik und die Entstehung der modernen Algebra* for a more precise analysis, in particular he refers to page 122, which coincides with the first page of the introduction to the second part of the book. This paragraph is entitled “Über die Differenz antiker und moderner Begrifflichkeit.” Here Klein discusses the relationship between the ancient and the modern approach to scientific activity: “The ancient mode of thinking and conceiving is, after all, not totally ‘strange’ or closed to us.”¹⁷ The “new” modern science arises out of the bequest of the ancient science. Its starting point is a “science already in existence,” whereas the Greek science has a “natural” basis.” In other words, Greek science comes up as a modification of, and stands in opposition to, a non- or pre-scientific attitude. By contrast, the new modern science is erected “in deliberate opposition to the concepts and methods”¹⁸ of Greek science. Up to now, Strauss’s account is very close to Klein’s.

However, Klein takes a position that, in my view, is not the same as Strauss’s. Klein attributes to modern philosophy a form of naturalness as well. More specifically, he notices that the opposition of some founders of the new science, such as Galileo, Stevin, Kepler and Descartes, to the ancient mode of thinking and conceiving is, rather, an opposition to a consolidated tradition:

They are carried by an original impulse which is quite foreign to the learned science of the schools. The scientific interest of these men and their precursors is kindled mostly by problems of applied mechanics and applied optics, by problems of architecture, of machine construction, of painting, and of the newly discovered instrumental optics.¹⁹

This leads Klein to claim that “whereas the ‘naturalness’ of Greek science is determined precisely by the fact that it arises out of ‘natural’ foundation, [...] the naturalness of modern science is an expression of its polemical attitude toward school science.”²⁰ Put in Strauss’s words, whereas the naturalness of Greek philosophy lies on an attitude pointed toward the phenomena of the pre-scientific world, the naturalness of the moderns is rooted in their capacity to turn their attention from knowledge acquired by the school to knowledge genuinely graspable by experimenting.

In such a way, Klein does not deny that modern philosophy could be naïve. He notices that modern science is characterized by a symbolic formalism and a calculational technique: “It determines its objects by reflecting on the way in which these objects become accessible through a general method.”²¹ Moreover, whereas ancient science illustrates its determinate object, modern science signifies

its possible determinacy; whereas ancient concepts directly refer to the object, modern concepts refer only indirectly to the object and directly to other concepts.²² However, by considering Klein’s position in relation with Strauss’s distinction between genuine and inherited knowledge, the naturalness of the moderns appears to be one with its genuine attitude.

For Strauss, knowledge could be described as genuine inasmuch as it is acquired by re-vitalizing the original horizon within which a discovery occurred. In other words, in order to be genuine, knowledge should be free of inherited elements. It is necessary that we assume no elements by tradition surreptitiously and unconsciously. This is possible only if we strive to re-activate the naivety characterizing the natural attitude of the ancients. We have to reconstruct an attitude pointed toward the pre-scientific world *which was natural for the ancients*.

Klein shares with Strauss the idea that knowledge is genuine if not mediated by tradition. However, unlike Strauss, Klein thinks that modern philosophy is not made genuine by an act aimed at reproducing the natural consciousness of the ancients, or by one striving to do it. Rather, founders of modern philosophy think in a genuine way once they begin by opposing the ancient mode of thinking, which works on them as inherited knowledge. Moreover, the naturalness of modern philosophy cannot coincide with the effort to act *as if* one were naïve. Obviously, the modern pre-scientific world is no longer the ancient one. New elements belong to the sphere of the modern everyday experience. The ancients had acquired these elements, which successively are *natural for the moderns*. This is the case, for instance, of the geometric structure of natural objects. In modern times, such structure becomes spontaneously graspable “by a naked eye.”

3. On the Nature of Historical Activity

Klein’s position undermines Strauss’s conviction that modern philosophy cannot establish a direct relation with the pre-scientific horizon of daily experience. Klein re-defines the role that the history of philosophy might play in the typical philosophical activity of questioning. Let me explain my idea in two steps: in the first, I will focus on the idea of naturalness; in the second, I will come back to the problem of the history of philosophy.

One of the authors Strauss and Klein are thinking of when they speak of the naturalness of consciousness is Husserl. He was elected by Klein as his most relevant teacher, but also Strauss gave him some credit. In his article on “The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy,” Strauss says that Husserl’s phenomenology “surpasses in significance everything I know of, which was done in Germany in the last 50 years.”²³ Furthermore, he adds that Husserl’s analysis of the transformation of the geometry underlying Galileo’s physics in *Crisis* is “the model for any analysis concerning the basic assumptions of modern science and philosophy.”²⁴

In *Crisis* § 9h Husserl describes Galileo at once as “a discovering and concealing genius” [*entdeckender und verdeckender Genius*]²⁵. Indeed, while discovering the mathematical world as a horizon of limit-forms, Galileo

conceals the life-world, that is the natural pre-scientific horizon from which scientific inquiry comes up and in which it is necessarily grounded. However, this does not entail that modern thinkers have no life-world. We have to distinguish the form of the prescientific life-world from its contents. The form, Husserl argues, is the same at any time. The life-world is the horizon within which man lives straightforwardly, having his goals in the object. It is substantially un-thematic²⁶. That is why the attitude that each man undertakes within the life-world is said to be natural. But the objects and the contents towards which we direct our interests are not always the same. They change along with time and articulate the evolution of human culture. This overview coincides with that which prompts Klein to ascribe a kind of naturalness to the moderns, too.

Stanley Rosen has reproached Strauss for having thought, in accordance with Husserl, that there was a time when such a thing as a “natural consciousness” existed. Rosen criticizes the idea according to which supposing the de-sedimentation of this pre-scientific life-world could purge modernity of its defects²⁷. If this is Strauss’s view, it doubtless does not belong to Husserl. Let me spell this out by employing another philosophical example which Strauss takes into account.

In his article on “The Living Issues of German Post-war Philosophy” Strauss recalls Schiller’s essay *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*²⁸. Schiller, he noticed, “had described the relation of the moderns to the ancients in these terms: the Greeks *were* nature, whereas for modern man, nature, being natural, is only an ought, an *ideal*; modern man has a *longing* for what was *real* in Greece.”²⁹ However, as Péter Szondi has demonstrated,³⁰ Schiller clearly distinguishes the natural way of living from the naive way. Greek man is not aware of being nature. When he becomes aware—that is as to say when he becomes a philosopher—it is no longer natural. Yet, two chances are still at stake: to seek naturalness or to live artificially. By employing this argument in order to interpret the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, two different positions can be taken: one corresponds to that of Friedrich Schlegel, the other to that which Szondi attributes to Schiller. The first is ascribable to Strauss, the second to Klein.

According to Schlegel, naturalness coincides with the spontaneity of classical poetry; no naivety in the compositional activity belongs to the modern poet³¹. Szondi states that he or she who has a longing for the natural way of living could reactivate the characteristic attitude of Greek man in a recasted manner. Naivety has to be acquired, by reproducing a particular way of living characterized by spontaneity. Furthermore, the naivety is no historical paradigm; rather, it is a mode of feeling, as Schiller repeatedly writes.

Similarly to Schlegel, Strauss holds that the world as it is present for, and experience by, a natural point of view had been discussed by Plato and Aristotle and not by the founders of modern philosophy, nor by its successors. An example of this would be Hegel, who, in Strauss’s view, “had indeed attempted to understand ‘the concrete’, the phenomena themselves, but he had tried to ‘construct’ them by starting from the ‘abstract’. Whereas this was precisely the meaning of the Socratic turning: that science

must *start* from the known, from the ‘known to us’, from what is known in ordinary experience, and that science *consists* in *understanding* what is known indeed, but non understood adequately.”³² This conviction prompts Strauss to conclude what follows:

Platonic and Aristotelian terms appeared to have a directness [...] absent from the modern concepts which all presuppose that *break*, effected by Descartes and continued by all his successors, with natural knowledge. Therefore, if we want to arrive at an adequate understanding of the ‘natural’ world, we simply have to *learn* from Plato and Aristotle.³³

Like Szondi, and more closely to Husserl’s notion of the life-world, Klein states that we are natural, once we live spontaneously and straightforwardly. A philosopher who is able to describe the horizon of his or her specific life-world undertakes a natural or genuine attitude. This is possible at any time because nature is not only to be understood as the cosmos. It is, rather, “in human understanding, multidimensional.”³⁴ By “nature” we may mean *physis*, that is “the natural being of every entity existing ‘by nature’ [...] within the texture of the world-order.”³⁵ But, within the sphere of nature, we may also encompass all that becomes familiar to us, all that has acquired the character of a “second nature”: “Almost every artful human activity tends to reproduce itself, to repeat itself, to make the artful product as familiar.”³⁶

The difference is, therefore, between the natural understood as the cosmic element and the natural as understood as the horizon of the familiar. The domain of the latter is wider than that of the former, since it is infinite and tends to be broadened out continuously, whereas that of the cosmos is limited and it is “the only original subject of philosophy.” Unlike Klein, Strauss exclusively identifies the natural element with the cosmos: “The elementary, the natural subject of philosophy still is, and always will be, as it had been for the Greeks: the *cosmos*, the world.”³⁷

This decisive difference between Strauss and Klein determines their approach to the quarrel and the meaning they attribute to the return to the ancients. Both Strauss and Klein think that the naturalness of ancient philosophy cannot be renewed in the modern or, better, in the post-modern time. However, the awareness that the ancient mode of living and thinking cannot really be duplicated leads the two authors to undertake two different attitudes: Strauss thinks that we should act *as if* the ancient mode of philosophizing was renewable; Klein thinks that the activity of the post-modern philosopher should consist of making the conceptual frame, which the founders of modern philosophy assumed to be natural, unfamiliar and unknown. Klein defines this activity *history* by recovering the ancient meaning according to which “*historia*” designates the inquiry through which we conspicuously grasp the original essence of things, the *rizomata panton*, as Klein says by quoting the end of Husserl’s article on *Philosophy as Rigorous Science*³⁸.

In his essay on *Phenomenology and the History of Science*, Klein points out that Husserl’s phenomenology aims at discovering, rediscovering and elucidating the beginnings, the origins and the “invariables” of things.

“This is”, he adds, “the attitude of a true historian”³⁹. But he also specifies what follows:

The origin of history is in itself a non-historical problem. Whatever historical research might be required to solve it, it leads ultimately to a kind of inquiry which is beyond the scope of a historian, whose purpose is to give the ‘story’ of a given ‘fact’. It may, indeed, lead back to the problem of inquiry, the problem of *historia* as such, that is, to the very problem underlying Husserl’s concept of ‘intentional history’.⁴⁰

In Klein’s view, history, understood in the manner just described, “cannot be separated from philosophy.”⁴¹ This philosophic-historical activity consists in rediscovering the significant formation [*Gebilde*] latently shaping, and acting on, a sedimented conceptual frame: “This interlacement of original production and ‘sedimentation’ of significance constitutes the true character of history.” From this point of view there would only be *one* legitimate form of history: the history of human thought. The main problem of any historical research would precisely be “the disentanglement of all these strata of ‘sedimentation’ with the ultimate goal of reactivating the ‘original foundations’, i.e., of descending to the true beginnings, to the ‘roots’, of any science and, consequently, of all pre-scientific conceptions of mankind as well.”⁴²

In describing the philosophical activity of the historian of philosophy, Klein takes the history of philosophy to be an integral and, above all, an essential part of philosophy independently of any time. It belongs to philosophy in ancient as well as in modern ages. However, in two epochs, the object towards which the historical activity is directed changes. The object of ancient philosophy is the *cosmos*, nature as the eternal element, and the aim of the ancient philosopher is to grasp the gap between the essences of things and their contingent manifestations. In modern times, the task of the philosophical historian of philosophy is to distinguish the conceptual frame derived by inherited knowledge from the approach a philosopher has genuinely acquired by looking at his or her life-world. As Klein has explained in his *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*, the aims are many: 1. To grasp the different attitudes the ancients and the moderns adopted in their scientific and philosophic inquiry; 2. To keep separate the conceptual frame that the moderns inherited by *school science* and by medieval tradition from the conceptual frame and the method they got through their living interests (experimental activity, applied mechanics and optics, arts such as architecture and painting); 3. To establish what the moderns lost with regard to the ancients, what they discover independently of their pre-suppositions, what they do in continuity with the ancients, what they do in opposition to the ancients or by re-elaborating and decisively modifying their bequest.

Even Strauss says that “‘history’ originally designated a particular kind of knowledge or inquiry.”⁴³ However, he holds that the meaning of the term changes when historicism assumes history as a field. Even Strauss thinks that we have to think of the gap between the ancients and the moderns without taking in advance a position on the value of the two attitudes. We must bracket progressivism. However, Strauss’s position diverges from that of Klein, since he places no trust in a philosophical form of the his-

torical inquiry. Rather, he is more interested in a form of hermeneutics that is a post-modern re-elaboration of medieval commentary.

In his essay on *Political philosophy and History*, Strauss points out that medieval philosophy was “dependent” on classical philosophy, and yet it was not in need of the history of philosophy as an integral part of its philosophic efforts:

“When a medieval philosopher studied Aristotle’s *Politics*, he did not engage in a historical study. The *Politics* was for him an authoritative text. Aristotle was *the philosopher*, and hence the teaching of the *Politics* was, in principle, *the* true philosophic teaching. However he might deviate from Aristotle in details [...], the basis of the medieval philosopher’s thought remained the Aristotelian teaching. That basis was always present to him, it was contemporaneous with him.”⁴⁴

For Strauss, it is precisely this contemporaneity of a thought with its basis which no longer exists in modern philosophy, and it is such a contemporaneity that explains the transformation of modern philosophy into an intrinsically historical philosophy.

In his essay on *The Living Issues of German Post-war Philosophy*, Strauss claims that once we apply historicism to itself by arranging “a critical analysis of the genesis of historical consciousness,”⁴⁵ we make a return to reason possible. This process “necessarily is a return to reason as reason was understood in pre-modern times.”⁴⁶ Accordingly, he raises the following questions: “Modern philosophy has come into being as a *refutation* of traditional philosophy, i.e. of Aristotelian philosophy. Have the founders of modern philosophy *really* refuted Aristotle? Have they ever *understood* him? They certainly understood the Aristotelians of their time, but they certainly did not understand Aristotle himself.”⁴⁷ The conclusion is that “if Plato and Aristotle are not understood and consequently not refuted, return to Plato and Aristotle is an open possibility.”⁴⁸

Conclusion

In Strauss’ view, the aims of the philosopher who is able to reactivate and rethink the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns can be summed up as follows: 1. He attempts to make ancient philosophers and their conceptual frame contemporaneous to him; 2. Aristotle’s and Plato’s writings and teachings cannot be considered as surpassed; he tries to take them *as if* they were still authoritative texts; 3. He strives to understand a philosopher as being as good as, or better than, himself.

Strauss’s position is the mirror-image of that of Klein. Strauss thinks that we should try to make ancient philosophy and the ancient life-world familiar to us; Klein thinks we should study ancient philosophy⁴⁹ and the ancient life-world in order to make the modern conceptual frame, which acts on us as Aristotelian tradition did on the founders of modern philosophy, unfamiliar to us. For Strauss, the return to the ancients lets us know the original interests of ancient philosophers in a deeper way. For Klein, the return to the ancients leads us back to the hidden roots of modern philosophy.

Both Strauss and Klein think of philosophy as a human activity originally characterized by the act of questioning. However, whereas Strauss tends to see a development and a training of this questioning in the hermeneutics, in the ongoing capacity of interpreting unfamiliar texts, Klein thinks that we may bring up our philosophical dispositions by devoting ourselves to the history of philosophy, that is by inquiring how philosophical paradigms evolve over the centuries.

Notes

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¹ Arendt, Löwith and Jonas are other interpreters of this idea, each one in a particular way.

² L. Strauss, *Political Philosophy and History (=PPhH)*, in "Journal of the History of Ideas", 10:1 (January 1949), 30.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *PPhH*, 31.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *PPhH*, 33-34.

¹⁰ *PPhH*, 35. On Strauss's criticism to historicism see C. Altini, "Beyond Historicism: Collingwood, Strauss, Momigliano", in *Interpretation*, XXXIV (2006), 47-66; A. Fussi, "Leo Strauss On Collingwood: Historicism and the Greeks", in: *Idealistic Studies*, vol. 44, issue 2/3, (2014): J. Bernstein (ed.), *New Directions in the Thought of Leo Strauss*, 149-261.

¹¹ *PPhH*, 50.

¹² For a deep discussion of Strauss's method in his interpretation of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns see A. Fussi, *La città nell'anima. Leo Strauss lettore di Platone e Senofonte*, ETS, Pisa 2012.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *PPhH*, 48. Strauss quotes by modifying Baillie's translation of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Mind*, 2nd edition (London, New York, 1931), 94. See original text: Hegel, *Phenomenology des Geistes*, in: *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, edited by E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1970-, vol. 3, 36-37.

¹⁷ J. Klein, *The Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra (=GMTOA)*, translated by E. Brann, New York: Dover Publications 1968, 117. On Klein's conception of the history of science see B. C. Hopkins, *The Origin of the Logic of Symbolic Mathematics. Edmund Husserl and Jacob Klein*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 2011.

¹⁸ *GMTOA*, 119.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*. On the significance of Klein's reading of the origin of modern science see A. Ferrarin, *Galilei e la matematica della natura*, ETS, Pisa 2014, in particular 11-25; 84-85.

²⁰ *GMTOA*, 120.

²¹ *GMTOA*, 123.

²² See *GMTOA*, 123; J. Klein, *The World of Physics and the "Natural" World*, in J. Klein, *Lectures and Essays (=L&E)*, edited by B. Williamson and E. Zuckerman, Annapolis (Maryland): St. John's College Press 1985, 1-34.

²³ L. Strauss, *The Living Issue of German Postwar Philosophy (=LI)*, in *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem, and other essential texts*, edited by H. Meier, Cambridge (MA): Cambridge University Press 2007, 137. The manuscript is located in Leo Strauss Paper, Box 8, Folder 14. On the occasion of the *Creighton Philosophical Club Thirty-ninth meeting* (Syracuse University, 27-28 April 1940) Strauss read a paper on "The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy with special reference to Husserl's *Phenomenology*."

²⁴ *LI*, 137.

²⁵ E. Husserl, *Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendente Phänomenologie*, Husserliana VI, edited by W. Biemel, Den Haag: Nijhoff 1976, 5 English translation by D. Carr: *Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology (=Crisis)*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1970, 52.

²⁶ See *Crisis* § 39.

²⁷ See S. Rosen, *The Elusiveness of the Ordinary. Studies in the Possibility of Philosophy*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2002, in particular: "Introduction", 1-13; "Husserl's Conception of the Life-World", 54-93; "Wittgenstein, Strauss, and the Possibility of Philosophy", 135-159. See also S. Rosen, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of the Modern*, in: S. Smith (edited by), *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2009, 119-136.

