LEO STRAUSS, PHILOSOPHER

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LEO STRAUSS, PHILOSOPHER

European Vistas

EDITED BY
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and
Josep Monserrat-Molas

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In memoriam
George Anastaplo (1925–2014), Constitutionalist
Stanley Rosen (1929–2014), Metaphysician

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CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgments ix

Abbreviations xxiii

Antonio Lastra
A Proem 1

Carlo Altini
Philosophy and History of Philosophy 15

Alessandra Fussi
Loyalty and Love of Wisdom in Plato's Republic 43

Jordi R. Sales-Coderch
Engaged Citizenship 67

Mauro Farnesi Camellone
The City and Stranger 81

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Lastra_Leo.indd 7 10/20/15 8:21 PM

Till Kinzel
Lessing's Importance for the Philosopher 101

Josep Monserrat-Molas
An Epilogue 117

Notes on Contributors 137

Index 141

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Philosophy and History of Philosophy

Carlo Altini

In a passage of the *Moralia*, Plutarch tells a story by Antiphanes of Chio, about Plato's followers:

> Antiphanes recounted, jokingly, that in a certain city it was so cold that as soon as words were spoken they froze, and that later, when they thawed, the inhabitants heard in the summer what had been said in the winter. The same thing happened to Plato's teachings to his followers when they were still young, and so later and with difficulty most of them only understood when they were old. This typically happens with philosophy in general.[1]

In recalling this anecdote, Plutarch was perhaps thinking of philosophy as a lifestyle, but certainly he was not thinking of the contemporary idea of the history of philosophy that was only possible in the post-Hegelian era. It is not obvious that philosophy has a history: before Hegel there were, at most, biographies of philosophers and lists compiling the opinions of philosophers. (There thus exists an introduction to

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philosophy without philosophical value.) But there is no history of philosophy with *philosophical significance* for philosophy. The relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy is very different from that of the history of science with science itself: even without taking into account the theoretical difficulty associated with the recognition of philosophy as an object of historical research, the history of philosophy cannot be a philosophical paleontology or a history of progress of the human mind.

Naturally it would be simplistic to try and resolve the problem of the philosophical meaning of the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy without having defined what is intended by "philosophy" (or its essence) on one hand, and the "history of philosophy" (or its object) on the other. All this had direct implications for the activities, for example, of philosophical historiography and philosophical hermeneutics. This simple observation demonstrates how wide-ranging and difficult the task is (which, in reflecting on the philosophical meaning of the history of philosophy, would have to take into account the conflicting interpretations of Hegel and Dilthey, Heidegger and Collingwood, Croce and Gramsci, Gentile and Dewey, Gadamer and Garin). It is also important to note the underlying issue that characterizes the problem of the history of philosophy: the historical scholar of philosophy has to consider the philosophical value of the doctrines of the past, but at the same time cannot attribute to any of these doctrines an absolute degree of truth, on pain of straying outside the bounds of good practice of a historian.

Here evidence emerges of a further difficulty regarding the relationship between history (understood as the search for transitory and particular truths) and philosophy (understood as the search for unchanging universal truths): the historical method, looking for the originality and unusual nature of a fact, is inadequate for achieving the objectives of the history of philosophy, nor can it provide the key for achieving conciliation between history and philosophy. History is different from philosophy, and in a certain sense history and philosophy are exact opposites: history seeks to reveal particular truths while philosophy seeks to reveal universal truths. The expression "history of philosophy" thus appears contradictory.

How is it possible to define a history of philosophy? It is undoubtedly possible to compile a history of the lives of philosophers, just as it is possible to write a history of philosophies: the first is a classic genre, doxography, while the second involves writing a history of philosophical theories, but understood as opinions rather than as the outcomes of research into truth. It is not possible, however, to write a history of the various philosophies understood as "truths." How could it be possible to consider as philosophical truths the elaborations of both Aquinas and Hobbes, or Aristotle and Spinoza? The task might be more accessible if we consider philosophy as a *search* for truth, without attributing a progressive significance to this search process. However, this embodies a hidden contradiction, because a history of philosophy constitutes a philosophical problem that has as object not existence nor the world, but the philosophy itself, which calls into question the pretext of universality through the subjectification of what, by its very nature, claims to be objective, or philosophical truth.

