

TWO

Leo Strauss Remembered

Our purpose here is to honor the memory of Leo Strauss.¹ It is fitting that we should do so. But honor depends upon the competence—if not the virtue—of those who give it, as well as upon the excellence of him who is to receive it. A great man once said of his teacher that he was such a one as bad men had no right even to praise. We cannot admit a doubt of our own wisdom without casting one as well upon him whom we would honor. Still, no one would have insisted more rigorously upon the necessity of both doubts than Leo Strauss.

Willmoore Kendall called Strauss the greatest teacher of politics since Machiavelli. I do not think that we—or at least I—know enough about politics to know who was its greatest teacher, either before or after Machiavelli. But I think I know what Kendall meant by that assertion, and why it is eminently plausible. For it was Strauss who, in a long series of works, culminating in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, laid bare the Machiavellian roots of modernity and of the specific teachings of the great moderns. With very few even apparent exceptions, Strauss proved beyond a reasonable doubt that the great political philosophers after Machiavelli—for example Spinoza, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx—were all, in the decisive respects, disciples of Machiavelli. All of them attempted in their doctrines to guarantee the actualization of a certain kind of just or legitimate regime, by taking their bearings, not by that regime which is everywhere best, but by what all men actually everywhere are. They tried to assure the fulfillment of the goal of political life by lowering that goal.

Kendall rightly observed that Strauss would not have been able to penetrate the Machiavellian origins of modernity, had he not himself transcended those origins. Machiavelli had denied that political life can be understood best or guided by what is highest. Yet Strauss, notwith-

standing his respect, or even awe, of Machiavelli's greatness, quietly denied that denial. No brief quotation can epitomize the vast sweep of Strauss's work, but I commend to you the following, for the concise simplicity—indeed for the classic grandeur—with which it denies Machiavelli's most fundamental denial. It is taken from the Preface to the 1965 translation of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. "It is safer," wrote Strauss, "to try to understand the low in the light of the high than the high in the light of the low. In doing the latter one necessarily distorts the high, whereas in doing the former one does not deprive the low of the freedom to reveal itself fully as what it is." Clearly, all the state of nature theorists, and all the historical schools, tried to understand decent civil society—the high—in the light of the most indecent and powerful passions. Kant's doctrine of Categorical Imperative would seem to be that point in modern philosophical thought furthest removed from Machiavellianism. In it, every consideration of personal advantage, every element of expedience, would seem to be removed. But what is the "good will" celebrated by Kant? Is it not an abstraction from that view of morality that is drawn from the distinction between mere interestedness and disinterestedness? And is not this view blind to the differences between noble and base interests? Is not Kant's attempt to "democratize" morality, by getting rid of the wise man as the judge of the moral man, an attempt to present the high in the light of the low? There are other and even stronger proofs that in the decisive respects, Kant too was a Machiavellian.

PERMANENT QUESTIONS

Strauss never thought that Machiavelli or his greatest disciples themselves understood the high simply in the light of the low. Had they done so, they could not have created works of such complex beauty, and Strauss thought that Machiavelli's works were very beautiful. The distinction between the wise few and the unwise many was as fundamental to Machiavellianism as to the classics. Political philosophy, Strauss often said—and wrote—was constituted essentially by permanent questions, to which there were no final answers. The great moderns agreed with the great ancients, both as to the permanence of these questions and as to the loftiness of life devoted to their consideration. But they did not think that the kind of man devoted to this life—the man of utmost refinement—could be the prototype of the political man. They placed more confidence in institutions, institutions whose dark foundations would be laid by unrefined men, institutions which incorporated their refined understanding of political reality, but whose success would not require such understanding for their operation. Still, only theoretical men could have denied so comprehensively to theory its sovereign role, or have constructed such theoretical books to enshrine that denial. The contemplation of the mod-

ern—or the Machiavellian—alternative is that it points toward the annihilation of that horizon within which alone its greatness is visible.

On what we may call the practical level, Strauss's career was constituted by the articulation of the difference between ancients and moderns. For it was with this difference that he provided us the bearings for understanding "where we are, and whither we are tending." On the purely theoretical level, it turned rather upon the difference between reason and revelation. These two principles represented the most fundamental alternatives to the most permanent of questions, concerning how man ought to live. Modernity itself was seen by Strauss as the most determined and comprehensive of human efforts to escape from the dilemma arising from the conflicts engendered in political life by these rival and ambiguous principles. Within the Jewish community, Spinoza was the greatest authority for that new conception both of reason and revelation in which all hitherto insoluble differences were to be reconciled. Spinoza as the philosophical founder of the critical-history study of the Bible, was a founder—if not the founder—of both liberal Judaism and liberal Christianity. He was moreover the first great political philosopher who may be said to have been a proponent of liberal democracy, of that regime which, among its other advantages, transcends the age-old differences of race and religion and allows men to become fellow citizens under a rule of law on a ground supplied by natural rights.