²⁸ F. Schiller, *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*, in: "Die Hören" 1795/96, now in: F. Schiller, *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 5, Hanser: München 1962.

²⁹ *LI*, 135.

³⁰ P. Szondi, "Das Naïve ist das Sentimentalische. Zur Begriffsdialektik in Schillers Abhandlung", in: P. Szondi, *Lektüren und Lektionen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973, 47-99.

³¹ See F. Schlegel, *Vorrede zum Studium-Aufsatz: "Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie"* (1797), in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, Band 1, edited by E. Behler, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag 1979, 205-217.

³² *LI*, 136. Strauss's interpretation of Hegel is, however, disputable. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel starts from what is first for us, such as sensible certainty. In saying that Hegel constructs phenomena, Strauss follows Heidegger, who claims in his course from 1930/1931 that the Absolute is a presupposition of Hegel's approach.

³³ *LI*, 136-137.

³⁴ J. Klein, *On the nature of nature* (1964), in *LE*, 221.

³⁵ J. Klein, *The World of Physics and the "Natural" World*, in: *LE*, 29-30.

³⁶ *LE*, 238. In his article "Husserl, Jacob Klein, and Symbolic Nature", in *Providence Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 29/1 (2008). J. Cosgrove explores the connection between Husserl's discussion of the mathematization of algebra and Klein's investigation of the genesis of the symbolic in modern times. Moreover, he shows how these inquiries can be applied to Minkowski's formulation of four-dimensional spacetime and to Einstein's special theory of relativity.

³⁷ *LI*, 138.

³⁸ See E. Husserl, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft (1911)*, in: Husserliana XXV, *Ausätze und Vorträge*, 61, translated into English by Q. Lauer: "Philosophy as rigorous science", in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, New York: Harper & Row 1965, 196.

³⁹ J. Klein, *Phenomenology and the History of Science*, in *LE*, 69. On Klein's interpretation of Husserl's concept of historicity see B. C. Hopkins, *op. cit.*, in particular 11-64.

⁴⁰ *LE*, 72.

⁴¹ *LE*, 78.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ *PPhH*, 33.

⁴⁴ *PPhH*, 49.

⁴⁵ *LI*, 133.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ *LI*, 134.

⁴⁸ *LI*, 135.

⁴⁹ Let me remind that Klein was also author of some commentaries to Plato's Dialogues. On his reading of Plato's thought and style see C. H. Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers. The Coherence of the Dialogues*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2009.

Löwith's Nietzschean Return to the Ancient Conception of Nature

Eduardo Zazo Jiménez

Abstract: This paper assesses Löwith's conception of Antiquity. For him Antiquity is opposite in meaning to Christianity, and not to Modernity. That is to say, Modernity would be included in the Christian times, and Antiquity, for its part, would be primarily considered as a polytheist culture, contrasting with the Christian worldview. As I will show, the scheme motivating such a conception of Antiquity is the Nietzschean antichristian philosophical program.

Keywords: Löwith, Nietzsche, Antiquity, Modernity, Christianity, Nature

1. Antiquity versus Christianity

It was only when Karl Löwith wrote *Meaning in History* (1949) that he first outlined a general theory on Antiquity. This theory was further developed in his work *Wissen, Glaube und Skepsis* (1955) and finally summarized in *Gott, Mensch und Welt in der Metaphysik von Descartes bis zu Nietzsche* (1966). Nonetheless, Löwith was indeed interested in the ancient world from the early stages of his work. His interest in Antiquity may not have been straightforward, but, as it will be argued in what follows, the roots of his thought can be traced back to Nietzsche, since for both philosophers Antiquity is opposite in meaning to Christianity, and not to Modernity. That is to say, Modernity would be included in the Christian times, and Antiquity, for its part, would be primarily considered as a polytheist culture and a way of thinking, contrasting with the Christian worldview. To that extent, Christianity, as the crucial event of the Western, is the main concern of Löwith's thought, as well as of Nietzsche's.

It is well known that from *Also sprach Zarathustra* on, but not before, Nietzsche took Christianity (and not the history of metaphysics, like many heideggerian scholars use to claim) as the decisive, wicked event in the cultural history of the Western civilization. Some popular examples that illustrate this stance are the following:

The symbol of this struggle, inscribed in letters legible across all human history, is 'Rome against Judea, Judea against Rome': — there has hitherto been no greater event than *this* struggle, *this* question, *this* deadly contradiction (Genealogie der Moral, 16) This eternal indictment of Christianity I will write on all walls, wherever there are walls — I have letters to make even the blind

see. I call Christianity the one great curse, the one great innermost corruption, the one great instinct of revenge, for which no means is poisonous, stealthy, subterranean, small enough — I call it the one immortal blemish of mankind (Der Antichrist, 62).

Ecce Homo concludes:

'Have I been understood? — *Dionysus versus the Crucified...*'¹

Nietzsche remained for Löwith the essential philosopher and he assumed his antichristian philosophical program². In 1914, at the age of 17, he joined the German Army after his intense reading of Nietzsche; in 1923 he wrote his thesis on Nietzsche, in a period when the philosopher from Röcken was barely been taken into account by scholars; from 1928 to 1934, he taught his philosophical thinking in Marburg on several occasions; in 1935 he wrote a book about Nietzsche's philosophy, *Nietzsches Philosophie der ewigen Wiederkehr des Gleichen*, when he was expelled from Germany; in 1941, he published in Japan a history of the revolutionary German thought entitled *Von Hegel bis zu Nietzsche*. Without doubt, Nietzsche plays a crucial role in both *Meaning in History* (1949) and *Gott, Mensch und Welt in der Metaphysik von Descartes bis zu Nietzsche* (1966), and during the 1960s Löwith put Giorgio Colli and Massimo Montinari in touch with the publishing house De Gruyter, which finally published the *Kritische Studienausgabe* (KSA) including the findings of Colli and Montinari in the *Weimar Archiv*. In short, Nietzsche was the main reference of the whole work of Löwith from the very beginning. And Löwith himself acknowledged it³. He accepted the Nietzschean diagnosis⁴ and attempted to overcome Christianity in order to find a way out to the Western civilizational crisis.

Although Nietzsche attempted to be as antichristian as possible, Löwith contended that such an undertaking ended in failure. Claiming himself to be an antichristian, Nietzsche remained Christian, all too Christian⁵. Löwith considered that *Zarathustra* could be read as an inverted Gospel and was convinced that the inversion of something makes this movement subordinate to what is attempted to be overcome. Nietzsche could have written some kind of *Iliad*, *History of the Peloponnesian War* or *De Rerum Natura*, but he wrote a Gospel. Although antichristian, it remains a Gospel⁶. Moreover, Löwith emphasized that the Nietzschean idea of *Wille zum Macht* is not compatible with the idea of the eternal recurrence of the same⁷. Löwith rejected the idea of *Wille zum Macht* but he

claimed that Nietzsche's idea of the eternal recurrence of the same, if not fully and coherently exposed, can only be understood in the context of this Nietzschean battle against Christianity, because the eternal recurrence of the same is essentially an antichristian idea. This is why Löwith, following and surpassing Nietzsche, enhanced this idea and claimed a new world image, which is the same of the ancients⁸, without the overenthusiastic and unconsciously christian-based Nietzschean impulse and prophetic writing.

2. The Idea of *Sattelzeit*

Being a disciple of Löwith, Reinhart Koselleck translated *Meaning in History* into German in 1953. In his early writings⁹, he showed that there was a period of *Sattelzeit* in the European history from 1750 to 1850. By this time, all socio-political concepts underwent both a paradigm shift and a process of resemantization. This methodological caution motivates us to take distance from the concepts to be found in the texts preceding that date. Even if the word we find remains unchanged, the semantics and the whole paradigm in which the concept once made sense are now different. These concepts must be therefore translated into our modern language. Consequently, the first task of the researcher is to keep in mind the several layers of meaning behind the concept. Since continuity in words does not entail any persistence in the meaning, a difference is to be faced and understood as such, being therefore suspicious about the tale of continuity of ideas.

Koselleck made an attempt at explaining the profound changes relating to the period 1750-1850 through the concept of *Sattelzeit*. According to Löwith, and even if he did not use that word, Christianity introduced a *Sattelzeit* in history. Concepts such as history, atheism, belief, faith, wisdom, philosophy, world, divineness or scepticism do not convey the same meaning in the pre-Christian world and in the Christian and post-Christian one. Despite the fact that the word is the same, the general axiological frame displaces the meaning. For these concepts refer to another context of meaning we should be aware of it in order to avoid projecting our common understanding of these words into those texts on Antiquity. I will offer some examples on the basis of Löwith texts:

History. In *Meaning in History*, Löwith distinguishes between *logos of the cosmos* and *Lord of the history*, being polytheistic Greeks and Romans concerned with the former and monotheistic Jews and Christians with the latter¹⁰. For Greeks and Romans, history means political history, but for Jews and Christians, the same terms refers to the history of salvation. Greeks and Romans understand the past as an everlasting foundation, whilst Jews and Christians as a promise to the future. The intellectual figure for Greeks and Romans is the political historian; for Jews and Christians, the prophet. In short, the ancient world did not develop a philosophy of history, which relies completely on the history of salvation¹¹. The modern philosophy of history goes for the *Lord of the history*¹².

Religion. Religions in Antiquity did not speak the language of belief. The correctness of religion was practical (orthopraxis), not theoretical (orthodoxy). Here

Löwith agrees with the etymology of the word religion offered by Benveniste¹³. Cicero's etymology corresponds to a polytheistic world; Lactantius' one, to a monotheist world. The fact that Antiquity did not speak the language of belief explains why the gods were a tool of communication between the different peoples¹⁴. When two human communities approached each other (because of the war, conquest or commerce), they usually translated their pantheons. The basic assumption until the emergence of the monotheistic religions was then that a translation of the gods was always available. On the contrary, Yahweh, God and Allah could not and cannot be translated; unlike Zeus, Jupiter, Tinia or Amun, they are not mutually translatable. Many philosophies of the Antiquity, specially those of the platonic tradition, aim to the one God, but they do allow the translation. Due to this polytheistic background, they do not defend monotheism, but the unity of God; they do not deny the existence of many Gods, while the monotheistic religion does. The following motto summarizes the differences: "polytheism sometimes aims to the one God; monotheism always aims to the only God". Furthermore, Löwith stated that he discovered Greek and Roman polytheism during his exile in Japan. There, in Japan, he found the worship of the everyday phenomena, like the sun, the moon, the nature, the sexuality, etc¹⁵. Löwith held that the Japanese *kami* can be put at the same level of the Roman *superiori*. Thus, the general comparison is not made exclusively between Antiquity and Christianity, but between, on the one hand, a polytheism distanced from our tradition (Japan) and a polytheism close to us (Greece and Rome), and, on the other hand, the Jewish and Christian monotheism.

The debates between reason and faith. This question surmises that reason needs to relate to faith. But where there is neither faith nor belief, as it was in the ancient Greece or Rome¹⁶, no pertinent question regarding the superiority of reason over faith could be raised. This conflict, believed to be the essential conflict of the Western history, is not so decisive for Löwith, precisely because the two contrasting elements are not equal. Athens did not need Jerusalem to understand itself until it was defeated by monotheism. Conversely, the prosperous monotheism of Jerusalem always needed Athens to attain self-understanding. Because of the role played by Athens and the Antiquity during centuries within the Christian and Jew traditions, the comparison is unfair. In other words, Greece and Rome do not compare themselves with the Jew and Christian traditions¹⁷. To the best of my knowledge, there was and there is no platonic Church, sovereign in a philosophical State, having embassies in foreign countries, enjoying tax privileges and resorting to platonic texts as the ultimate source of authority in politics, science, gender policies and religion. Monotheistic religions, and specially the Catholic Church, do. In order to understand the dialectics between Athens and Jerusalem, a focus on the institutions needs to be done. Athens and the Antiquity played, and still do, a role within the current institutions. When considered historically and by itself, Athens was not aware of the tensions, fractures and depths of Jerusalem. Athens's main concern was not the relationship between faith and reason, but the differences between doxa, episteme, pistis, skepsis, etc.¹⁸

Atheism means in Antiquity distance of the community from the religious ground, and it relates to social and political issues. As a matter of fact, the early Christians were found guilty of atheism, because they did not recognise and worship the gods of the Roman Empire. Only after the emergence of Christianity, atheism acquires a completely different meaning. Orthodoxy emerges, and consequently heresies, believers, true believers, false believers, non believers and atheists –a new form of atheism¹⁹–. The religious difference in relation to belief, which creates heresies, cannot be found in the polytheistic world. Thus, a new form of atheism enters in the world history through this religious difference in relation to belief, namely the one we “naturally” understand. Here a striking example: Diogenes Laërtius in his *Lives and Opinions* uses the word heresies in the title to describe the numerous philosophical groups that simply held different opinions.

Greek philosophy does neither seek to prove the existence of the gods nor to rationally justify the religious beliefs. The aim of Greek philosophy is rather to know the divineness better than the popular religion of the communities²⁰. If one attempts to picture the ancient philosophers, they should look more like the Indian wise men²¹ than like the medieval and modern philosophers linked to the universities and dedicated to commentary and analysis of texts. It is not just a coincidence that the ancient world was essentially an oral culture that did not “invent” the separation of words. The wisdom was not proved through the depths of the soul, but through the serenity of the old wise men.

Scepticism in the ancient world means examination, investigation, search for the truth. Scepticism, as a way of life, was not a method of thinking or the systematic and epistemological doubt about the human capacity of knowing the truth. Scepticism was condensed by a doctor, Sextus Empiricus, whose main concern was not theoretical or epistemological, but practical. The ancient sceptic searched for the truth, and did not use scepticism as a tool in the search for certainty, conviction or belief.

Those distinctions and this precomprehension of the *Sattelzeit* can be tracked in many modern philosophers. In *Religion within the Boundaries of the Mere Reason*, Kant differentiated the religion of the mere cult and observances from the religion of the good life conduct. Hegel, for its part, differentiated in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* the determine religions from the consummate religion. Nietzsche differentiated the slave and master moralities in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Kant and Hegel positively assessed this historical change, whilst Nietzsche assessed it negatively. At all events, the philosophy of Löwith, following the line of Nietzsche’s thought, can be understood as a warning to keep the differences and not to project the common meaning of our words onto Antiquity. We see the same words and we assume the continuity between the philosophy of Plato and our time, but in Antiquity concepts such as atheism, belief, heresy, philosophy of history, religion, monotheism, scepticism or even philosophy, in the way we spontaneously understand them, are nowhere to be found. The axiological references and the context of meaning is completely different. After the triumph of the Christian faith, the concepts of the Greek and Roman philosophy need to

be translated and we need to keep the Antiquity at a distance so that it can be properly understood.

3. The Critique of Modernity and the Concept of Nature

The examples outlined above allowed Löwith for warning us against the sharp separation between Antiquity and us. Moreover, he postulated that modern philosophy does not imply breaking away with Christianity²², and thus returning to the ancient philosophy, but that modern philosophy from Descartes to Heidegger ambiguously continues to pursue the *Lord of the history*, and not the *logos of the cosmos*. In this regard, religion is understood as orthodoxy, not as orthopraxis; the relationship between faith and reason still galvanizes the debates; scepticism describes a method of thinking, not a way of life... Modernity can be seen as a prolongation of the Christian world-image. In this process, the idea of *Sattelzeit* helped us to note the differences between the ancient and the Christian worlds. This could be described as a triviality suitable for a degree student. But Löwith is interested in showing that our conceptual constellation comes from the break that Christianity introduced in history²³. Since then, philosophy has no longer resorted to the ancients. Modern philosophy is both Christian and antichristian. It is Christian because it does not break up with the main themes of Christianity, namely the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the divisions reason/faith, eternal/temporary, etc. And it is at the same time antichristian because it attempts to prove them using no religious means at all²⁴. The key point for Löwith is that modern philosophy does not resort to the classical topics of ancient philosophy. According to him, the main topic of ancient philosophy was nature²⁵. Nature was considered by the ancients as the highest object of thinking²⁶ and for that philosophy should be understood in the same way as it was when it was born in Greece: that is, as physiology. The ancients, from the pre-Socratics to Pliny, could still think that there was nothing highest or more divine than nature; but the moderns, having lived in a monotheistic tradition for so many centuries (since Augustine at least), are not able any more to be amazed by the divineness and the simplicity of the natural world. From Augustine to Heidegger, the most striking object is not the world itself, but the self. According to Löwith, the world for the ancients is not the creation of a transcendent god or the making of the human mind, but “als das Ganze des Seienden ist die Welt immer schon vollständig und vollkommen selbständig und die Voraussetzung aller unselbständigen Existenzen”²⁷. The world is not just an idea (Kant), an horizon (Husserl) or a projection (Heidegger), but the highest, the only existing and the divine world. Therefore, Modernity can be defined as the time of the forgetfulness²⁸ of nature.

From Descartes to Heidegger, no philosopher was capable to fully develop a suitable conception of nature²⁹. Löwith’s critique of the close relationship between philosophy and theology could be understood as a rejection of the survival of the latter in the former, in such a way that the permanent appropriation of theological concepts by the modern philosophy stopped it from conceiving nature close to the ancient philosophy. In that way, the his-

tory of modern thought shows that the ancient conception of nature, with the exception of some philosophers like Spinoza, Goethe or Nietzsche, has been long forgotten.

Any form of systematic and consistent atheism needs a new conceptualization of the world and the nature. It is not by chance that the most furious contemporary atheist, Michel Onfray, has recently published a book entitled *Cosmos* (2014). Every attempt to overcome Christianity and monotheism in general bumps into the necessity of drawing a new image of the cosmos and nature. An atheist ontology seeking to exclude the afterlife and the tricks of religion demands a new image of the world, a new world image. The great danger for atheism is falling into the chains of Christianity, as evidenced by the example of Nietzsche and probably Onfray.

Plessner, Leo Strauss and Gadamer among others have strongly criticized Löwith's historical explanations. Plessner claims that it would bear a resemblance to the Heideggerian one³⁰. Leo Strauss in *Notes on Lucretius*³¹ and Gadamer in *Wahrheit und Methode*³² hold that attempting to return to the ancient conception of the nature at the peak of Modernity would be totally inappropriate. I also agree with the idea that it is impossible to return to the ancient idea of nature in the present³³. But the central and still valuable idea of Löwith is that we have to keep in mind the gap between the ancients and the moderns and that the human being cannot find a solution to the contemporary political problems unless a new relationship with the nature is established³⁴.

Löwith's defense of the superiority of the ancient conception of the nature only began after the exile and the Second World War. Before that time, in his early writings, there was no sign of pointing to the development of a concept of nature. Nonetheless, we can surely find continuity in Löwith's philosophy from the twenties to the seventies in a concern that will easily drive him after the exile to the ancient world: the Nietzschean concern about the body, the Earth and the nature. That is, Löwith's main philosophical interest did not change because of his forced stay in Japan and in the United States (1936-1952). However, considering that it had a Nietzschean origin, which can be trailed both before and after the exile in 1936, these concerns led him to oppose the ancient and the Christian worlds — after the exile.