Facing this problem, Hegel resorted to the idea of a nonsubjective history 'resolving' the history of philosophy in philosophy, thereby destroying the historicity itself of the philosophical systems. Collingwood, like many other idealist authors close to the historicist tradition, opted for the idea of a radical historical conditionality of philosophy: philosophy is historical because humankind is historical. Historicity is the condition of possibility of philosophical discourse. Other philosophers such as Plato or Descartes would have been radically critical of this approach, since for them philosophy is a discourse on truth unconditioned by history. Regardless of these opposing solutions, there nevertheless remains a complex relationship between philosophy and historicity: philosophical knowledge, when it acts, appears to act in only a *mediated* way, considering that philosophy prepares an investigation that is essentially and necessarily noncurrent, and which, as in the anecdote of Antiphanes of Chio narrated by Plutarch, sees its meaning realized in the future. Philosophy remains a form of knowledge that not only refuses temporal localization but subjects time to its own scale, both past and future. Philosophy is essentially noncurrent: it belongs to that class of things destined never to achieve an immediate impact in the present.

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1. HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY AND HISTORICISM

Strauss began addressing the history of political philosophy in the 1920s and 1930s, dedicating himself to the study of the conflict between modern philosophy, premodern philosophy, and Judaism clearly represented in the *Theological-Political Treatise* by Spinoza.[2] The motivation for this decision was not academic curiosity, but rather a response to the "crisis of values" that was enveloping the entire European culture. After the collapse of all the philosophical systems, the scenario for a young German–Jewish philosopher in the Weimar Republic was certainly not reassuring: it is enough to mention the names of Nietzsche and Spengler to epitomize the spiritual climate pervading German culture during these years. It was a climate dominated by an awareness of the crisis in meaning and the role of science and politics in the modern world, a struggle between nihilism and rationalization and reification, *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*. In this sense it is not possible to define the 'return' of Strauss to premodern philosophy (of Plato and Maimonides in particular) as a form of nostalgia or refuge in the past, because he was perfectly aware that a direct and immediate recovery of classic political philosophy was impossible: as necessary as this recovery might be, it could be no more than experimental. It was not the concrete political solutions offered by the classics—which are not directly applicable to the problems posed by modern societies—that had to be recovered, but rather the forms of classical philosophical-political thought. The motivation that drove Strauss to the recovery of the ancients against the moderns is thus ultramodern and dictated by the need to overcome the crisis in the modern world (obvious, for example, in the horror of the drift towards totalitarianism and the relativism of liberal outlooks).

Historical reflection is a necessary means to overcome the problems of modernity: Strauss studied Plato and Machiavelli, Xenophon and Hobbes, Maimonides and Spinoza, Aristophanes and Locke, Thucydides and Rousseau in an attempt to overcome the contradictions in the modern experiment, brought clearly into focus by Nietzsche. The reconstruction of the philosophies of the authors of the past is therefore not only presented as research of a historical nature, aiming to identify the truths of the past, but also as a sort of return to the roots of

modernity through a deconstruction of modern political philosophy. In this way historical research, historical reconstruction, and theoretical thought turn out to be inseparable: Strauss's questions about modernity are born out of reflection on the contemporary crisis and are developed through the acquisition of historical critical instruments with the aim of arriving at a new understanding of the current situation. If historical research aims to be more than simply a collection of sources and scholarly materials, it needs close comparison with philosophical research which, in turn, historically acts by the reconstruction of certain texts of the past, tracing out lines of dialogue and genealogical trees between philosophers that outline new historiographic paths of philosophical relevance.[3]