When Strauss wrote that first book on Spinoza he was, as he tells us in that same Preface, "a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grip of the theologico-political predicament." What was that predicament? The Weimar Republic was a liberal democracy, says Strauss, which "proclaimed its moderate, nonradical character: its resolve to keep a balance between the dedication to the principles of 1789 and the dedication to the highest German tradition." In short, the Weimar regime represented, in a high degree, that resolution of the human problem that modernity at its best had promised. Strauss never failed to see the weakness of the Weimar regime as a paradigm of the weakness not merely of German liberal democracy, but of modernity. While he never failed to appreciate all the particular reasons for the tragedy of German liberalism, he never thought that the deepest and longest run, the strongest reason for tragedy was merely German. No one appreciated better than he—not was anyone more grateful than he for—the strength no less than the decency of Anglo-American democracy. But he began his Walgreen lectures in 1949 with a prophecy, that what was happening here would be the first time that a nation, Germany in this case, defeated on the field of battle, had imposed the yoke of its thought on its conqueror. Still, that thought was radically modern, rather than radically German.

THE HUMAN PROBLEM

The young Strauss knew the weakness of the Weimar Republic. He knew the vulnerability of the German Jewish community—also the most liberal in Europe—should Weimar fail. But neither he nor anyone else could guess that the regime that would replace it would have no other clear principle, as he says, than murderous hatred of the Jews. Strauss was certainly attracted then by political Zionism. But political Zionism was an attempt to provide a political solution to a problem originated by religious differences, the very differences that liberalism was designed to transcend. But it was itself essentially a liberal solution, since it was based upon an idea of nationality—of humanity and culture—divorced from Jewish orthodoxy. But there was no idea of Jewish nationality or culture that was possible that did not point to Jewish orthodoxy as its core. Merely political Zionism proved to be a self-contradiction. In this context, Strauss's Jewish studies led him, not merely to a profounder understanding than Spinoza, but beyond Spinoza, to that greatest Jewish thinker, Maimonides. And it was Maimonides who pointed the way for him to Al Farabi, the tenth century Muslim philosopher, and ultimately to Socrates. Henceforth his Jewishness would not take the form of any political commitment as such, but of a quiet pride in a tradition that he now knew incorporated the highest as well as the most sacred wisdom.

The establishment of the state of Israel, Strauss thought, "procured a blessing for all Jews everywhere regardless of whether they admit it or not." But it did not solve the Jewish problem. That problem was at bottom the problem arising from the challenge of the revelation itself, which science had not refuted, and for which the ethics of humanity was no substitute. The Jews, whose heritage made them the highest symbols of the demand of God Himself that men live on the highest level, had become symbols of that cosmopolitanism which represented the lowering of goals of political life, ultimately in the interest of the universal and homogenous state. The Nazis had singled out the Jews as representatives of international banking and international Communism, the ostensibly degenerate symbols of the lowered goals of modern cosmopolitanism. But the Nazis were not Christians. Their hatred of the Jews was a hatred of the entire tradition of the West. Hitler's romantic longing for the Middle Ages was an irrational longing for a past purged of the reality of its struggle with reason and revelation. The Jewish problem was, in the end, the human problem.

Strauss did not believe that the principles of reason and revelation could ever be reduced one to the other. Hence he did not believe in the possibility of a synthesis, since any synthesis would imply a higher principle than either, a principle which regulated the combination. Catholic Christianity, which found its highest expression in Thomas Aquinas, at-

tempted such a synthesis. Strauss admired the magnificence of Thomas' efforts, and saw in them a great humanizing and moderating of Catholic theology. Perhaps the greatest gain from the Thomistic synthesis was that Aristotle, from being a forbidden author, became eventually a recommended one. But only in traditional Judaism did the idea of revelation, and of tradition undivided and uncompromised by syncretism, find its full expression. And Western civilization at its highest expressed the tension between Greek rationalism and Jewish revelation.