Notes

¹ All quotations are from Walter A. Kaufmann's English translations: F. Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, Modern Library, New York, 2000; F. Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, Penguin, London, 1982.

² J. Chytry, "Zur Wiedergewinnung des Kosmos. Karl Löwith contra Martin Heidegger", in D. Papenfuss & O. Pöggeler (Hrsg.), *Zur philosophischen Aktualität Heideggers. Band II: Im Gespräch der Zeit*, Klostermann, Frankfurt, p. 94.

³ K. Löwith, *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933. Ein Bericht*, J.B. Metzler, Stuttgart, 1992, pp. 7-8.

⁴ E. Donaggio, *Una sobria inquietud. Karl Löwith y la filosofía*, Katz, Buenos Aires, p. 39; R. Wolin, "Karl Löwith: The Stoic Response to Modern Nihilism", in R. Wolin., *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2015, pp. 74-75; M. Bormuth, "Ereignis und Geschichte. Karl Löwith kritisiert Martin Heidegger", in M. Bormuth & U. von Bulow (Hrsg.), *Marburger Hermeneutik zwischen Tradition und Krise*, Wallstein, Göttingen, 2008, p. 89.

⁵ K. Löwith, "Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)", in K. Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften VI: Nietzsche*, J.B. Metzler, Stuttgart, 1987, p. 406: "But when Nietzsche went mad, he signed some of his letters 'Dionysos the Crucified', confusing himself with the dismembered Dionysos Zagreus

and with the crucified Christ. This double signature reveals not only an accidental confusion but an ultimate problem, the problem of Nietzsche's anti-Christian Christianity."

⁶ K. Löwith, "Nietzsches antichristliche Bergpredigt", in K. Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften VI: Nietzsche*, J.B. Metzler, Stuttgart, 1987, p. 468.

⁷ K. Löwith, "Nietzsche nach sechzig Jahren", in K. Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften VI: Nietzsche*, J.B. Metzler, Stuttgart, 1987, p. 460.

⁸ J. Chytry, "Zur Wiedergewinnung des Kosmos. Karl Löwith contra Martin Heidegger"... p. 93.

⁹ R. Koselleck, "Einleitung", in O. Brunner, W. Conze & R. Koselleck (Hrsg.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Bd. 1, Klett Cotta, Stuttgart, 1972, pp. XIII-XXVII.

¹⁰ K. Löwith, "Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen. Die theologische Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie", in K. Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften II: Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen. Zur Kritik der Geschichtsphilosophie*, J. B. Metzler, Stuttgart, 1983, p. 14.

¹¹ This idea first appeared in Löwith's thought in K. Löwith, "The Theological Background of the Philosophy of History", *SOCIAL RESEARCH* 13, 1 (Spring, 1946), pp. 51-52: "There would be no search for the meaning of history if its meaning were manifest in historical events. It is the very absence of meaning in the events themselves which motivates the quest. Conversely, it is only within a preestablished horizon of ultimate meaning, however hidden it may be, that actual history seems to be meaningless. This horizon has been established by history, for it is Jewish and Christian thinking that brought this colossal question into existence. [...] The ancients were more moderate in their speculations. They did not presume to make sense of the world or to discover its ultimate meaning. They were impressed by the visible order and beauty of the cosmos, and the cosmic law of growth and decay was also the pattern for their understanding of history."

¹² J. A. Barash, "The Sense of History: on the Political Implications of Karl Löwith's Concept of Secularization", in *HISTORY AND THEORY* 37 (1), 1998, p. 76.

¹³ E. Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes II: pouvoir, droit, religion*, Minuit, Paris, 1969, pp. 267-273.

¹⁴ J. Assmann, "Translating Gods: Religion as a Factor of Cultural (Un)Translatability", in S. Budick & W. Iser (eds.), *The Translatability of Cultures. Figurations of the Space Between*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1996, pp. 25-36; V. Rocco Lozano, "Le dodici tesi di Hegel sulla Romanitas", *Philosophical Readings* VII.3 (2015), p. 10.

¹⁵ F.-R. Hausmann, "Karl Löwiths Sendai - japanisches 'Alt-Marburg' oder nur exotisches Provisorium?", in *INTERNATIONALE ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR PHILOSOPHIE*, Heft 2/2008, p. 78; K. Löwith, "Curriculum vitae (1959)", in K. Löwith, *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933. Ein Bericht*, J.B. Metzler, Stuttgart, 1992, p. 187.

¹⁶ E. Benveniste, *op. cit.*, p. 273; K. Löwith, "Atheismus als philosophisches Problem", in K. Löwith, *Sämtlichen Schriften III: Wissen, Glaube und Skepsis. Zur Kritik von Religion und Theologie*, J. B. Metzler, Stuttgart, 1985, p. 333: "Den neutestamentlichen Begriff des Glaubens hat es im griechischen Denken nicht gegeben".

¹⁷ K. Löwith, "Atheismus als philosophisches Problem", in K. Löwith, *Sämtlichen Schriften III...*, pp. 331-332: "Die seit Augustin immer wieder aufgeworfene Frage nach dem Verhältnis von Einsicht und Glaube impliziert, dass die philosophische Einsicht von sich aus ein Verhältnis zum Glauben an Offenbarung habe. Diese Voraussetzung fehlt jedoch der gesamten griechischen Philosophie, von der alle spätere herkommt, die dieses Namens wert ist. Sie trifft nur zu für die Philosophie nach dem Christentum. Die Unterscheidung sowohl wie die Vereinbarung von Vernunft oder Wissen und Glauben ist eine innerchristliche Angelegenheit."

¹⁸ K. Löwith, "Wissen, Glaube und Skepsis", in K. Löwith, *Sämtlichen Schriften III...*, p. 206: "Die klassische Philosophie bewegt sich nicht innerhalb des Entweder-Oder von Wissen und Glaube, sondern innerhalb des Unterschieds von episteme und doxa."

¹⁹ K. Löwith, "Atheismus als philosophisches Problem", in K. Löwith, *Sämtlichen Schriften III...*, p. 334: "Der Unterschied von Rechgläubigen, Irrgläubigen und Ungläubigen hat in der Antike keine Entsprechung. Häresien kann es nur geben, wo es Orthodoxien gibt, und Atheisten nur dort, wo es auch Gläubige gibt. In der Antike ist der Atheismus keine religiöse Differenz zum Glauben, sondern eine politische Art von Häresie im Verhältnis zu den religiösen Grundlagen der polis. Atheismus war asebeia, und diese ein Frevel, die von der polis bestraft wurde."

²⁰ K. Löwith, "Wissen, Glaube und Skepsis", in K. Löwith, *Sämtlichen Schriften III...*, pp. 205-206: "Die antike Theologie ist darum vorzüglich theologische Ontologie und Kosmologie, aber keine Theologie des Glaubens. [...] Die Theologie gehört in der Antike zum wesentlichen Bestand der Philosophie, weil sie ein höchstes Wissen um das höchste

Seiende ist. Die Frage war nicht: kann man Gott wissen oder muss man zuerst an ihn glauben?, sondern: kann man das Göttliche besser wissen, als es in der populären Religion vermeint wird?”.

²¹ L. Dumont, *Essais sur l'individualisme. Une perspective anthropologique sur l'idéologie moderne*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1991, p. 40.

²² Löwith, “Wissen, Glaube und Skepsis”, in K. Löwith, *Sämtlichen Schriften III...*, pp. 207-208; E. Zazo Jiménez, “Cristianismo difuso e islam minoritario en las ciudades europeas”, in *Philosophical Readings VIII.3* (2016), p. 213.

²³ E. Donaggio, *Una sobria inquietud...*, p. 187; K. Löwith, “Mensch und Menschenwelt”, in Karl Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften I: Mensch und Menschenwelt. Beiträge zur Anthropologie*, J. B. Metzler, Stuttgart, 1981, pp. 302-313.

²⁴ K. Löwith, “Christentum, Geschichte und Philosophie”, in K. Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften II: Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen. Zur Kritik der Geschichtsphilosophie*, J. B. Metzler, Stuttgart, 1983, pp. 448-449.

²⁵ J. Chytry, “Zur Wiedergewinnung des Kosmos. Karl Löwith contra Martin Heidegger”..., pp. 90-91; E. Donaggio, *Una sobria inquietud...*, p. 193.

²⁶ D. Henrich, “Sceptico Sereno. Rede am 9. 1. 1967”, in B. Hermann & M. Riedel (Hrsg.), *Natur und Geschichte. Karl Löwith zum 70. Geburtstag*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln/Mainz, 1967, pp. 461-462; K. Löwith, “Gott, Mensch und Welt in der Metaphysik von Descartes bis zu Nietzsche”, in Karl Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften IX: Gott, Mensch und Welt in der Philosophie der Neuzeit, G. B. Vico und Paul Valéry*, J. B. Metzler, Stuttgart, 1990, pp. 6-7.

²⁷ K. Löwith, “Curriculum vitae (1959)”, in *Mein Leben in Deutschland...*, p. 191.

²⁸ L. Weissberg, “East and West: Karl Löwith's Routes of Exile”, in H. O. Horch, H. Mittelmann & K. Neuburger (Hrsg.), *Exilerfahrung und Konstruktionen von Identität. 1933 bis 1945*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston, 2013, p. 175.

²⁹ K. Löwith, “Gott, Mensch und Welt in der Metaphysik von Descartes bis zu Nietzsche”, in Karl Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften IX...*, p. 12: “Wie verschieden auch immer das *se ipsum* in der nachchristlichen Philosophie von Descartes bis zu Heidegger ausgelegt wird, die Konsequenz für das Weltverständnis bleibt dieselbe: die Welt ist nicht mehr das Erste und Letzte, alles Umfassende und unbedingt Selbständige, sondern über Gott auf den Menschen bezogen, zuerst als Krone der Schöpfung, und sodann als selbstbewusstes Subjekt.”

³⁰ H. Plessner, “Geleitwort”, in B. Hermann & M. Riedel (Hrsg.), *Natur und Geschichte. Karl Löwith...*, pp. 7-9.

³¹ Leo Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius”, in Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995, pp. 77-141.

³² H. - G. Gadamer, “Hermeneutik und Historismus”, in H. - G. Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke II: Hermeneutik II. Wahrheit und Methode*, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen, p. 414.

³³ E. Zazo, “Reseña de ‘M. Bruni, *La natura oltre la storia. La filosofia di Karl Löwith*, Il Prato, 2012””, in *REVISTA DE LIBROS DE LA TORRE DEL VIRREY*, n. 4, 2014/2.

³⁴ M. Bruni, *La natura oltre la storia. La filosofia di Karl Löwith*, Il Prato, 2012, pp. 123-141; K. Löwith, “Das Verhängnis des Fortschritts”, in K. Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften II: Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen. Zur Kritik der Geschichtsphilosophie*, J. B. Metzler, Stuttgart, 1983, p. 410: “Und solange wir nicht unser gesamtes Verhältnis zur Welt, und damit zur Zeit, von Grund aus revidieren, sondern mit der biblische Schöpfungsgeschichte und den christlichen Begründern der modernen Naturwissenschaft voraussetzen, dass die Welt der Natur für den Menschen da ist, ist nicht abzusehen, wie sich an dem Dilemma des Fortschritts etwas ändern sollte.”

Ancient Wisdom and the Modern Temper. On the Role of Greek Philosophy and the Jewish Tradition in Hans Jonas's Philosophical Anthropology

Fabio Fossa

Abstract: The question about the essence of man and his relationship to nature is certainly one of the most important themes in the philosophy of Hans Jonas. One of the ways by which Jonas approaches the issue consists in a comparison between the contemporary interpretation of man and forms of wisdom such as those conveyed by ancient Greek philosophy and the Jewish tradition. The reconstruction and discussion of these frameworks play a fundamental role in Jonas's critique of the modern mind. In the first section I introduce the anthropological problem in Hans Jonas's oeuvre. Moreover, I clarify why it becomes essential for Jonas to resort to different forms of traditional wisdom. In the second and third sections I try to give an account (as complete as possible) of the two generalisations which Jonas shapes in order to criticise the modern concepts of man and nature. In the last section I show how Jonas links these generalisations to his own philosophical assessment of modernity. Finally, I focus on his methodology, which exemplifies how critical thinking may arise from a reconsideration of traditional contents.

Keywords: Hans Jonas, Philosophical Anthropology, Greek Philosophy, Jewish Thought, Value of Tradition.

1. The Anthropological Question in the Philosophy of Hans Jonas

The anthropological question – i.e., the question concerning the essence of man and his relationship to the world – is a topic that caught Jonas's attention since his early writings and kept engaging him until his last works¹. As a student of Martin Heidegger during the 1920s, Jonas was deeply impressed by the existential analysis of *Sein und Zeit* and tried to apply Heidegger's ideas to the study of man in the late antiquity. Both *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem*² (1930) and *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* (1934–54) share an interest in historical interpretations of man and the world. After his shift to a more theoretical attitude, in 1963 Jonas gave the subheading *Zur Lehre vom Menschen* to his book *Zwischen Nichts und Ewigkeit*³. The essays there collected flew then into the last section of *The Phenomenon of Life*⁴ (1966), which is dedicated to a "Philosophy of Man". He elaborated further on the anthropological question in his best-known

work, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*⁵ (1979), and in related writings such as *Macht oder Ohnmacht der Subjektivität*⁶ (1981) or *Technik, Medizin und Ethik*⁷ (1987). Finally, Jonas's last book, *Philosophische Untersuchungen und metaphysische Vermutungen*⁸ (1994), starts again with a section dedicated to "Organism and the Theory of Man".

This is just a sketch of the presence of anthropological themes in Jonas's works and it does not claim to be exhaustive. Although the spectrum of Jonas's thoughts on man is extremely wide, I think it possible to recognise two different, yet related patterns of reasoning. On the one hand, Jonas approaches the anthropological question from a phenomenological point of view in order to include man in his general theory of organism or philosophical biology. This pattern draws upon several concepts Jonas developed in *The Phenomenon of Life* and it is not properly understandable apart from those. Essays such as *The Nobility of Sight*⁹, *Image-making and the Freedom of Man*¹⁰, and *Tool, Image and Grave*¹¹ belong to this pattern¹². On the other hand, Jonas tackles the same issues from a cultural and historical perspective as well. The motives that inspire this pattern are the same operating in Jonas's early writings. In so doing, Jonas clarifies the terms by which the anthropological question presented itself to him. At the same time, this kind of considerations enable him to set a specific task to philosophy, the same task that he would try and carry out by developing the former pattern. This second approach reveals all its potential in the essay *Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism*¹³ (1952).

Although many different studies belong to it, this pattern exhibits an intrinsic unity which stems from the recourse to the same historical-philosophical approach. This sort of argument strategy consists in reconstructing traditional images of man and the world in order to reach a standpoint from which to criticise the modern mind.

As it is well known, Jonas's main targets are the images of man and nature conveyed by Heidegger's philosophy of existence and scientific natural monism. Put briefly, the most significant flaw of the Heideggerian standpoint lies in its incongruous dualism, that is, in the claim that man and nature are ontologically heterogeneous terms. In Jonas's opinion, Heidegger resorts to a specific metaphysical language though depriving it of its own theoretical background. As a result, his interpretation of

man, which is based on the concept of thrownness, is inconsistent. In fact, Jonas claims, while Heidegger fails to properly address the question as to whence *Dasein* is thrown, this is exactly the essential aim of the general mythological framework to which the notion of thrownness belongs. As a consequence, Heidegger cannot but condemn man to be «a project from nothingness into nothingness»¹⁴, which in Jonas's opinion is a false perspective.

A different but equally false standpoint, Jonas believes, lies at the basis of what is addressed as the technoscientific interpretation of nature. According to this framework, nature is brute matter void of any intrinsic meaning over which to exercise full control. As a consequence, the scientific mind denies acknowledgement to any dimension of being other than physical existence. So, scientific reductionism leads to a monistic viewpoint within which living things and human beings are just another physical object to be understood and manipulated. This is, in Jonas's opinion, a misleading interpretation, since it fails to acknowledge the phenomenon of life in general and, specifically, it overlooks the distinctive properties of human life.

In order to overcome these disappointing alternatives, philosophy must follow a path on the edge between Heideggerian dualism and scientific monism. The first pattern of anthropological reflection I mentioned earlier aims to reach this goal by means of an ontological revolution¹⁵ which would reevaluate the theoretical weight of the phenomenon of life over brute matter. However, this is not the only way by which Jonas carries out his task. On and off throughout his entire work he conducts an intense dialogue with traditional forms of wisdom, which helps him bring the whole issue into focus. Why is that so?

In order to develop his criticism, Jonas needs to highlight virtual possibilities which may be still available though hidden by the two dominant views. Then, he must turn to theoretical frameworks the main assumptions of which are entirely incompatible to those of the modern mind. In this situation, in fact, he would get no support by sticking to his own times. So, since he believes that the so-called modern mind derives mostly from Christianity¹⁶, Jonas focuses on classical Greek philosophy and the Jewish tradition with the intention of reconstructing the interpretations of man conveyed by those cultural frameworks. In so doing, Jonas shapes two generalisations which provides him with a guideline to expand on his research. My aim is to follow up his outline of these generalisations and to show how these studies assist him in his philosophical efforts¹⁷. In the next section I take into consideration Jonas's thoughts on the image of man conveyed by classical Greek philosophy. After that, I deal with the image of man which, in his opinion, belongs to the Jewish tradition. Finally, I show the results of such a reevaluation of traditional contents and I make some general observation on Jonas's methodology.

2. Classical Greek Philosophy: the Man as *Polites*

While Jonas's notes on the Jewish tradition are quite gathered, his remarks on the classical interpretation of man and the world are scattered all over his oeuvre. Most

of them can be found in *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* and in *The Gnostic Religion*¹⁸ (1958). The first chapter of *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* is significant in this regard too. Moreover, essays like *Is God a Mathematician?*¹⁹ (1951), *The Practical Uses of Theory*²⁰ (1959), and *Immortality and the Modern Temper*²¹ (1961), as well as the 1970 course *Problems of Freedom*, testify his long-lasting interest in the classical theory of man²². Although Jonas turns back to this topic repeatedly, his main ideas do not vary during the years and, therefore, may be considered together. What Jonas proposes is beyond doubt a generalisation, a scheme that does not apply to every specific case. Historical accuracy is certainly not what Jonas seeks. Before clarifying Jonas's intentions, however, it is necessary to organise his many remarks.