In order to understand the relationships between philosophy and the history of philosophy in Strauss's thought, his antihistorical argument (also elaborated according to the principles of his hermeneutic), through which history, philosophy, and historicism are distinguished, must be taken into account. History is a form of scientific-narrative knowledge that examines the facts and ideas of the past. Philosophy is a form of knowledge that aims to understand 'what is.' Historicism is a particular interpretation of philosophical knowledge, in which all philosophical and scientific knowledge is historical knowledge. History thus represents a knowledge that seeks the truth of what is particular; philosophy is a knowledge that seeks the truth of what is universal; historicism is instead an attempt to define philosophy as historically conditioned knowledge, incapable of achieving truth. According to Strauss there also exists a clear difference between historicism thus defined and the history of philosophy, which is a type of knowledge that aims to reconstruct forms and contents of the philosophies of the past and that has the potential of achieving the truth. Philosophy and the history of philosophy are obviously not the same thing; but nevertheless the history of philosophy may fulfil certain aims and functions of philosophy, especially in times of crisis: indeed, the idea itself of a history of philosophy presupposes that certain fundamental philosophical problems persist through the ages.

The distortion between history and philosophy caused by historicism therefore poses a problem of knowledge both to history and

to philosophy. A problem of inadequacy of the sources of historical information is transformed into a problem of theoretical knowledge, in particular as regards the statute of philosophical activity. Vice versa, the inadequacy of the form of theoretical knowledge available makes it difficult, if not impossible, to achieve an adequate historical understanding of philosophical activities in past eras. It therefore becomes necessary, according to Strauss, to establish what the differences are between the fundamental characteristics of correct historical research and the philosophical principles of historicism, in order to recover the distinction between historical issues and philosophical issues, abandoning the idea of a universal philosophical history. If philosophy is not determined by historicity or localization, but from its nature, the subject of historical research (within its philosophical relevance) is not to identify the historical-social energy that would have determined the conditions of possibility and the objectives of the philosophical discourse that, in this sense, would be reduced to a mere ideological product of material conditions. The subject of historical research is instead to reread the texts of the philosophical tradition and to identify the philosophical turning points in the tradition. In the analysis of philosophical texts, the task of a correct historical research becomes to eliminate rigid historically deterministic suppositions, with related psychological and socio-economic reductionisms, in favor of a purely philosophical assessment of the texts and their reciprocal dialogue. In Strauss's view the history of philosophy is a plane marked by a radical discontinuity between ancient and modern, but it is also a unifying plane since it is characterized by the permanence of concepts and categories, concretely visible in the critical dialogue between the classics. In this way only is it possible to safeguard the autonomy of philosophy while defending the universal nature of philosophical thought from relativism and ideology.

2. FROM SOCIAL POSITIVISM TO HISTORICISM

In Strauss's interpretation, historicism is the final outcome of the modern crisis. The highest exponent of historicism is Martin Heidegger

but, as regards the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy, Strauss criticizes Robin George Collingwood. However, as an introduction to Strauss's criticism of Collingwood, it is important to understand its place within a wider discussion of the relativism of modern philosophy, exemplified in the transition from social positivism (Max Weber) to historicism. For Strauss the task assumed by modern science resides in the replacement of the image of reality derived from common sense with a scientific image of reality. The problem derives from the conflict of two opposite forms of scepticism: the ancient-Medieval on one hand (represented by Plato and Maimonides), and modern scepticism on the other hand that ranges from Descartes to Hegel through Hume and Kant, ending up in the contemporary nihilistic expressions, obvious in Nietzsche and Heidegger. In the Straussian interpretation, the radical distinction between natural image and scientific image, founded on the criterion of radical doubt, leads to inverse results compared to those reached following Socratic scepticism, keeping in mind that that the search for wisdom requires a dialectic path through contradictory common opinions. By rendering the model of scientific understanding independent of the model of natural perception, Cartesian scepticism is nothing other than a modern form of dogmatism: the central problem of Descartes in *Meditations* consists in an attempt to construct a new metaphysical foundation for science.