Strauss may in the end be best remembered for his works on Socrates, the preoccupation of his last years. For Socrates was the man who seemed to have discovered, or to have invented, political philosophy. For he was the man who either first asked the questions which formed its core, or at least asked them in such a way as to make their asking itself a way of life. The Socratic way of life was a continual demonstration that the rulers of Athens—and of course every actual regime anywhere—did not really know the things they thought they knew, knowledge of which was implied in every action they took. By implying that statesmen should know what they needed to know, Socrates implied that every existing regime was defective, and that it had a duty to transform itself into something better—ultimately into the best regime. That of course, implied a disloyalty to Athens sufficient to justify Socrates' execution. Yet Strauss did not think Socrates' teaching was utopian, in the sense that everyone should strive to introduce the best regime. Socrates confessed that he knew nothing, and that knowledge of ignorance is, or should be, moderating, if not humbling. Statesmanship informed by the awareness of ignorance is not likely to aim at final, much less at universal solutions, solutions which imply that we actually do know what we do not know. The best regime is not a political regime: it lives in speech and not in deed. But it is the best, and we need not transform the world in order to live there—we need only to transform ourselves. No one who has experienced the magic of Leo Strauss's teaching can doubt that whatever amelioration of our condition is possible will come about by the influence upon those who exercise political power of its spirit.

I have been asked to say a word on my own studies of Lincoln, and the American regime, in their relationship to Strauss. The most obvious connection is between Strauss's many expositions of Locke and Locke's massive influence upon America. Locke certainly represented modernity in its soberest form, although Strauss was careful to emphasize Locke's ultimate, if concealed, insobriety. But Strauss also thought that American politics at its best showed a practical wisdom that owed much to a tradition older than Locke. Indeed Locke's esoteric teaching, which emphasized that older tradition, was taken with the greatest seriousness here. But the American regime was not formed only by Locke. Many a frontier log cabin, which had in it no philosophical works whatever, had the King James Bible—and Shakespeare. And Shakespeare was the greatest vehicle

within the Anglo-American world for the transmission of an essentially Socratic understanding of the civilization of the West.

CLASSICAL PHILOSOPHY

Most Americans' studies begin, and properly begin, with the Constitution. The Constitution does not define the regime, but it is the most public and visible expression of it. It is part of the defect of modern politics that it looks to the character of the law, more than the character of the men who make and enforce the law, however intimate the connection between them necessarily is. However admirable the character of the American Constitution, it was not, I thought, the most admirable expression of the regime. The Constitution is the highest American thing, only if one tries to understand the high in the light of the low. It is high because men are not angels, and because we do not have angels to govern us. Its strength lies in its ability to connect the interest of the man with the duty of the place. But the Constitution, in deference to man's non-angelic nature, made certain compromises with slavery. And partly because of those compromises, it dissolved in the presence of a greater crisis. The man—or the character of the man—who bore the nation through that crisis, seemed to me—and Strauss gave me every encouragement to believe it—the highest thing in the American regime. The character of Lincoln became intelligible, not on the basis of *The Federalist*—profound as that work is—but on that of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the final analysis, not only American politics, but all modern politics, must be clarified on the basis of classical political philosophy. That is because, "It is safer to try to understand the low in the light of the high than the high in the light of the low. In doing the latter, one necessarily distorts the high, whereas in doing the former one does not deprive the low of the freedom to reveal itself fully as what it is."²

We leave to others—more detached and more objective—the judgment of Strauss's place among the political philosophers. For us who have had the privilege of knowing him as a teacher and as a friend, we can only say that of the men we have known, he was the best, and the wisest, and the most just.

NOTES

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1. These remarks prepared especially for *National Review* were delivered orally at a memorial service for Leo Strauss at the Claremont Colleges on November 3, 1973.
2. Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 225.

THREE

Political Philosophy and Honor

The Leo Strauss Dissertation Award

In what way shall we bury you? However you wish, if you can catch me, and I do not escape from you. Then he laughed gently, and turned and looked at us, and said: I do not, men, persuade Crito, that I am that Socrates who has been discussing and conducting argument; but he thinks I am that other one, whom he will see a little later as a dead body, and asks, how will he bury me.

—*Phaedo*, 115C

Nothing perhaps better illustrates the enduring character of political philosophy than the enduring presence of its body servants, whose piety would inter the soul of the teaching with the body of the teacher.

At its annual meeting in 1974 the American Political Science Foundation established the Leo Strauss Annual Dissertation Award in political philosophy. This action followed a petition addressed to the Council of the Association, signed by some forty-four distinguished teachers and scholars. Of these, it appeared, more than half were former students of Leo Strauss. The petition declared, among other things, that:

There is at present no such award in the field of political philosophy. We believe the establishment of one to be particularly important and timely. It is important that the association signalize to the profession in general, and to graduate students in this field, its recognition of political philosophy as one of the important traditions within the discipline.

In 1959 Leo Strauss published a book with the title essay, "What is Political Philosophy?" In that essay, Strauss wrote that: "Today, political philosophy is in a state of decay and perhaps putrefaction, if it has not vanished altogether. Not only is there complete disagreement regarding