In Jonas's opinion, the primary feature of the Greek mind is a strong belief in the autonomy and perfection of the universe. Our world is a necessary part of the divine whole—even though, to some extent, a deprived and lesser one. This is, Jonas claims, a sort of cultural *a priori* which lasted until the final hour of the Greek civilisation. Plato's ideas, Aristotle's forms, even Stoic *Logos* are thought of as different expressions of this single principle, inasmuch as they are idealisations of contents which belong to this world. This is why Jonas defines classical philosophy as a «self-sufficient intramundane metaphysics»²³. The world as a whole is the main object of the Greek thought. Its attempt to get in touch with the very essence of reality relies on the idealization of this world. As a consequence, there is no place for any anti-mundane idea such as the Stranger God of the Gnosis. In the Greek metaphysical framework every concept is embedded in this world.

The kernel of this outlook is the understanding of the world as *kosmos*, i.e., as a well-ordered, self-contained and everlasting whole²⁴. This is the world the demiurge shapes in the *Timaeus*: a living being, intelligent and divine, an imitation of eternity in time²⁵. For what concerns the temporal dimension, the *kosmos* is eternal, unborn, and undying. Its time flows in a circular, repetitive way. This recurring structure supports the biological experience of time of some of its hosts. However, this limited experience does not spoil the eternal steadiness of the *kosmos*, which absorbs the unstable and futile becoming in its universal order²⁶. Harmony and rationality are embedded in the very essence of the world. The universe is therefore a magnificent example of beauty which inspires reverence and piety. It is a divine being, in the Greek sense of the word. The stars and the skies symbolises its divine essence through their regular, eternal, and law-abiding movements²⁷. They offer a clear image of the *kosmos* itself, of its stability and endurance. Thus, they serve as a persuasive example of the Greek idealisation of the world.

The Greek *kosmos* displays not only quantitative aspects, but also qualities and values that the human mind is able to recognise. Human beings exist in a positive, meaningful context which is not a mere stage at their disposal. Nature is a divine entity and man is a part of it. Humanity belongs to the universal *logos*²⁸. So, there is no gap either between being and values or between nature and man. The universe is a *holon*, a whole whose parts fully exist only in their mutual relationships. For this reason, in the

classical framework the anthropological question can only be addressed properly by considering man's position in the world—or, which is the same, by considering man as a part of a whole. In order to fulfil his own nature, man must adjust his behaviour to the cosmic law. So, although the *kosmos* is not affected by man's deeds, man has the power to achieve a fulfilled existence in this world. The best form of life man could ever live gets him in contact with the world for two reasons. First, the world offers all the information man needs to determine his position and consequently his tasks. Secondly, this world is the only and true dimension where man can reach fulfilment and happiness. Human beings' fulfilment lies in perfecting their natural qualities by playing their role in the *kosmos*.²⁹ Hence, the existential attitude of the Greek theory of man is a sense of belonging to this world.

The proper human space in the world is the *polis*,³⁰ which represents the practical requirement of the classical worldview. The *polis* is the middle term that guarantees an enduring agreement between man and the natural order, thus allowing him to fulfil his own nature. In fact, the city embodies the unity of all the citizens through time. It redeems their limited and suffering lives by raising them to eternal relevance and glory. As a living whole, the *polis* remains identical with itself despite changes in its components. In so doing, it reproduces the eternal recurrence of nature. Indeed, the city is a natural entity, something that does not belong to human initiative entirely, but to the order of things. This is why the Greek citizen believes in immortality³¹. He strives to survive in the everlasting memory of the city and, as a consequence, he acts as if the eyes of the whole city were pointed at him. The *polites* identifies himself with the laws and traditions of the city, *nomos* and *ethos*, which shape the most excellent ways of life³². In so doing, he harmonizes himself to the cosmic order, being the city an expression of that order in the first place. By taking part to the political life of the city, man accomplishes his natural goal. He reaches perfection by becoming a *polites*.

The *polis* is, then, the proper environment for man to endorse a virtuous way of life and fulfil his life on earth. According to Jonas, the Greek mind enjoys a self-confident attitude towards its own possibilities. This attitude, however, stems from neither a sense of powerfulness nor the belief in an ontological privilege. By contrast, it originates from a dispassionate awareness of man's limitations. As a consequence, the ideal of self-accomplishment is kept close to human existence and, at the same time, any feeling of cosmic inadequacy or despair is marginalised. The concept of *arete* is most relevant in this regard³³. The *aretai* represent the most excellent ways of living in the world. In fact, virtues indicate which worldly ends are suitable for man and how to act in order to achieve them. By adopting a virtuous attitude, man can bring to perfection the natural faculties with which his soul is endowed. As man's efforts to put reason in charge consciously reaffirm a natural fact, virtues allow man to meet the demands of his own nature. This is why the *telos* is always within man's grasp. The ideal of the good life does not require any reference to an upper level which may conflict with the laws of the world or which may require a more-than-human dedication. Greek virtues establish a *praxis*, that is, an actualization of the authentic

possibilities imprinted in human nature and embedded in the laws and traditions of the city. For this reason, Jonas thinks, the typical mood of Greek being-in-the-world is a sense of existential belonging and a feeling of disenchanting self-confidence.

The virtuous life accomplished in and thanks to the city represents the *polites'* perfection, that is, the fulfilment of what his position in the *kosmos* requires. At the same time, as I mentioned earlier, this sort of wisdom shows a negative side. The Greek man does not overestimate his condition nor try to rearrange the order of things in his favour. He knows that his own deeds are nothing compared to the natural order and looks to the *kosmos* with a mixed feeling of sacred fear and resignation. More specifically, he knows that every human project takes place in the unpredictable realm of *Tuche* and that therefore he is not entirely in control of his own life³⁴. Nonetheless, Jonas thinks that this is not a despairing evidence for the Greek mind. It is up to the resourceful man to face the changeable circumstances in which human beings are bound to exist. So, classical fatalism does not conflict with freedom, but describes the context in which freedom can express itself. Consequently, the Greek man is not a stranger in a world he can't cope with. He does not carry the destiny of the world on his shoulder either. The results he achieves are related to his own situation, their effects are bound to disappear soon and their importance from a cosmic perspective is none³⁵.

This fatalistic conception corresponds to the actual size of the ancient Greek man's power of action³⁶. The ancient Greek man is the master of himself within the walls of the city, but this kind of power cannot compete with the *kosmos*. Nature shows human beings the way to fulfilment, sets the general boundaries of human activity, and is by no means modified by human deeds. All man's efforts and conquests drain away in nature's recurring identity. The uncertainty of human affairs is a defining condition of all human deeds, which are bound to dissolve themselves in the cosmic order. So, the human condition is doomed to remain essentially the same forever. That is why the distant future is not a problem in the eyes of the *polites*. Rather, he is concerned with what happens during his lifetime and among his fellow citizens. In his ethical and political worries he's not pressed by irreversible and long-lasting consequences. Proximity circumscribes the range of Greek actions.

3. The Jewish Tradition: the Man as Repository

Before assessing how the Greek framework assists Jonas in his philosophical task, let us take into consideration his thoughts on the Jewish vision of the world. In this case it is much easier to realise where to look, since Jonas addresses this specific topic in *Jewish and Christian Elements in Philosophy*³⁷ (1967) and *Contemporary Problems in Ethics from a Jewish Perspective*³⁸ (1968). In 1968 Jonas wrote the first version of *The Concept of God after Auschwitz*³⁹ as well. However, the well-known myth appeared for the first time in the already mentioned essay *Immortality and the Modern Temper*, which dates back to 1961 and must be taken into consideration too, since it contains some elements of great interest. Finally, I will

refer also to lesson VII of the 1970 course *Problems of Freedom*⁴⁰.

Whilst the Greek vision of the world is based on the idea of *kosmos*, the cornerstone of the Jewish standpoint is the concept of creation. Yet, creation implies the beginning of time, which in turn rules out the possibility of considering this world as an eternal entity. This means that creation and *kosmos* give birth to mutually exclusive conceptions of the world. In the Jewish framework, necessity and contingency, universals and particulars, will and reason are no more harmonious parts of a general system. On the contrary, they express a duality that stems from the distinction between the Creator and His creatures. For example, the experience of time passing concerns only creatures, which are bound to perish in the same way they were once brought into being. There is of course a relationship between God and the creation. Nevertheless, God and the world are two separate entities and must not be unified or confused. The world cannot be understood as an image of God either, since this is only a man's privilege. Man is the image of God, while the world is God's work. In a word, the Jewish tradition seems to support a dualistic conception of being, with God and Nature as ontologically different entities and man as a middle term which, however, is made in the image of the Creator.

From the glorification of the transcendent God and, to some extent, of man as His own image might very well follow a corresponding underestimation of the world. However, in Jonas's opinion the Jewish tradition does not convey a form of radical dualism. Anti-cosmic beliefs, Jonas claims, do not belong to this framework. For, in this perspective, the world neither exists by itself nor is the outcome of a tragic incident, but originates from an act of will and is shaped according to a divine project that precedes it. Moreover, God expressed satisfaction for his own work: the world met its maker's expectations. Therefore, there are values embedded in the world, even if the world is not the source of them. Despite the difference between God and nature, the goodness of God's work reflects its maker's qualities. Its magnificence inspires admiration and respect. So, since this world is the actualization of God's will, it is provided with an inner meaning.

Let us now turn back to man as an image of God. According to this conception, man is the concretisation of an eternal and divine image. Yet, this image neither is just man's mould nor simply stands for a matter of fact. It represents also an ideal which assigns a life-long task⁴¹. The image shows how man is related to true and objective moral values, as they are revealed by God and embedded in the creation. From a Jewish perspective, man's task consists in approaching to that ideal, or even in actualizing the divine resemblance. Then, a metaphysical dignity belongs to every human being, and it calls for acknowledgement and care. The resemblance, and the dignity that comes from it, establishes an eternal existential attitude. Therefore, moral wisdom is not a progressive form of knowledge as modern science is and the modern man does not stand at the peak of a continuous moral progress. The main contents of morality have been given to mankind once for all and man must preserve their meaningfulness through history⁴². Tradition is the only vehicle of moral wisdom, since it offers the possibility of moral

education. So, the form of wisdom bequeathed by tradition is based on an eternal message to man. Man is the *repository* of such universal and objective wisdom. By studying, pondering, interpreting, and testing it, he may live up to the demands of his own essence. Man's task consists in meaningfully binding together the everlasting message of tradition and the unique historical circumstances in which he exists.

In addition, the Jewish tradition passes on some suggestions about man's relationship to the world. As we have already seen, Jonas claims that the Jewish conception of the world does not imply anti-cosmic beliefs even though it supports a dualistic ontology. From this tenet follows very important consequences for our technological age. Since nature is God's work and bears positive values, creation is not entirely at man's disposal. Of course man's dignity is superior to that of nature, which makes him nature's master. Yet, his authority is not absolute at all. In fact, God entrusted his work to man, expecting him to be a responsible guardian of the wellbeing of the world. Man is not allowed to establish a dictatorship. On the contrary, he is expected to act as a good master who cares for the wellbeing of the subjects. Man must take care of nature, since it mirrors God's splendour: he must acknowledge God's assignment and protect nature's richness. So, the glory of man, which makes him the master of the world, does not consent to his dictatorship, but makes him responsible (and accountable) for nature's safeguard.

These last thoughts match the reflection, which Jonas expressed in *Immortality and the Modern Temper*, on the biblical Book of Life⁴³. In *Psalms 69: 28-29* and in *Malachi 3:16*, for example, the Book of Life is a sort of ledger in which God writes down people's names and merits. In Jonas's opinion, it may be interpreted as a record of all human actions and their consequences on human dignity—or, on the Image of Man—and on the wellbeing of nature. The constantly delayed balance this divine chronicle involves is an evaluation of man's governance. The Book of Life symbolizes the relationship between man and nature, which within the Jewish framework must be one of care, respect and responsibility. As Jonas writes, man is «the eminent repository of this supreme and ever betrayable trust»⁴⁴.

4. Towards a Third Way? Tradition as a Source of Critical Thinking

As noted earlier, Jonas's interest in the Greek and Jewish conceptions of man and the world is essentially theory-laden. Jonas addresses these forms of wisdom while searching for something specific. He is looking for different perspectives which would help him overcome the anthropological dead end sketched in the first section of this paper. He does not aim at a thorough historical account of classical Greek philosophy or of the Jewish culture. By contrast, Jonas shapes two generalisations which serve him as supports for his philosophical task. The frameworks he elaborates, no matter how historically accurate, work as alternative interpretations of man and the world which sustain the critical efforts of the philosopher.

More than revealing something specific about the cultures to which these frameworks are supposed to belong, Jonas puts in practice a method of historical reasoning which is based on (and relies on) the critical power of tradition. Tradition, in Jonas's opinion, is not a set of notions which belong exclusively to a particular moment in the past. Rather, human cultural tradition hands down ideas, the meaningfulness of which the contemporary man can explore in order to understand, define, and criticise his own condition. This means that a plain restoration of the past neither is possible nor desirable. The actual conditions of a particular historical situation must not be overlooked. However, they do not make traditional wisdom useless. The present is a mediation of the past, heavy with future. Man has to carry out this mediation, that is, he has to understand it in order to act responsibly in it. For this is one of man's most important tasks, it is immediately clear how the Jewish conception of man as a repository of a meaningful tradition influences Jonas's mind.

This is not the only aspect which catches Jonas's attention. One of the most important steps in finding out a third way between Heideggerian dualism and scientific monism consists in conceiving a positive idea of nature. This idea, however, has to be compatible with man's specific difference⁴⁵. In order to think man and nature together, without reducing one to the other, it is necessary to locate the foundations of morality within nature itself. In other words, Jonas thinks that the so-called Hume's law must be put aside. Nature is not a value-indifferent object⁴⁶. This is what Jonas aims to demonstrate in *The Phenomenon of Life*.

Now, both the Greek and Jewish frameworks refer to a positive concept of nature which delimits man's will and constitutes a positive context to his activity. Going beyond the modern domination of nature, Jonas seeks the conditions of a being-in-the-world based on the idea of responsible dwelling. Only a world that manifests inner values may be fully dwelled and not just exploited. Likewise, only a positive conception of nature may support man's pursuit of the good life. In fact, man is capable of no satisfaction unless he acknowledges the meaningful context in which he exists. Values are embedded in nature and call for respect and care. The Greek admiration for the beauty of *kosmos* and the related conception of this world as the true dimension of moral fulfilment may still have something to say in this respect. The same goes for the Jewish esteem for God's work and the related commitment to its good administration. Thanks to the mediation of traditional standpoints, the contemporary man may rediscover himself as a part of a whole, as an entity which is not thrown into the world, but belongs to it.

So, this interpretation of nature matches a corresponding interpretation of man. What makes Jonas's task so difficult is the necessity to keep man close to nature without reducing him to its components or functions, that is, to the physical side of existence. In this regard, classical Greek philosophy and the Jewish tradition hint at two different options between which Jonas constantly swings. He is fascinated by the classical idea of man, based on the natural monism of *kosmos*. Yet, in *The Phenomenon of Life* he theorises a metaphysical gap between human and animal life⁴⁷ which cannot but remind the reader of the Jewish idea of man as God's image. Jonas tries to establish man's

full belonging to nature and yet he is always troubled with the actual extent of man's naturality. The problem of the so-called metaphysical gap between man and nature is beyond doubt one of the most complex the critics of Jonas's philosophy have to face. Perhaps deepening our understanding of Jonas's appraisal of the Greek and Jewish anthropological thought may shed an interesting light on this puzzling question.

It has already been said that, in order to unveil their hidden potential, traditional tenets cannot be taken as they are. On the contrary, they must be reread with an eye to the present conditions of man's existence. In this mediation, tradition shows its everlasting meaningfulness. The actual circumstances of a historical situation determine the critical value of tradition. Jonas is very careful in assessing the specific characteristics of his age. He is well aware that technology has essentially modified the human power of action and that modern human agency is very different from that of the *polites*. Similarly, he knows that the modern mind has come into terms with religion and God. Still, tradition may speak to the philosopher and help him developing a critical appraisal of his own situation. Tradition allows the philosopher to put a critical distance between himself and his time without losing connection to it. This is not a conservative attitude towards the present, but a responsible way to dwell in the world and face the future consciously.

Notes

¹ In Jonas's opinion, it is impossible to separate a peculiar image of man from the conception of the world that is held by that man. Man and World are terms which reciprocally define themselves. Cf. H. JONAS, *Problemi di libertà/Problems of Freedom*, Nino Aragno Editore, Torino 2010, p. 337; H. JONAS, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, Teil I*, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen 1988, pp. 12-13. Of course, Jonas follows Heidegger's lesson in this regard. Indeed, Jonas's general understanding of the anthropological problem utterly belongs to the Heideggerian framework, as clearly emerges from his works on Gnosticism and from the presence of Heideggerian-inspired notions throughout *The Phenomenon of Life*.

² H. JONAS, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem. Eine Philosophische Studie zum pelagianischen Streit*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1965.

³ H. JONAS, *Zwischen Nichts und Ewigkeit. Zur Lehre vom Menschen*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1963.

⁴ H. JONAS, *The Phenomenon of Life. Towards a Philosophical Biology*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2001; German edition with additions H. JONAS, *Organismus und Freiheit*, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main-Leipzig 1994.

⁵ H. JONAS, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1979.

⁶ H. JONAS, *Macht oder Ohnmacht der Subjektivität? Das Leib-Seele-Problem im Vorfeld des Prinzips Verantwortung*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1987.

⁷ H. JONAS, *Technik, Medizin und Ethik. Zur Praxis des Prinzips Verantwortung*, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1985.

⁸ H. JONAS, *Philosophische Untersuchungen und metaphysische Vermutungen*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1994.

⁹ H. JONAS, *The Phenomenon of Life*, pp. 135-156.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 157-182.

¹¹ H. JONAS, *Mortality and Morality. A search for the Good after Auschwitz*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1996, pp. 75-86.

¹² I dealt with such pattern in F. FOSSA, "Vision, Image, & Symbol. Homo Pictor and Animal Symbolicum in Hans Jonas's Anthropology", *Aisthesis*, VIII, 2 (2015), pp. 165-182.

¹³ H. JONAS, *The Phenomenon of Life*, pp. 211-234.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 232.

¹⁵ On this see R. FRANZINI TIBALDEO, *La rivoluzione ontologica di Hans Jonas. Uno studio sulla genesi e il significato di "Organismo e Libertà"*, Mimesis, Milano 2009.

- ¹⁶ See H. JONAS, *Jewish and Christian Elements in Philosophy: Their Share in the Emergence of the Modern Mind*, in ID., *Philosophical Essays. From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1974, pp. 21-44.
- ¹⁷ Although many scholars (and, sometimes, Jonas himself) do not seem to support this claim, I think that also Gnosticism may have played a positive role in this regard. I defended this thesis in F. FOSSA, *Il Concerto di Dio dopo Auschwitz. Hans Jonas e la Gnosi*, ETS, Pisa 2015 by focusing on the link that connects Hans Jonas's reception of Heidegger's philosophy of existence, his research on Gnosticisms, and his own philosophical suggestions.
- ¹⁸ H. JONAS, *The Gnostic Religion*, Beacon Press, Boston 1963.
- ¹⁹ H. JONAS, *The Phenomenon of Life*, pp. 64-92.
- ²⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 188-210.
- ²¹ *Ivi*, pp. 262-281.
- ²² For further inquiries into Jonas and ancient philosophy see AA.VV., *Hans Jonas: the Thinker of Antiquity and Modernity*, "Giornale Critico della Storia delle Idee", 14, 2015.
- ²³ H. JONAS, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, Teil I*, p. 142: «innerweltlich-autarken Metaphysik». See also *ivi*, pp. 140-143.
- ²⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 146-148; H. JONAS, *The Gnostic Religion*, pp. 241-250; H. JONAS, *Jewish and Christian Elements in Philosophy*, pp. 27-28.
- ²⁵ See H. JONAS, *The Phenomenon of Life*, pp. 70-71; ID., *Problemi di libertà/Problems of Freedom*, pp. 337-338.
- ²⁶ See H. JONAS, "Bemerkungen zum Systembegriff und seiner Anwendung auf Lebendiges", *Studium Generale*, 10, 1957, pp. 88-94.
- ²⁷ H. JONAS, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, Teil I*, pp. 159-161; H. JONAS, *The Gnostic Religion*, pp. 254-270.
- ²⁸ H. JONAS, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, Teil I*, p. 147 footnote; *ivi*, pp. 238-239.
- ²⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 140-1.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*. See also *ivi*, pp. 238-243, and H. JONAS, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 248.
- ³¹ H. JONAS, *The Phenomenon of Life*, pp. 262-266.
- ³² H. JONAS, *Problemi di libertà/Problems of Freedom*, pp. 262-265.
- ³³ H. JONAS, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, Teil I*, pp. 24-26, 40-41; ID., *The Gnostic Religion*, cit., pp. 266-269.
- ³⁴ H. JONAS, *Problemi di libertà/Problems of Freedom*, cit., pp. 267ss.
- ³⁵ In Jonas's opinion (H. JONAS, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, Teil I*, p. 165), these are the general guidelines to frame classical pessimism. Classical pessimism, we could summarize, is not a form of *intramundane* pessimism such as the gnostic one. By contrast, it is a universal form of pessimism which does not require salvation but acceptance of the way things are. In so doing, it constitutes a proper space for human fulfilment on earth, while *intramundane* pessimism generally advocates retirement from worldly affairs. However, Jonas's account of classical Greek pessimism may very well turn out to be a weak point of his great tableau – see A. MAGRIS, *La logica del pensiero gnostico*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2011, pp. 69ss..
- ³⁶ H. JONAS, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1979, pp. 15-59.
- ³⁷ H. JONAS, *Philosophical Essays*, pp. 21-44.
- ³⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 168-182.
- ³⁹ H. JONAS, *The Concept of God After Auschwitz. A Jewish Voice*, in A.H. FRIEDLANDER (ED.), *Out of the Whirlwind. A Reader of Holocaust Literature*, Schocken Book, New York 1968, pp. 465-476.
- ⁴⁰ H. JONAS, *Problemi di libertà/Problems of Freedom*, pp. 337-349. For a general inquiry into Jonas and the Jewish tradition see C. BONALDI, *Hans Jonas*, in A. FABRIS (ED.), *Il pensiero ebraico nel Novecento*, Carocci, Roma 2015, pp. 182-199. See also C. WIESE, *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas. Jewish Dimensions*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham 2007.
- ⁴¹ The idea of the "Image of Man" as a normative and historical content which is endlessly threatened and, therefore, needs to be repeatedly reaffirmed and appropriately reinterpreted is a recurrent concept in Jonas's ethical reflection, from *Zwischen Nichts und Ewigkeit* to *Philosophische Untersuchungen und metaphysische Vermutungen*. However, even if Jonas hints at this notion in crucial passages, he never addresses it specifically. There is no systematic theory of the "Image of Man" in Hans Jonas's works. This notion remains one of the many *Leitfäden* which run through Hans Jonas's entire oeuvre—the writings on Gnosticism included.
- ⁴² On the relation between what is permanent and what is temporal see the essay *Change and Permanence. On the Possibility of Understanding History*, in H. JONAS, *Philosophical Essays*, pp. 237-260.
- ⁴³ H. JONAS, *The Phenomenon of Life*, pp. 271-274.
- ⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 274.
- ⁴⁵ The claim by which man is a peculiar entity in the realm of nature, since he is endowed with distinctive features, originates not only from the conception of man as God's image but also from the outcomes of Jonas's phenomenological analysis of organism. See H. JONAS, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 157-174.
- ⁴⁶ See Chapter VI of *Gnosticism, Existentialism and Nihilism*, in H. JONAS, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., pp. 232-234.
- ⁴⁷ See the last page of the essay *Image-making and the Freedom of Man* (H. JONAS, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 175) where Jonas theorizes a *metaphysical gap* between animal and human life.

Hans Jonas' Work on Gnosticism as Counterhistory

Elad Lapidot

Abstract: In this article I propose a reflection on the basic meaning of Hans Jonas' work on Gnosticism. This reflection carries implications not just for how to re-evaluate Jonas' work on Gnosticism, but also for how to re-evaluate Jonas' intellectual project in general. I will not be able to fully and systematically develop here my reflection on Jonas' Gnosticism project, much less to provide a full account of its broader implications. What I will propose is a paradigm, a basic hermeneutic perspective for reading or re-reading Jonas. My basic claim is that in his work on late-antiquity Gnosticism Jonas develops not just the conceptual or existential features of a specific historical-spiritual figure, but a narrative, a story, which suggests itself as an alternative deep intellectual history of the West, what I will call here a "counterhistory". In other words, Jonas does not only re-tell the story of Gnosticism, he also re-tells the story of Western thought. Or more precisely, he lays the foundations for such a revised history. As incomplete and preliminary as they may be, these foundations – this is the broader implication I suggest for re-reading Jonas – will continue to inform also Jonas' later, so to speak "post-Gnostic" project. I would even hazard to say that to a certain degree, Jonas' late work is not fully comprehensible without his historical narrative. That is to say, the story of Gnosticism, as told by Jonas, may also provide a narrative structure for the story of Jonas' own lifework.

Keywords: Jonas, Heidegger, Existentialism, Gnosticism, Counterhistory.

1. Introduction

In this article I propose a reflection on the basic meaning of Hans Jonas' work on Gnosticism. This reflection carries implications not just for how to re-evaluate Jonas' work on Gnosticism, but also for how to re-evaluate Jonas' intellectual project in general. I will not be able to fully and systematically develop here my reflection on Jonas' Gnosticism project, much less to provide a full account of its broader implications. What I will propose is a paradigm, a basic hermeneutic perspective for reading or re-reading Jonas.

My basic claim is that in his work on late-antiquity Gnosticism Jonas develops not just the conceptual or existential features of a specific historical-spiritual figure, but a narrative, a story, which suggests itself as an alternative deep intellectual history of the West, what I will

call here a "counterhistory". In other words, Jonas does not only re-tell the story of Gnosticism, he also re-tells the story of Western thought. Or more precisely, he lays the foundations for such a revised history. As incomplete and preliminary as they may be, these foundations – this is the broader implication I suggest for re-reading Jonas – will continue to inform also Jonas' later, so to speak "post-Gnostic" project. I would even hazard to say that to a certain degree, Jonas' late work is not fully comprehensible without his historical narrative. That is to say, the story of Gnosticism, as told by Jonas, may also provide a narrative structure for the story of Jonas' own lifework.

An introductory word about the concept of "counter-history": this article is based on a paper delivered in 2015 in Pisa, in a conference on "The Wisdom of the Ancients. Jerusalem rediscovers Athens: The German-Jewish Revaluation of Ancient Philosophy". My focus in the paper was on the notion of "re-evaluation", namely on the operation of rethinking value, of putting into question a certain consensus and discourse about the value of something and perhaps of attaching new values to it. What interested me was the way in which this operation does not simply consist in attaching new values to the same thing, here "ancient philosophy", but more profoundly in revising the very understanding of what "ancient philosophy", "antiquity" or "philosophy" in general actually is. In other words, I was interested in how reevaluating ancient philosophy entails or entailed rewriting the history of philosophy, and eventually rewriting history itself. This is why, for designating the intellectual project I was reflecting on, I chose the concept of "counter-history".

Under the concept of "counter-history" I do not have in mind a very specific theory. On the conceptual level, it means an alternative narration of history, which does not simply tell a completely different story, but re-reads the same facts in a different manner, thereby ascribing to them a new meaning, which runs counter, opposite to the traditionally accepted one. On a deeper level, in question here is a certain type of intellectual project, of philosophical project, whose fundamental act of conceptual rethinking is inherently intertwined with an act of counter-history, of re-narration of history.

That philosophical thought should imply an act of historiography at all is far from trivial and the cases in which it does not doubt belong to a specific configuration of knowledge and thinking, which in its turn may perhaps itself be characterized historically, for instance as modern. That philosophy should produce *counter*-historiography – this would be a further determination of the same histori-

cal configuration. Ultimately, this article is another effort to think this configuration, through the work of Hans Jonas.

For the sake of comparison, one famous articulation of the counter-historiographical project was offered by Walter Benjamin in *On the Concept of History* (1940), under the notion of history “against the grain”.¹ There, Benjamin describes philosophy from the outset as a historiographical figure, the figure of (crypto-theological) “historical materialism” (thesis I, p. 693). Benjamin’s fundamental observation in this context is that the philosophical struggle, the battle of ideas, is not fought only or even primarily on how we shape our future, but more basically on how we see our past: “[T]he dead too will not be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious” (thesis VI, p. 695). Philosophy thus has a hermeneutical-historiographical task, i.e. to re-read tradition: “In every epoch one must try to deliver tradition anew from the conformism that threatens to take control over it” (ibid.). And so Benjamin arrives at the famous formulation of what I would call his counter-history project:

“No document of culture exists without being simultaneously also a document of barbarism. And just as this document itself is not free from barbarism, so the process of tradition, in which this document has fallen from one [hand] to the other. The historical materialist thus moves as far away from this tradition as possible. He considers it as his task to brush history against the grain” (thesis VII, 696).

As Benjamin notes, the very project of counter-history, i.e. of resisting the prevailing hegemonic narrative, also means resisting the very idea of history as “the image of progress of human kind in history”, namely implies a “critique of the image of progress in general” (thesis XIII, 700), aspiring “to explode the continuum of history” (theses XV and XVI, 701-2). It is so that Benjamin’s idea of explosive counter-history, conceived as resistance to fascism, interestingly corresponds to Amos Funkenstein’s explicit concept of “counter-history”, which diametrically designates historical revisionism and negationism and thus carries the exact opposite connotation, as a “pernicious action, destructive and self-destructive”.²

That I should propose to situate the thought of Hans Jonas, the philosopher of life and world affirmation, in this mercurial environment, is less than obvious. This proposition challenges a narrative that Jonas himself has offered with respect to the relation between his work on Gnosticism and his later work, and the reception of this narrative in the literature on Jonas. It further recalls into question the relation between the Jonasian and the Heideggerian projects, by pointing at a deep affinity between Jonas’ (counter-)history of Gnosticism and Heidegger’s *Seinsgeschichte*.

The structure of my argument will thus be as follows: (1) I will start by explaining in what way my reading of Jonas’ work on Gnosticism as counter-history presents a challenge to Jonas’ own self-narrative; (2) I will then, as the main part of this article, present and demonstrate this reading in Jonas’ major texts on Gnosticism; subsequently, in order to understand the meaning of what I perceive as Jonas’ counter-history, (3) I will indicate its affinity with Heidegger’s project, especially his *Seins-*

geschichte, and its fundamental difference from it; to (4) conclude in an epilogue noting the paradoxical nature of Jonas’ “history against the grain”, which perhaps accounts for its absence from his own self-narrative, and how it may call for a new sensibility in the reading of “The Phenomenon of Life”.

2. From *Gnosis* to Life? A Short History of Jonas

My claim that in his work on Gnosticism in late-antiquity Jonas developed a basic counter-historical narrative that remained decisive for his later work on philosophical biology, stands in opposition to Jonas’ own account of the meaning of his early Gnosticism project to his later philosophy. In a nutshell, the basic motif of Jonas’ account is the profound *break* between his early “historical” research of Gnosticism and his later, non-historical but rather “philosophical” work on the phenomenon of life. This motif of “break” also implies a very specific understanding of the “historical” nature of the Gnosticism project.

Talking about Jonas’ account, I am referring here to Jonas’ retrospective autobiographical narrative of his life work. There should be nothing scandalous in challenging this self-interpretational narrative, in comparison to other readings of Jonas’ work. On the contrary, as Jonas himself noted in 1974 at the beginning of his “Retrospective View” on his work on Gnosticism: “To reminisce is a dangerous matter, as everyone knows. When one looks back, things have somehow been edited in one’s mind, unintentionally but inevitably”.³ This caveat reads almost as an invitation to counter-narration.

In Jonas’ own retrospective view, his work on Gnosticism had a very defined and limited scope. In his 1964 preface to the second edition of his *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* of 1934, he described the book’s project as a “philosophical interpretation of a historical phenomenon”.⁴ In his memoirs of 1989 he explained: “If one wants to talk about my philosophy, it doesn’t start with Gnosticism, but with my efforts for a philosophical biology. My work on Gnosticism was, in contrast, only my apprenticeship [*Gesellenstück*] – an implementation of Heidegger’s philosophy, especially the existential analytics [...] on specific historical material, in this case the Gnosticism of late antiquity”. This work presented nothing more than “a special contribution to the research of late antiquity”.⁵ The same version was repeated by Lore Jonas in her foreword to the memoirs: “I recognize in the work of my husband three phases: his work on *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* he called his ‘apprenticeship’ – a historical work. In *Organismus und Freiheit* he turned to the present, and in *Prinzip Verantwortung* he expressed his concern about the future”.⁶

It is in the “*Lehrbriefe*” to Lore, namely the philosophical letters that the soldier Hans Jonas has written to his wife from the field during Second World War, which his memoirs locate the supposed radical break with the historical “apprenticeship” for the sake of real, non-historical philosophy: “Far from books, without any means of erudite research work, I was thrown back to what actually should concern the philosopher, namely the question of one’s own being and the being of one’s sur-

rounding world. So I started to reflect on what it means for the theory of being, that there are organisms".⁷ Jonas presents here a clearly anti-historicist and anti-hermeneutical view of philosophy: the philosopher's concern, "being", shows itself primarily not in books, but in non-historical existence, i.e. in organic life. Accordingly, his own work on the Gnostic literature does not really belong to his philosophy. As he also expressed it in his "Retrospective View": "I came back from the war with the decision to work out a philosophical program which would take me far afield from historical studies, from Late Antiquity, from Gnosticism and so on: namely the philosophical understanding of our organic Being, and not only ours, but of life in general".⁸

The philosophy of life would constitute a break with the historical study of Gnosticism, because neither the primary object of philosophy, organic life, nor philosophy itself are essentially historical. And so, in his retrospect of 1974 Jonas found himself in need of an "*apologia* for my life as a scholar", i.e. for his historical study of Gnosticism, and identified the "primary philosophical interest in the subject of Gnosticism" in a non-historical, rather typological "analogy between things gnostic and things modern".⁹

This self-narration has also been identified and presented by most prominent contemporary Jonas scholars. Christian Wiese, for instance, in his excellent afterword to the memoirs, distinguishes between the "research of Gnosticism" and the "philosophical work" of Jonas.¹⁰ In this perspective, the earlier work on the Gnostic tradition was, as Jonas himself described it, an exercise of the Heidegger student Jonas in applying his master's existential analytics to "this alien religious-historical phenomenon of antiquity".¹¹ I equally doubt something like Gnostic-based counter-history was what Dietrich Böhler had in mind when, in his recent introduction to the new critical edition of Jonas' collected writings, he proposed "Against the Stream" as "a general critical motto" for the life, thought and work of Hans Jonas.¹² Nonetheless, Böhler does indicate, following Leo Strauss' observation, the "revolutionary character of Gnosis", as told by Jonas, a revolutionary element that has had "a certain philosophical heritage".¹³

I know wish to show that the designation of this revolutionary element as constitutive heritage of Western philosophy is a central motif in Jonas' Gnosticism project from its inception.

3. Jonas' Gnostic Counter-History

3.1. Jonas' Gnosticism Project

It would be inaccurate to call Jonas' work on Gnosticism his "early work", since his engagement on this subject, in various forms, continued for the most part of his academic career, for almost 50 years. This work started in 1925 or 1926 in a talk on *Gnosis* in the Gospel of John that Jonas delivered at Rudolf Bultmann's New Testament seminar in Marburg.¹⁴ It developed to a doctoral dissertation on *The Concept of Gnosis*, which Jonas wrote under Heidegger's supervision and submitted in 1928.¹⁵ The dissertation then led to a larger project, *Gnosticism*

and the *Spirit of Late Antiquity*, the first part of which, *The Mythological Gnosis*, was published in 1934¹⁶, and the second part, *From Mythology to Mystical Philosophy*, 20 years later, in 1954.¹⁷ These books were both in German and published in Germany. In 1957 Jonas published the already mentioned *The Gnostic Religion*¹⁸, a shorter, partly reformulated English version of his work – to quote Jonas: without "the more difficult philosophical elaboration, with its too technical language".¹⁹ In between and also after, he held lectures on Gnosticism, for example in 1938/39 in Jerusalem²⁰ and in 1967/1968 in the New School in New York²¹, and published on the subject up to as late as 1974²².

In what way could Jonas' Gnosticism project be said to constitute "counter-history"?

3.2. Gnosticism as the Paradigmatic Foreign to Common Historiography

The first and most obvious fact in this respect is the historiographic status of the subject-matter, of Gnosticism: it is paradigmatically foreign to common historiography. The phenomenon called "Gnosticism" appears in Western history from the very beginning as an antagonist, a counter-figure. The main sources on Gnosticism from late antiquity have been, until late 19th century, almost exclusively anti-Gnostic texts, mostly polemics of early Church Fathers against Gnosticism. Newly discovered sources were literally dis-covered – namely excavated by archeologists. It is as if the very essence of Gnosticism has been to appear in order to disappear. As Jonas poetically describes it in the Introduction to the 1st edition of the *Gnostic Religion*:

"Out of the beginning of our era there looms a pageant of mythical figures whose vast, superhuman contours might people the walls and ceiling of another Sistine Chapel. [...] [But their] tale has found no Michelangelo to retell it, no Dante and no Milton. The sterner discipline of biblical creed weathered the storm of those days, and both Old and New Testament were left to inform the mind and imagination of Western man. Those teachings which, in the feverish hour of transition, challenged, tempted, tried to twist the new faith are forgotten, their written record buried in the tomes of their refuters or in the sands of ancient lands".²³

If this is the status of Gnosticism in the history of religion – it is all the more so in the history of philosophy. As Jonas observes in 1952, Gnosticism, "a freak even in its own time", was "never admitted to the respectable company of our philosophic tradition".²⁴ Gnosticism would be the paradigmatic "foreign" of the two major Western intellectual historiographies: religion and philosophy.

It should be noted that this encounter and convergence or re-convergence of the Western traditions, discourses and disciplines of religion and philosophy is a significant feature of Jonas' project, already on the existential level. It started in Bultmann's New Testament seminar and turned into a philosophy dissertation with Heidegger.²⁵ Note the significance of the fact that it was not the other way around: to become a doctor of theology in Germany, then and also today, one has to be a member of the church. This may open up a more general reflection on

the role of thinkers of Jewish descent in the modern re-connection of theology and philosophy.

In any case, this was an important aspect of Jonas' *Gnosis and the Spirit of Late Antiquity*, published as Volume 33 in the series of "Researches on Religion and Literature of the Old and New Testament". Later, writing in Canada his preface to the 2nd edition of 1954, Jonas will explain that "religion is an essential aspect of humanity, and [...] no study of philosophy is possible without somehow being joined with a study of religious phenomena".²⁶ However, he admits, due to the philosophical nature of the book, even in its own series it was "like an alien [Fremdling]": its method was alien to theologians and historians of religion, and the material was alien to philosophers, "on whose interest I counted more".²⁷

In fact, the original work was not about the "Gnostic Religion", but on "Gnosticism and the Spirit (*Geist*) of Late Antiquity". In other words, from a Christian anathema, Jonas turned Gnosticism into an element of universal intellectual history, what is called in German "history of spirit" (*Geistesgeschichte*). More specifically, Jonas was interested precisely in the conceptual interrelation between *gnosis*, Greek for "knowledge", and, from the one hand, the Christian *pistis*, and, from the other hand, the ancient Greek *episteme* of "philosophy and science".²⁸ Here, in ancient *Gnosis*, he perceived a point of tangency between what for Moderns seems to be the distinct traditions of philosophy and religion: they converge in what seems to be foreign to both.

3.3. Gnosticism as the Hidden Oriental Principle of the West

This seeming foreignness to intellectual Western tradition is – and this is my second point – precisely the fundamental historiographic motif that Jonas calls into question. In his 1934 introduction he critically refers to earlier researchers, such as Bousset²⁹ and Gruppe³⁰, as having identified in Gnosticism "everywhere products of the past, nowhere proper creation and new original impulse", with "a future value for the history of spirit".³¹ In contrast, to Jonas, Gnosticism, this common "other" of Western religion and philosophy, which has so far been invisible and foreign, is to become the basic principle for Jonas' revolution of history, for his counter-history of the West.

The emergence of this history, its crucial, inaugural event, takes place in what Jonas calls "Late Antiquity". "Late Antiquity" is a threshold, a *krisis*, separating the antique from the non-antique, from the new. It is the beginning of a new era. In Late Antiquity, says Jonas, a new world is born – these are the centuries of the *Zeitenwende*, the change of times.³² What new era begins in late antiquity? What does Jonas refer to? It seems that this new era is none but *our* era, the era of the West, CE: the "common era", the "current era". It is in "late antiquity" that we usually locate our year zero. According to this common count, the beginning of the current era is the birth of Christ; it is therefore, so goes this historiography, the "Christian era".

It is precisely in these terms that Rudolf Bultmann understood the meaning of Jonas' first book on Gnosticism. In his foreword to the book he located Gnosticism at the "turn from the antique understanding of the world

to Christianity".³³ Bultmann recognized the historiographic novelty of Jonas' narrative of late antiquity, but he inscribed it within the general framework of post-antiquity as the Christian Era. For Bultmann, Jonas' contribution lied in showing the importance of Gnosticism not just for "individual phenomena of the New Testament and the old history of the Church", but for "the entire understanding of world and salvation in Christianity".

Jonas' historiographic operation, however, so I submit, is more radical than that. He takes a further step back, and points at *several* spiritual phenomena that appear in the Hellenistic world around the 1st century BC, before our current era: (1) Hellenized Judaism; (2) Babylonian astrology and magic; (3) the mystery cults and religions; (4) Christianity; (5) the Gnostic systems; (6) transcendental, neo-platonic philosophy.³⁴ The "Spirit of Late Antiquity" is a syncretism, a mix of these elements. But what is the center, what is, Jonas asks, "the organizing force in the syncretistic matter", what was "the directing principle, and what the direction", what is "the true agent" of this beginning of our history?³⁵ According to Jonas, the answer is not Christianity, but Gnosticism:

"It appears everywhere in the movements coming from the East, and most conspicuously in that group of spiritual movements which are comprised under the name 'gnostic'. We can therefore take the latter as the most radical and uncompromising representatives of a new spirit, and may consequently call the *general principle*, which in less unequivocal representations extends beyond the area of gnostic literature proper, by way of analogy the 'gnostic principle'".³⁶

What Jonas suggests here is that the fundamental spiritual principle that defines our era, our history, is not Christian, but Gnostic. That is the first element of his counter-history.

The second element concerns the *origin* of the Gnostic principle. As Jonas points out, the traditional view, which considered Gnosticism as a Christian heresy, identified it primarily as Greek, namely as originating in the Greek intellectual tradition of philosophy and science. Exemplary is Adolf von Harnack's position, who defined Gnosticism as the "acute *Verweltlichung*, i.e. becoming-worldly, secular, or Hellenisation of Christianity".³⁷ Now, one of the most significant motifs in Jonas' 1934 book, following the then new directions in Gnostic studies, was the decisive shift from the Greek origin of Gnosticism to what Jonas calls "the East", a geo-ideo-logical designation for the various phenomena mentioned earlier. Interestingly, Jonas' points out how the new "oriental" paradigm of Gnostic research in fact brings together all the different and so far disparate fields of antiquity studies, "beyond the coincidental fragmentation according to linguistic, geographical or religious-dogmatic perspectives in unrelated individual fields of material, and their division in special disciplines, towards a unified observation".³⁸ Oriental Gnosticism emerges, so to speak, as a secret unifying principle both in history and in the historical studies.

In this, Jonas declares a historiographic break with the "exclusive status of Greekness"³⁹ and the humanistic tradition. In other words, by laying the Gnostic principle at

the foundation of Western history, Jonas identifies its core as being something deeply *foreign* to what he calls the “humanistic intellectual history, including the history of philosophy”.⁴⁰ Gnosticism would be the hidden Eastern principle of the West.

3.4. The Gnostic Principle

This brings us to the heart of the matter – the Gnostic principle itself. What is the Gnostic principle and in what way does it counter the Greek-humanistic principle?

This question touches the heart of my reflection here – and of Jonas’ thesis. In order to answer it in a way that moves forward my argument, I will proceed in two phases. I will first provide an initial, more immediate answer, which will conclude this section. On the meaning of this initial answer I will then provide, in the next section, a more complex reflection.

Jonas characterizes the countering effect of the Gnostic intellectual movement as the “*Umwertung antiker Werte*”⁴¹, the “revaluation of antique values”. It is noteworthy (and this is a first hint to a more fundamental point I will make shortly), that this description, even as it challenges the Greco-centric narrative of Western historiography, remains itself within the Greco-centric perspective. Eastern Gnosticism is characterized essentially as non-Greek, as “foreign” to Greekness, as a shift or perversion of Greek values. Topologically, Jonas can only describe Gnosticism as “the eschatological world-mood of the time, which emerges from the East”⁴², because his own narration is situated in the West.

What does this “revaluation” consist in?

On the first, immediate level, we are referred to the “primal content” (*Urgehalt*) that Jonas provides for the Gnostic movement, a concise formulation of its ideal core. It is precisely to showing how this primal content is in fact the ideal core of the foundational Gnostic texts that the greatest part of *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* is dedicated. This ideal core of Gnosticism, according to Jonas, is: “anti-cosmic eschatological dualism”.⁴³ This formulation Jonas refers to an even deeper, more concise “driving motive”, which he expresses in one German word: *Entweltlichungsstendenz* (ibid.), i.e. a tendency of taking distance from the world. The fundamental “anti-cosmic” tendency implies an opposition between the world, as a negative principle, element or *topos*, and a fundamentally different, outer-worldly principle, the positive one. Anti-cosmism implies dualism. Since man is in the world, i.e. in the midst of negativity, anti-cosmism also means a movement of departure, of liberation from the negative, the evil, directed towards the positive and good – an “eschatological” movement of redemption. It is easy to see how this characterization is essentially *negative*, designating a movement of resistance or “distance-taking” with respect to a more primal attitude – a *pro-world* attitude, which Jonas identifies with the Greek. In its content too, Gnosticism is counter-Greekness.

What is the counter-historiographical meaning of this Gnostic principle? In other words, how does the discovery of this principle in late antiquity, as the constitutive anti-cosmic, anti-Greek, oriental principle of the Common Era, affect Jonas’ history of the West? Where and how does the hidden Gnosticism of the West manifest itself?

It is at this point, I think, that Heidegger enters the story.

4. The Story of Jonas and Heidegger

4.1. Gnostic Physics

The figure of Heidegger is omnipresent in Jonas’ work on Gnosticism. Not only is Heidegger, together with Bultmann, said by Jonas to be his most important teacher and influence in this project⁴⁴, but in his 1934 book Jonas takes Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* as the “systematic foundation” for his own interpretation of the Gnostic sources.⁴⁵ It is in the Heideggerian categories of the *Daseinanalyse* that Jonas presents Gnosis as the Gnostic *Dasein*, the Gnostic existence. This procedure is presented in the book as purely methodological: Heidegger’s “philosophy of existence”, as Jonas refers to it, simply provided a useful set of basic categories in which to conceptualize human existence in general, and thus also the specific Gnostic one. It is the very notion that human existence in general *can* be, within a legitimate academic project, conceptualized by a limited set of categories, which provided Jonas his innovation vis-à-vis the purely historical-philological Gnostic studies, namely the attribution of the entire Gnostic literature to one basic existential posture – *Entweltlichungsstendenz*.

Nonetheless, this professedly methodological use has at least one important exception. This exception is found in one of the rare places in the 1934 book where Jonas concretely tries to point at the Gnostic principle at work in the heart of Western intellectual tradition, i.e. concretely engages in counter-historiography of the West. This attempt is found in a long and rich footnote, so to speak the “historiographic footnote”, which also contains valuable statements concerning the roles of Judaism and Christianity in the hidden Gnostic history.⁴⁶ Jonas himself will remember well this footnote and refer to it ones again at a historiographically critical point of his “Phenomenology of Life”.⁴⁷

Gnosticism, Jonas explains in this footnote, by alienating man and God from the world, operates (through the historical mediation of Christianity) “the *Entgöttlichung* [i.e. de-divinization, de-sacralization] of visible objectivity, thereby flattening it to the level of things that are indifferently present-at-hand [*vorhanden*], merely worldly”. This leads in “the spirit of later periods” – “one may well hazard the claim” – to “the fundamental possibility of a purely ‘physicalistic’ observation of nature”.⁴⁸

It is easy to recognize here a Heideggerian critique of the mathematical-physicalistic nature of Western, particularly modern, post-Cartesian thought and science, as Heidegger presented, for example, in *Being and Time*:

“The classical example for the historical development of a science and even for its ontological genesis, is the rise of mathematical physics. What is decisive for its development...lies in *the way in which nature itself is mathematically projected*. This projection discovers primarily things that are constantly present-at-hand [*ein ständig Vorhandenes*] (matter) and opens the horizon for the guiding perspective on its constitutive moments, which are quantitatively determinable (movement, force, location and time).”⁴⁹ [emphases in the original]

In 1934, so it seems, Jonas did not only analyze the historical phenomenon of Gnosticism in Heidegger's philosophical terms, but identified the Gnostic principle as the deep source that has been generating the very fundamental attitude to the world that was the object of Heidegger's critique of modernity, namely the "purely" or "mathematical" physicalist ontology.

4.2. Gnostic Existentialism

20 years, one World War later, Jonas revised his position. In his aforementioned 1952 essay on "Gnosticism, Existentialism and Nihilism"⁵⁰, the Gnostic principle is taken as a key for understanding the spirit of modernity, of which the physicalism of modern natural science is now understood as being only one side of the coin. The other side of modern Gnosticism is "man's loneliness in the physical universe of modern cosmology".⁵¹ The modern human condition is that of a "foreigner in the world".⁵² The counterpart of modern natural science is therefore a modern philosophy that is profoundly world-negating, profoundly, says Jonas, "nihilist". The hidden Gnosticism in modernity is nihilism, and modern nihilism, Jonas observes, has reached its most accomplished manifestation in existentialism, whose "most profound and still most important manifestos" is Heidegger's *Being and Time*.⁵³

Having used Heidegger's categories for conceptualizing late-antique Gnosticism, Jonas now turns in the opposite direction and takes the Gnostic categories for interpreting Heidegger, who now becomes the embodiment of modern Gnosticism. As Jonas describes it: "the hermeneutic functions become reversed and reciprocal – lock turns into key, and key into lock: the 'existentialist' reading of Gnosticism, so well vindicated by its hermeneutic success, invites as its natural complement the trial of a 'gnostic' reading of Existentialism".⁵⁴ This reversal is not just a methodological *Kehre*, but a reevaluation. 20 years and one World War later, Jonas, as many others, turns from a student into a critic of Heidegger.

4.3. Gnostic History and "Seinsgeschichte"

There is, however, another important side of Heidegger's thought, which is highly or even primarily relevant for appreciating the counter-historiographical aspect of Jonas' notion of Gnosticism. In his discussions of Heidegger both before and after the war, subject to one famous exception that I will discuss below, Jonas refers exclusively to Heidegger of *Being and Time*, that Jonas, as many others, understands as the "existentialist" Heidegger.⁵⁵ If this designation is at all appropriate for Heidegger's early philosophy (Heidegger himself denied it⁵⁶), his later writings take a different direction, what is commonly referred to in the Heidegger's reception as the "*Kehre*", the turn.⁵⁷ One of the first shapes that Heidegger's post-turn philosophy takes, from the early 1930s, i.e. during the exact time that Jonas was writing the first volume of *Gnosticism and the Spirit of Late Antiquity*, is that of the *Seinsgeschichte*, which can be translated as "the History of Being". This is a very inadequate translation, but it does convey the important point for me now,

namely of a philosophical thought that is essentially engaged in historiography.

Although Jonas, writing in the early 1930s, is aware of Heidegger's concept of *Seinsgeschichte*⁵⁸, nowhere, to my knowledge, does he reflect on the relation between the Heideggerian historical-hermeneutical project and his own work on Gnosticism. I would like to suggest a rather close relation. Without going here into the specifics of Heidegger's onto-historical project⁵⁹, I submit that both this project and Jonas' Gnosticism project set out, during the same years, to perform a reevaluation of Western intellectual history, both are in this sense counter-histories. It seems to me that a very general comparison between the basic features of the two projects could shed more light on the exact meaning and profound ambivalence of Jonas' Gnostic history of the West.

The two counter-narratives, the Heideggerian and the Jonasian, have one crucial point in common: both take Athens, i.e. classic Greek antiquity, as the ultimate reference point for Western history. The two narratives, however, are diametrically opposed in their basic appreciation of the role of the Greek beginning in this history, and of this history in general, *as history*. For Jonas, as I showed above, the hidden "foreign" element exposed by him in Western history, *Gnosticism*, was an Eastern disruption and negation of the original, positive Greek *cosmos*. In contrast, for Heidegger, it is Athenian philosophy itself that constitutes the metaphysical disruption in the original event of being – the beginning of *Seinsverlassenheit*, the "abandonment of being", of *Seinsvergessenheit*, the "forgetfulness of being".⁶⁰ Simply said, the Greeks begin the history of being by an act of forgetfulness of being, by forgetting being, i.e. the history of being begins in Greece by forgetting itself as such, *as a history of being*. Heidegger's first counter-measure against this forgetfulness is precisely the *Seinsgeschichte*.

This is not at all Jonas' project. His self-narration, as I demonstrated above, is outspokenly anti-historicist: a development from the historical study of Gnosticism to the real philosophical study of organic life. In the one famous exceptional occasion, where Jonas does refer to the later Heidegger, namely in his strongly critical 1964 speech on "Heidegger and Theology", he criticizes, in the name of freedom of thought, the "fateful nature of thought" in Heidegger. This fatefulness of thought lies, thus Jonas' reading of Heidegger, in its "dependence upon what is sent to it, and the sending issues from the history of being".⁶¹ In Jonas' own counter-reading of Western thought, the forgetfulness of history is most definitely *not* what has gone amiss through the Gnostic disruption of Greekness.

On the contrary, I suggest that to a very important extent, in Jonas' conception, historical thinking itself is an expression of the Gnostic principle. As already said, Gnosticism for Jonas is the embodiment of the "new". It introduces a new era – ends antiquity. In fact, it not only ends antiquity, it generates antiquity: "antiquity", the ancient, old time, is only produced through the emergence of the new time, the new, post-antiquity era. The Gnostic "new" breaks the Greek continuity of time. This break in the continuity of time, generating old and new, is precisely what generates something like "history".

It should be well noted that this is not just the relative effect of the emergence of Gnosticism, but it constitutes

the essence of Gnosticism. According to Jonas, in contrast to the ancient spirit of human harmony with the given *cosmos*, the given natural, sociological, political, moral order of the world, late-antiquity *Gnosis* is the exact negation of this givenness, namely the fundamental human foreignness to the given world, to "this" world. Gnosis is not at all, as Harnack thought "worldly", but the exact opposite principle of being *weltfremd*, foreign to the world, the world as it is, as it is present-at-hand (*vorhanden*).

In fact, what is for Jonas a seminal Gnostic text, "the programmatic formulation of Gnosticism"⁶², a passage from Clemens of Alexandria's notes on the teachings of the Valentinian Gnostic teacher Theodotus, which Jonas quotes in all his works on Gnosticism, can be read as a possible definition of the very philosophical vocation of historical knowledge:

"[What makes us free] is the knowledge [of] who we were, what we have become; where we were, wherein we have been thrown; whereto we speed, wherefrom we are redeemed; what is birth and what rebirth" [Clemens Alex., *Exc. ex Theod.* 78, 2].⁶³

I leave here open the question about the precise relations between Gnosticism and historicism in themselves.⁶⁴ It seems to me that in Jonas' conception they have a lot in common. Jonas' post- and anti-Gnostic project is not formulated as proceeding from cosmology to history, but from history to cosmology. I wonder if this project could not be described as countering history itself, as returning from the oriental *mythos* to Athenian *physis*. Jonas' central criticism against Heidegger is that "[n]o philosophy has ever been less concerned about nature".⁶⁵ Indeed, the conclusion of Jonas' years of Gnosis and Heidegger seems to be a decisive return to pre-Gnostic Greek philosophy of man's harmony with nature, which would become a central motif in Jonas' later work.

5. Epilogue: Counter-History of Life

The result of the aforesaid is somewhat paradoxical. It indicates in Jonas' oeuvre a critical historiography that accuses Western thought of a Gnostic tendency to historicism. In other words, the aforesaid suggests in Jonas a counter-history, which counters the very principle of historicity, an anti-historical counter-history. This anti-historicity, I think, is more radical than Benjamin's resistance to the idea of history as "the image of progress of human kind in history", to which also Heidegger's *Seinsgeschichte* could subscribe. Both Benjamin and Heidegger contest a common notion of history in order to argue for a different notion, whereas Jonas appears to counter the very dimension of history as essential for thought. This is what makes his historiography paradoxical, which could explain why it is excluded from his own and accordingly common account of his work.

To conclude, I would like to quickly suggest that awareness to the historiographical elements in Jonas' earlier work, with its paradoxical or ambivalent nature, may also lead to a new sensibility in reading his later work. Primarily, it will complicate the narrative about the alleged shift from the "historical study" of Gnosticism to

the "philosophical inquiry" of life. In this framework, it will be necessary to reflect on the precise nature of the conceptual struggle, the intellectual drama at work in "The Phenomenon of Life".

One struggle is that of life itself, emerging in the primitive form of vegetal metabolism and climbing up the scale of freedom, liberating itself to ultimately achieve the summit of human thought, action and knowledge. Next to this organic drama, however, Jonas' text traces another plot, no less dramatic, which concerns not life itself, but precisely the *phenomenon* of life, namely the image or idea of life. There would be a life struggle that takes place in the dimension of knowledge and thought of life, a dimension that is not organic, but historical. There would be thus a struggle of life itself against the history of the idea of life, a history of alienation, anti-cosmism and dualism, as Jonas tells it, which has been the historical spirit of science itself, since around late antiquity.

Notes

¹ Walter Benjamin, „Über den Begriff der Geschichte“ (1940), in *Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I.2, hg. v. R. Tiedemann und H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1991 (1974), 691-707. The translations are mine.

² Amos Funkenstein „History, Counterhistory, and Narrative“, in: Saul Friedländer (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, p. 69.

³ Published as the "Preface to the Third Edition" of *The Gnostic Religion*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1991, xiii.

⁴ Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist. 1. Die mythologische Gnosis: mit einer Einleitung zur Geschichte und Methodologie der Forschung*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988 (1st ed. 1934; 2nd ed. 1964), p. viii.

⁵ Hans Jonas, *Erinnerungen*, Nach Gesprächen mit Rachel Salamander, Vorwort von Rachel Salamander, Geleitwort von Lore Jonas, Herausgegeben und mit einem Nachwort versehen von Christian Wiese, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2003, S. 117. The translations are mine.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁸ *The Gnostic Religion*, xxvi.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 404.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 403.

¹² Dietrich Böhler, „Einführung in die Kritische Gesamtausgabe“, in: *Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke von Hans Jonas*, Band I/1, hg. von Horst Gronke, Freiburg/Berlin/Wien, 2010, XVII-LXIV, p. XVII.

¹³ *Ibid.*, XXXVIII, where Böhler quotes Jonas telling how Strauss, having read his book on Gnosticism, wrote to Jonas that "based on his personal acquaintance with me, he never realized that I was actually a hidden revolutionary" (see *Erinnerungen*, 262).

¹⁴ *The Gnostic Religion*, xvi.

¹⁵ Hans Jonas, *Der Begriff der Gnosis*, Marburg, Univ., Diss., 1928, Teildruck, Göttingen: Hubert 1930. This publication only contains a part of the dissertation. Further parts of the dissertation, partly handwritten and partly typewritten, is found in the Hans Jonas Archive in Konstanz, as HJ-2-17-54 and HJ-13-30-1.

¹⁶ Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist. 1. Die mythologische Gnosis: mit einer Einleitung zur Geschichte und Methodologie der Forschung*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1934 (hereinafter, „GSG I“).

¹⁷ Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist. 2.1. Von der Mythologie zur mystischen Philosophie*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954.

¹⁸ See above.

¹⁹ *The Gnostic Religion*, xxxv.

²⁰ Hans Jonas Archive, HJ-13-18 ("The Jerusalem Lectures").

²¹ Hans Jonas Archive, HJ-20-12, HJ-1-17-15 and HJ-1-17-17.

²² See for instance, Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1974.

²³ *The Gnostic Religion*, xxxi.

- ²⁴ Jonas, “Gnosticism, Existentialism, Nihilism”, first published as “Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism”, *Social Research* 19 (1952), reprinted in and quoted here from *The Gnostic Religion*, 320-341, p. 320.
- ²⁵ “Heidegger talked to me about it and said, ‘If you want to, I am willing to accept a dissertation in philosophy on that topic or something connected with it.’”, *The Gnostic Religion*, xvii.
- ²⁶ GSG 1, xiv.
- ²⁷ GSG 1, viii-ix.
- ²⁸ GSG 1, xviii.
- ²⁹ Wilhelm Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1907.
- ³⁰ Probably Otto Gruppe, *Die griechischen Culte und Mythen in ihren Beziehungen zu den orientalischen Religionen*, Leipzig 1887.
- ³¹ GSG 1, 23-24.
- ³² GSG 1, 74.
- ³³ GSG 1, vi.
- ³⁴ GSG1, 25; The Jerusalem Lectures, 19.
- ³⁵ *The Gnostic Religion*, 26.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 1. Band, Akademische Verlagsbuchhandlung von J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Freiburg i. B. 1888, 190.
- ³⁸ GSG, 4.
- ³⁹ GSG, 4.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ⁴¹ GSG 1, 146.
- ⁴² GSG 1, 5.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ *The Gnostic Religion*, xiv.
- ⁴⁵ GSG, 90-91.
- ⁴⁶ GSG, 176-7, n. 2.
- ⁴⁷ *Organismus und Freiheit*, KGA Jonas I/1, p. 31.
- ⁴⁸ GSG, 176-7, n. 2.
- ⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 1967 (1927¹), 362. The translation is based on John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson’s translation, *Being and Time*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1962, p. 413-414, with my modifications.
- ⁵⁰ *The Gnostic Religion*, pp. 320-341.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 322.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 323.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 335.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 321.
- ⁵⁵ In contrast to “the later Heidegger who is certainly no ‘Existentialist’”, *ibid.*, 337, note 13.
- ⁵⁶ See his marginalia to his copy of *Being and Time*, where, with respect to the statement that the question of existence aims at “the analysis of what constitutes existence” (p. 12), he write: “so no existential philosophy [Existenzphilosophie]” (*Sein und Zeit*, p. 440). See also Martin Heidegger, *Brief über den Humanismus* (1946), GA 9, 313-365.
- ⁵⁷ See Martin Heidegger, *Ein Vorwort. Brief an Pater William J. Richardson* (1962), GA 11, 143-152.
- ⁵⁸ He speaks of a “*seinsgeschichtliche Prozess*”, GSG 1, p. 187, note 1.
- ⁵⁹ For a recent presentation, see for instance Tobias Keiling, *Seinsgeschichte und phänomenologischer Realismus. Eine Interpretation und Kritik der Spätphilosophie Heideggers*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2015; see also Jeffrey Andrew Barash, *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning*, New York: Fordham, 2003, pp. 189-252.
- ⁶⁰ See for instance Martin Heidegger, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit*, GA 9, 203-238.
- ⁶¹ Hans Jonas, “Heidegger and Theology”, *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Dec. 1964), 207-233, pp. 215-6.
- ⁶² GSG 1, 108.
- ⁶³ Quoted by Jonas in GSG1, *ibid.*; The Jerusalem Lectures, 39; “Gnosticism, Existentialism, Nihilism”, in *The Gnostic Religion*, 334; *The Gnostic Religion*, 45.
- ⁶⁴ There seems to be at least one thinker, a contemporary of pre-WWII Jonas, Franz Rosenzweig, for whom history might have been the answer to Gnosticism, see Benjamin Pollock, *Franz Rosenzweig's Conversions: World Denial and World Redemption*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014.
- ⁶⁵ “Gnosticism, Existentialism, Nihilism”, 337. It should be noted that this critique stands in a *prima facie* contradiction to Jonas’ criticism of Heidegger in the name of Christian theology: “It must be clearly and unambiguously understood that the ‘being’ of Heidegger is, with the ‘ontological difference’, *inside* the bracket with which theology must bracket in the totality of the created world. The being whose fate Heidegger ponders is the quintessence of this world, it is *saeculum*. Against this, theology should guard the radical transcendence of its God, whose

The Law and the Philosopher. On Leo Strauss' "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*"

Ferdinand Deanini

Abstract: This paper presents an interpretation of Leo Strauss' essay on Yehuda Halevi's *Kuzari* that focuses on reading it as a philosophic text in its own right. It argues that Leo Strauss uses the *Kuzari* to show the central importance the question of a fully rational law has for an adequate understanding of the relationship between philosophy and society. Strauss presents the philosophic view as ultimately denying any absolute obligations based on moral laws and puts it in opposition to a position that claims the law to be obligatory not as rational, but as divinely revealed.

Keywords: Leo Strauss, Yehuda Halevi, *Kuzari*, Philosophic Life, Political Philosophy.

1. Introduction

Leo Strauss' Essay "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*" is without doubt one of his less known works*. This is hardly surprising, as it appears – at least at first glance – to be a merely scholarly discussion of Yehuda Halevi's *Kuzari*, a somewhat obscure work of medieval Jewish literature. But already at the beginning of his essay, Strauss indicates that he has more in mind than a work of scholarship when he poses the question of "what philosophy is or what a philosopher is" (LRK §1, p. 95).¹ This question, Strauss continues, can only be resolved through a discussion of the Natural Law or, more specifically, of the possibility of a rational law, a Law of Reason.

This paper focuses on Strauss' understanding of this "Law of Reason" and its relationship to philosophy and the philosopher. In the first part, I will discuss the term "Law of Reason" in comparison to other terms employed by Strauss in his essay, namely "Natural Law" and the "rational *nomoi*." Then I will turn to the Law of Reason both as the philosophic law and as the basis for every law. Afterwards, Strauss' hypothetical interpretation of Halevi as what one may call a "lapsed" philosopher will be discussed. I will conclude with the question of Strauss' intention in posing the question of "what a philosopher is" specifically in the context of his essay on the *Kuzari*.

Yehuda Halevi, the author of the *Kuzari*, was an important Jewish poet who lived in the Islamic part of Spain during the late 11th and early 12th century CE.² The *Kuzari* is his most famous work and has to this day remained an important part of the Jewish literal tradition.³ It presents

mainly a dialogue between a Jewish Scholar and the king of the Khazars, the eponymous "Kuzari," which results in the latter's conversion to Judaism. As such the book can be called an example of Jewish apologetics because Halevi presents various other religious positions that are then refuted by the Jewish scholar. The setting of the dialogue itself is based on the historical conversion of the Khazars, a nomadic people that ruled a kingdom in the Caucasus region between the 7th and 10th century CE.⁴ Halevi possibly drew on older accounts of this event, but the dialogue itself is entirely fictional.⁵ The main interlocutors relevant for the discussion in this paper will be the philosopher, the Jewish scholar, and the king of the Khazars.

Strauss published his essay on the *Kuzari* first in 1943 and later included it in the collection *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, where it is situated between the essays on Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* and Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*, respectively.⁶ As such, it forms the central part of a triad of essays that all discuss works of Jewish authors on law. But while the other two parts are mainly concerned with divinely revealed law and specifically the Bible, the essay on the *Kuzari* discusses the Law of Reason, i.e. the law of the philosophers.

Despite this prominent place in Strauss' oeuvre, the essay on the *Kuzari* has generally found only moderate scholarly interest compared to books like *Natural Right and History*.⁷ Recently, Laurence Lampert published a substantial interpretation of the "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*" that assigns the essay a central role in Strauss' "embrace [of] exotericism".⁸ Lampert's reading would warrant a detailed discussion that goes beyond what this paper is trying to accomplish. I will thus refer to it only when it immediately applies to the argument presented here.

2. The Law of Reason

Strauss begins his essay by contrasting two opposing understandings of the "Natural Law," a term that, as he adds, "is as indispensable as it is open to grave objections" (LRK §1, 95). Citing the medieval author Marsilius of Padua, Strauss presents what he calls "the philosophic view" of the *ius naturale* (LRK §3, p. 97), which identifies the Natural Law with those moral rules that are accepted by many different political communities (LRK §2-4, pp. 95-98). As such these rules can, however, only me-

taphorically be called natural, because they are based on mere convention that may or may not have a rational, i.e. natural, foundation. They are only, as Marsilius puts it, “quasi-natural”.⁹ The other view, which Strauss calls “perhaps (...) the theological view” (LRK §3, p. 98), is represented by Thomas Aquinas. It amounts to the supposition that natural laws are inherent in human rationality (*rationi inditum*) and, as such, non-conventional and universally binding. It is noteworthy that from the beginning of the essay, Strauss frames the question of the Natural Law as a dichotomy between a theological view, on the one hand and a philosophic or, as one might add, anti-theological view, on the other. Against the authority of Marsilius of Padua and Thomas Aquinas, Strauss calls upon Yehuda Halevi, who seems to contradict the “impression that the philosophers (...) denied the rational character of the Natural Law” (LKR §4, p. 98). Halevi, in other words, appears to present in his dialogue a philosopher who asserts the existence of a rational law, a Law of Reason.

Strauss’ term “Law of Reason” is a peculiar terminological choice. It is deliberately meant to confuse the reader, since Strauss uses “Law of Reason,” “rational laws,” or “rational *nomoi*,” among others, which sound similar at first, with various meanings. Therefore, the reader of the essay is always required to consider the context in which Strauss uses these different terms, as their meaning shifts while the argument progresses. In addition, while one might expect the title-giving “Law of Reason” to be a term taken from the *Kuzari*, Halevi never actually uses it. Strauss indicates this by only referring to “rational laws” or, most prominently, “rational *nomoi*” when he directly cites the *Kuzari*.¹⁰ By using a general philosophic term not directly employed by Halevi, Strauss shows that his interpretation of Halevi’s teaching serves to illuminate the general philosophic question of the relationship between reason and law and has to be understood as doing so.

But even the seemingly more “historical” term “rational *nomoi*” serves a rhetorical purpose and is not merely a direct translation from the *Kuzari*. As Strauss points out in a footnote: “The term employed by Halevi (...) means literally ‘the intellectual *nomoi*.’ I am not at all certain whether this literal translation is not the more adequate one.” (LRK §4, p. 98 n. 8). The reason for Strauss’ decision in favor of the less literal translation becomes clear, when he later points out that “Plato’s *Laws* were known in Halevi’s period as Plato’s rational *nomoi*” (LRK §20, p. 116). When speaking of the “rational *nomoi*” as *the* philosophic position, Strauss has a specific philosophic position in mind, namely the one taken by ancient philosophy and especially Platonic philosophy.

3. The rational *nomoi* of the philosophers

What do we have to understand by these “rational *nomoi*”? To answer this question, Strauss begins with the explanation the philosopher gives to the king of the Khazars in the first part of the *Kuzari* (LRK §16-21, pp. 112-118). According to this account, the rational *nomoi* seem primarily intended to regulate the life of philosophers. This regulation is based on an understanding of human

nature that sees philosophy as the highest perfection of man. The rational *nomoi* “have been set up by the philosophers with a view to the unchanging needs of man as man” (LRK §20, p. 116). The life of the philosopher consists essentially in theoretical contemplation and seems as such completely disinterested in any social interaction beyond the barest minimum. “The philosopher denies the relevance (...) of all actions; more precisely, he asserts the superiority of contemplation as such to action as such” (LRK §18, p. 114). Strauss can thus call the rational *nomoi* with some justification a “*regimen solitarii*” (LRK §20, p. 116), a regulation for the life of a hermit.

But in his dialogue with the king, the philosopher cannot completely deny the relevance of social interactions, especially as the king is deeply concerned with social, or, more precisely, political and religious matters. The king, prompted by a prophetic dream, wants to know which religion he should adopt for himself and his country. To this question the philosopher answers in a manner that seems to reveal a complete agnosticism: He advises the king to decide this question based purely on practical expediency. The king might simply remain in his ancestral religion, he might choose one of the existing religions for himself, or he might even invent an entirely new religion. As Strauss points out: “The religious indifference of the philosopher knows no limits” (LRK §19, p. 115).

Strangely enough, the philosopher also presents a fourth option to the king: to adopt the rational *nomoi* of the philosophers as his own religion. We learn that the rational *nomoi* are “identical with ‘the religion of the philosophers’” (LRK §20, p. 116). How can this statement be understood in light of the philosopher’s supposed complete religious indifference? It soon becomes clear that this indifference only concerns outward actions, the adherence to this or that religious ceremony and creed. Regarding divine revelation, the philosopher is far from indifferent. Rather, he completely denies divine revelation, or, as Strauss defines it, “information given by God immediately to human beings concerning the kind of action which is pleasing to him” (LRK §9, p. 103). The philosopher primarily denies God as a lawgiver. According to his theology, “God has no likes or dislikes, no wish or will of any kind” (LRK §18, p. 113). The philosopher thus interprets God in accordance with his general understanding of the highest excellence consisting not in action, but in contemplation.

The rational *nomoi* of the philosophers can accordingly be called a religion because they have a certain set of theological implications. But there is another aspect that ties them to religion. As Strauss later points out, “philosophy presupposes social life” in the sense that a contemplative way of life is only possible in a society that provides enough leisure for it (LRK §44, p. 139). Because the philosopher cannot ignore his social environment, his rational *nomoi* have to include a “governmental part” (LRK §43, p. 138), a political component that regulates his relations with others. The full meaning of this governmental part is, as Strauss shows, spelled out only by the Jewish scholar, and not by the philosopher himself (LRK §24, pp. 120-121). As an enemy of philosophy, the scholar can state clearly what the philosopher is reluctant to reveal in public. The rational *nomoi* of the philosophers turn out to have both an “exoteric” (LRK §24, p. 121),

that is, political teaching directed at non-philosophers and an “esoteric” meaning intended for potential philosophers who are capable of disentangling it from the teaching as a whole. But, as Strauss makes clear, not every philosopher weighs these elements in the same manner. While some may limit their rational *nomoi* to “an essentially apolitical rule of conduct,” others may present an “essentially political code” (LRK §20, p. 116). This code is intended not only for the guidance of potential philosophers, but also encompasses legislation for a particular political community. As such, though, the exoteric teaching has to convince the citizens of a specific community.

The rational *nomoi* can then be understood both as a set of laws for a particular political community and as a personal code of conduct for the life of the philosopher (LRK §20, pp. 115-117). As a set of political laws, the rational *nomoi* have to demand obedience from the citizens of the political community, which they are supposed to regulate. For this purpose, they require a different basis than pure rationality, as not all – or even most – citizens will be able to understand the view of the philosophers rationally. The philosophers are forced to invent religious myths to support their rational *nomoi*, giving them the form of a religion. As an “essentially political code,” the rational *nomoi* therefore contain “a political theology” (LRK §20, p. 116).¹¹ This religion, despite being invented by philosophers, can never be called fully rational, as it will by necessity include elements that are politically useful, but not theoretically sound (LRK §23-24, pp. 119-121). Strauss makes this very clear by singling out “that God is a lawgiver” as a theological teaching the philosopher “must consider untrue” (LRK §24, p. 121), a position that is obviously incompatible with the alleged divine origin of the civil laws proclaimed by the philosophers. Their religion “is, at best, a likely tale” (LRK §24, p. 121).

The philosophers do not consider the rational *nomoi* obligatory, either as a political legislation or as a personal code of conduct. Both aspects stand in the service of the philosophic way of life. They “have been set up by the philosophers with a view to the unchanging needs of man as man; they are codes fixing the political or other conditions most favorable to the highest perfection of man” (LRK §20, p. 116). And the legislative aspect of the rational *nomoi* is ultimately not a necessary element for them: “The philosopher’s law is not necessarily a political law” (LRK §20, pp. 116-117). Their concern is the “philosophic life” (LRK §20, p. 117), which is distinguished from – if not contrary to – the political life.¹²

4. The Law of Reason and the Natural Law

The Jewish scholar – of course – rejects the rational *nomoi* of the philosophers, as he believes in the truth of the divinely revealed Jewish Law. But surprisingly enough, his rejection is only a partial rejection. By comparing the different statements of the scholar, Strauss shows that the scholar uses the term “rational *nomoi*” in an ambiguous way (LRK §29-41, pp. 118-135). On the one hand, there are the rational *nomoi* meant as a “complete code,” which the scholar rejects, but on the other hand,

there are the rational *nomoi* understood as a “framework of every code,” which he accepts as true (LRK §42, p. 136). This distinction is possible because the scholar tacitly separates the *regimen solitarii* of the philosophers from its “governmental part” (LRK §43, p. 138), the part of the rational *nomoi* that is concerned with regulating the social relations of the philosopher (LRK §42-44, pp. 135-139). While being a necessary element of the “Law of Reason,” i.e. the complete code taught by the philosophers, this “governmental part” is separable because it is based on the necessities underlying all social relationships.

These necessities form the “framework of every code” of law and are what Strauss now calls the “Natural Law” in contradistinction to the “Law of Reason” (LRK §42, p. 136). This Natural Law cannot be called fully rational, “if universal validity is taken as an unambiguous sign of rationality” (LRK §37, p. 133). When we consider the opposition between the “quasi-natural,” i.e. commonly accepted laws, and the Natural Law as a rational and obligatory law, as Strauss had presented it at the beginning of his essay (LRK §2, pp. 95-96), it becomes evident that what Strauss now calls the Natural Law is largely in accordance with the position of the quasi-natural laws. The commonly accepted laws are not rational because they have no fixed, universally obligatory content. But what can come to be accepted in a society is limited by the aspirations and needs of its members, i.e. by human nature. This is the point in which this second statement on the quasi-natural laws differs from the first statement. While formerly these laws had appeared as only an agglomeration of commonly held, but ultimately arbitrary laws, the Natural Law now becomes clear as a set of “elementary rules of social conduct which have to be observed equally by all communities, by the most noble community as well as by a gang of robbers” (LRK §20, p. 116).

The concept of the Natural Law as a “framework of every code” can then be summed up in the following manner: Reason is able to supply standards for the distinction of good and bad laws insofar as the maintenance of a specific social community is concerned. But these laws cannot be judged outside of their concrete context and therefore cannot be universalized. They cannot even be understood as strictly obligatory, as Strauss demonstrates through the case of the prohibition of lying. Every society has to proscribe lying to some extent, but at the same time the philosophers as inventors of political religions are shown to be lying about the very foundation of political society.

Furthermore, the Natural Law as a mere sum of rules necessary for any kind of association is by itself insufficient to support a political community. This becomes clear when we consider the opposition between a “gang of robbers” and the “most noble community” cited before. A gang of robbers, or any association purely directed towards promoting the individual interests of its members, would be able to function, at least for some time, by balancing those interests in a reasonable manner. But a political community has to motivate its citizens to subordinate their private interests to the public good. Both the philosopher and the Jewish scholar agree that religion is ultimately necessary to turn individuals into citizens invested in the public interest, or, as Strauss puts it at the end of his essay in a reference to Plato, “to transform natural man

into “the guardian of his city” (LRK §45, p. 140). The Natural Law as a mere framework cannot supply such a religion, as it is based only on enlightened self-interest. It cannot as such impose absolute duties. This is the fundamental reason why it is not called a complete code, as it requires guidance from outside itself to function as a foundation for political society.

The philosophic Law of Reason as a complete code could offer such guidance, insofar as it can direct political society towards a code of laws that is in accordance with the nature of man as such. But the philosophers understand human perfection as ultimately consisting in a solitary, contemplative existence that is not bound by any absolute, universal duties. All society is a means to the end of human, i.e. philosophic perfection. Society as such is, in other words, not an end in itself. Thus “the Natural Law is not obligatory and does not command, or presuppose, an inner attachment to society” (LRK §45, p. 140). The philosophers are forced to foster such an attachment by inventing political religions.

This is “the fundamental weakness of the philosophic position” in the eyes of the Jewish scholar (LRK §45, p. 140). He agrees with the philosophers regarding the necessity of a standard beyond the quasi-natural law. But he disagrees with their claim that human reason alone can supply this standard. The essentially asocial life of the philosopher cannot satisfy the desire of someone who has “a passionate interest in genuine morality,” i.e. absolute moral duties (LRK §45, p. 140). Thus, “one has not to be naturally pious (...) in order to long with all his heart for revelation” (LRK §45, p. 140). While the scholar is a believer in the revealed divine law, his ultimate objection to philosophy turns out to be essentially connected with a concern for political society and genuine morality. This is the reason why, according to Strauss, “the central part of [the scholar’s] critique of philosophy” is his critique of asceticism (LRK §29, p. 126). The philosophic life is ascetic in the sense that it is not essentially directed towards political society and moral action. The scholar is in full agreement with the king of the Khazars that not contemplation, but genuine moral action is of the highest importance to man as such.

According to the scholar, only the divinely revealed law can supply a political community with a code that is not ultimately rooted in the selfish interest of its members and that can prescribe absolute duties. The divinely revealed law is *the* alternative to the rational *nomoi* of the philosophers because it also directs political society towards an ideal that lies beyond it. However, while the necessity of a revealed law can be understood by human reason alone, a true divine law cannot be established without God’s direct intervention. Only the Jewish nation was elected by God to receive and pass on the true divine law. Hence “only the Jewish nation is eternal, all other nations are perishable; all other nations are dead, only the Jewish nation is living” (LRK §39, p. 134).

5. Halevi’s Conversion

But the position of the Jewish scholar should not be mistaken for the position of Halevi. Strauss interprets the

Kuzari as a book with both an exoteric and an esoteric teaching. As he shows throughout his essay, Halevi uses many of the rhetorical devices that philosophers like Avicenna, Aristotle, or Maimonides employed in their works (LRK §14, pp. 110-111). The Jewish scholar is merely one voice in the dialogue Halevi constructs to convey his teaching. Might then the *Kuzari* itself be an example of rational *nomoi*, a complete code that uses Jewish orthodoxy as its governmental part? Was Halevi, in other words, a philosopher?

While Strauss considers this possibility (LRK §12, pp. 106-108),¹³ he also discusses another hypothesis that is somewhat astounding. According to this second hypothesis, Halevi was deeply influenced by philosophy and at some point even “converted” to it, before he ultimately rejected it. As Strauss puts it: “[F]or some time, we prefer to think for a very short time, he was a philosopher. After that moment, a spiritual hell, he returned to the Jewish fold” (LRK §13, p. 109). While Halevi found the philosophic arguments largely convincing, he ultimately could not accept philosophy as a way of life. Strauss thus presents the unique case of what one might call a “lapsed” philosopher, a particularly curious phenomenon if we consider that Strauss had only a few pages earlier pointed out that “a genuine philosopher can never become a genuine convert to Judaism or to any other revealed religion” (LRK §11, pp. 104-105). How, then, do we have to understand Halevi’s return to “the Jewish fold”?

Laurence Lampert, in his interpretation of “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*,” treats Halevi’s supposed rejection of philosophy as ironic, a facetious remark by Strauss that barely hides his true conviction that Halevi was indeed a philosopher.¹⁴ Such irony is certainly not entirely foreign to Strauss’ way of writing and it is quite likely that his ultimate assessment of Halevi was different from his openly stated opinion. But it may be premature to simply dismiss Strauss statement as ironic and hence philosophically unimportant. Not only is this presentation of an author as being a strange mixture of philosophic and non-philosophic elements unique in Strauss’ oeuvre, but Strauss also points out in the essay itself that “all ambiguities occurring in good books are [due] not to chance or carelessness, but to deliberate choice, to the author’s wish to indicate a grave question” (LRK §22, p. 118). Furthermore, Strauss takes up the question of Halevi’s nature again at the end of his essay, when he speaks about Halevi’s “basic objection to philosophy” (LRK §45, p. 141). It seems necessary, then, to pose the question of why Strauss chooses to present Halevi in this ambiguous manner.

To give an answer, we have to accept Strauss’ hypothesis for the sake of the argument and consider what Halevi’s “objection to philosophy” might have been. One possibility would be that he denied philosophy on the ground of the revealed Jewish law, just like the Jewish scholar. While Strauss points out that Halevi’s “basic objection to philosophy was (...) not particularly Jewish, nor even particularly religious, but moral” (LRK §45, p. 141), these two elements would not have to be mutually exclusive. But Strauss makes clear that Halevi shared the objections of the philosophers against revealed religion (LRK §13, pp. 108-110). He even indicates what Halevi may have found particularly objectionable in the scholar’s

position: Halevi presents specifically the doctrine of the justice of God as his own and not just the scholar's teaching (LRK §6, p. 99). As mentioned before, the scholar ultimately concluded that only the true revealed law inherited by the Jewish people could supply the guidance needed by mankind. But it is hard to see, how a god can be called just, that, without any reason, gives what is needed by all human beings as such only to a particular part of mankind and denies it to everybody else. Halevi's rejection of philosophy therefore cannot be based on a particular revealed law, because the very particularity of such a law would call its genuine morality into question.

It may then be more fruitful to look towards a philosophic position that is deeply concerned with genuine morality and that can be understood as standing in opposition to what Strauss calls in his essay "the philosophic view" (LRK §38, p. 134): Kant's Practical Philosophy. Strauss' emphasis on universality as the distinctive feature of genuine morality may already remind the reader of Kant's thought. This is entirely intentional and Strauss frequently alludes to Kantian terminology in the last section of his essay, going so far as to identify genuine morality with "categorical imperatives" (LRK §45, p. 140). Even the term "Law of Reason" itself evokes Kant's *Vernunftgesetz*. One could then assume that the Halevi of Strauss' second hypothesis stands in for Kant, presenting an argument that is or at least seems to be Kantian. But it would be wrong to identify Halevi's position as simply Kantian. This becomes immediately evident when we consider that Halevi, according to Strauss, hides his true intention behind an exoteric teaching. Far from only omitting truths that may be dangerous to state openly, he presents arguments to his readers that he himself holds to be untrue. He thus shows his ultimate agreement with the position of the philosophers not only in speech, but also in deed. While the Halevi of the second hypothesis shares with Kant the concern with universal morality, he does not think such a morality possible on the basis of human reason alone. It may then be more adequate to call the position of this Halevi nihilistic in the sense that he longs for a kind of morality that he at same time holds to be impossible. The philosophers teach truths that prove deadly, "a spiritual hell" (LRK §13, p. 109). By writing in an exoteric manner, Halevi protects the majority of his readers when he argues for religion and soothes the doubts they may harbor, while showing the true bleakness of the human condition only to those readers that are capable of becoming aware of the problem on their own.

Strauss' presentation of Halevi thus seems to be intended to evoke concepts strongly connected with modern, especially Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. This puts the argument of his essay in a wider context than the original opposition of a "philosophic" and a "theological" view. "Philosophy" makes its first appearance in the text as part of an open question and Strauss' allusion to Kant invites the reader to consider the difference between ancient and modern philosophy in regard to morality and the question of "what a philosopher is" (LRK §1, p. 95). But the ambiguity of Halevi's position also leads the reader to reconsider the unity of the classical philosophic tradition itself. As already mentioned, Strauss starts his essay by calling out a philosophic and a theological position concerning the Natural Law and connects them to two me-

dieval thinkers, Marsilius of Padua and Thomas Aquinas.¹⁵ But in the same place he also identifies both thinkers as "Christian Aristotelians" (LRK §2, p. 96). Later on, he points out that "philosophy is not identical with Aristotelianism" (LRK §16, p. 112). Thus, what may at first glance appear to be a simple opposition of philosophers and believers turns out to be a more complex situation. The believers, on the one hand, draw on the philosophic tradition of, e.g., Aristotelianism, while the philosophers, on the other hand, may not be as unconcerned with the moral law as one might think. Halevi's ambiguity towards philosophy for moral reasons serves as a demonstration of the ambiguities present in the philosophic tradition as a whole.

6. Strauss' Intention

We may then say that Strauss' intention in writing "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*" goes beyond the desire for a clearer presentation of a certain understanding of philosophy and the philosopher. It also goes beyond emphasizing the fundamental opposition between the philosophic life and the demands of revealed religion. While Strauss stresses the necessity of a refutation of the "very possibility of Divine revelation in the precise sense of the term" (LRK §12, p. 107) for the philosopher, he also shows a more general aspect of this question by drawing the connection between the concern with morality and the belief in a revealed law. "Moral man as such is the potential believer" (LRK §45, p. 140) and insofar as the potential philosopher is also a moral man, i.e. someone concerned with politics and the fate of his fellow citizens, he will have to consider both morality and religious belief in their interconnectedness to understand his own position.

This is also true for Leo Strauss himself. The historical Halevi was an early proponent of a return of the Jewish people to the Holy Land and died on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Therefore he was later sometimes hailed as a medieval precursor of Zionism. If we consider the importance of Zionism for the young Leo Strauss, it may not seem entirely accidental that he chose Halevi in particular as an example of a philosophic thinker concerned with morality and the defense of Judaism.¹⁶

"The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*" can thus ultimately be understood as being in service to what is most important to every philosopher: self-understanding.

Notes

* I want to thank Professor Heinrich Meier, whose seminar on the *Kuzari*-Essay during the winter semester 2010/11 at the LMU Munich I had the opportunity to attend. His thorough interpretation was of great help to my understanding of the text. Any mistakes in this paper are my own.

¹ L. STRAUSS, *The Law of Reason in the Kuzari*, in: Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Free Press, Glencoe, Ill. 1952, pp. 95-141. Citations from the essay will be indicated as LRK with paragraph and page throughout this paper.

² For Halevi's biography see: J. YAHALOM, *Yehuda Halevi: Poetry and Pilgrimage*, Hebrew University Magnes Press, Jerusalem 2009.

³ Cf. A. SHEAR, *The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity, 1167-1900*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008.

⁴ Cf. K. BROOK, *The Jews of Khazaria*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham 2006 (2nd Edition); P. GOLDEN, *The Conversion of the Khazars to Judaism*, in P. Golden / H. Ben-Schammai / A. Róna-Tas

(ed. by), *The World of the Khazars: New Perspectives. Selected Papers from the Jerusalem 1999 International Khazar Colloquium*. Handbook of Oriental Studies Sect. 8 Vol. 17, Brill, Leiden 2007, pp. 123-162.

⁵ Cf. LRK §7-10, pp. 100-104.

⁶ First publication in: "Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research", 13, 1943, pp. 47-96.

⁷ Cf. K. H. GREEN, *Religion, Philosophy and Morality. How Leo Strauss Read Judah Halevi's Kuzari*, in "Journal of the American Academy of Religion", 61, 1993, pp. 225-273; L. LAMPERT, *The Enduring Importance of Leo Strauss*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2013, pp. 32-71.

⁸ LAMPERT, *Importance*, p. 32.

⁹ MARSILIUS OF PADUA, *Defensor pacis*, I. c. 19, sect. 13; MARSILIUS OF PADUA, *The Defender of the Peace*, translated by Annabel Brett, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, p. 136. Cf. LRK §2, p. 96 n. 2.

¹⁰ Strauss consistently shifts from "Law of Reason" to "rational *nomoi*" and "rational laws" when speaking more specifically about the text of the *Kuzari*. Cf. LRK §4, p. 98; LRK §16, p. 112 with LRK §19, pp. 114-115; LRK §22, p. 118; LRK §26, p. 122; LRK §29-30, pp. 126-127; LRK §31, p. 128; LRK §42-45, pp. 136-140.

¹¹ Strauss uses this term here in the traditional sense of a *theologia civilis*, signifying the employment of religious teachings as a means to purely political ends. Cf. AUGUSTINUS, *De Civitate Dei*, VI. c. 5-12. It should not be confused with the meaning that "political theology" has attained more recently. Cf. H. MEIER, *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts. Vier Kapitel zur Unterscheidung Politischer Theologie und Politischer Philosophie*, J.B. Metzler, Stuttgart 2012 (4th Edition), pp. 291-293.

¹² This is the context in which Aristotle introduces the term: ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, VII 1324a 25-33. Cf. for the concept of the "philosophic life" in Strauss' thinking: H. MEIER, *Politische Philosophie und die Herausforderung des Offenbarungsglaubens*, C.H. Beck, München 2013, pp. 43-46 with n. 6.

¹³ Cf. LAMPERT, *Importance*, pp. 39-45.

¹⁴ LAMPERT, *Importance*, pp. 45-47.

¹⁵ Marsilius of Padua and Thomas Aquinas also appear together in *Natural Right and History*, representing the two alternative interpretations of Aristotle's natural right teaching. Strauss in a footnote even refers the reader to *The Law of Reason in the Kuzari*. It is almost the only footnote in the entire book that points towards one of Strauss' own works. Cf. L. STRAUSS, *Natural Right and History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1953, pp. 157-164 with n. 32.

¹⁶ The only biographical article Strauss cites in his essay emphasizes the political aspect of Halevi's life and writing: S. BARON, *Yehudah Halevi: An Answer to an Historic Challenge*, in: "Jewish Social Studies", 3, 1941, pp. 243-272. See especially LRK §13, p. 109 n. 38, which points to a passage in Baron's article opposing the "hard and fast realities of [Halevi's] age" to the futility of studying the "wisdom of the Greeks" (BARON, *Yehuda Halevi*, p. 259). Cf. LAMPERT, *Importance*, p. 37 n. 8.