Modern philosophy and modern science construct an image of reality through a particular modification of the real, such as to surpass natural understanding, considered as a hybrid generated from a mingling of the subjective world of sensations and the objective world of external reality. Modern scientific knowledge is radically distinct from natural or prescientific knowledge and comes about from a radical transformation—not an improvement—of the latter. In this way the world in which we live is no longer the natural world, but a product of modern science. An epistemological approach of this type leads to a relativistic shift from philosophy to history and sociology, especially through the definition of rules and institutions of direct effectiveness and practical applicability, with the reduction of political philosophy to techniques on one hand (as in the legal positivism of Hans Kelsen) and to ideology on the other hand (as in the decisionism of Carl Schmitt).

Strauss's argument is mostly directed against the two fundamental currents of philosophical thought of the 1800s, social positivism and historicism. In the Straussian interpretation, in particular in *What is Political Philosophy?*, the modern distinction between scientific knowledge and natural knowledge generates the idea that scientific knowledge is unable to take value judgments into account. This idea leads the way to an ethically neutral political philosophy founded on the conviction that there is a radical difference between facts and value judgments, and that only factual judgments fall within the realm of social science. The outcomes of such a social science are catastrophic: knowledge becomes instrumental, at the service of all purposes regardless of their noble or evil nature.

Strauss identifies Max Weber as the primary representative of a social positivism that transforms itself progressively into historicism. For Weber a historical process does not have meaning apart from the subjective meanings present in the actions of individual actors: the propositions of positivistic social science thus comprise the answers to questions that depend on the orientation of the interests of the social scientist or of the society to which he or she belongs, in particular on his concepts of value. The objects of the social sciences are provided by a "reference to values": but, since the reference to values is inextricably linked to the contingent situation, social science is linked to history. In Strauss's interpretation of Weber, it is thus impossible to speak of a "natural frame of reference" or a "definitive system of fundamental concepts" because all frames of reference are changeable, considering that no socio-cultural order can be defined as the right or rational order. Social reality is in itself an infinite and meaningless process of individual events infinitely divisible: within this framework the underlying problems, and thus the questions that social science must answer, change with the shifting historical and cultural context. An evaluative study of facts presupposes a selection of the relevant questions guided by an orientation based on values, in turn determined by a historical selection from among the values that underlie the conceptual scheme within which the social scientist operates. In the Straussian interpretation social science provides scientific answers to nonscientific questions since the questions are formulated from the perspective of the present and start from historically contingent ideas of value.

However, Strauss believed that Weber never demonstrated the theoretical difference between facts and values; that is, their assumed absolute heterogeneity: it had never been demonstrated that the conflict between values is an irresolvable issue for human reason, given that such a demonstration would require a comprehensive critique of the criteria of evaluation. A consequence of the heterogeneity of facts and values is the impossibility of reaching conclusions about values starting from facts, and vice versa: social science can answer questions regarding facts and their causes but is unqualified to answer questions regarding values. Social science is by nature ethically neutral: there is a fundamental difference between reference to a value (which implies a rational analysis) and judgment of the value (which is essentially irrational). Social scientists who identify a link between an object and the protection of liberty do not necessarily assume a position in favor of liberty, nor provide an evaluation of the object, instead limiting themselves to identifying the causal connections. Ethical imperatives and cultural values are subjective, so much so that it is impossible for the reason to scientifically justify a noble ideal rather than an ignoble ideal: the choice between the different ends can be made in full awareness of causes, choosing the most suitable means to achieve the predefined ends; but this cannot be in itself rational, because reason cannot say which ends must be preferred to others. Not by chance the dignity of people consists in freedom, in autonomy interpreted as capacity to define their own final values (their own demon) and to choose rationally the appropriate means to match these values. Such a position—which brings together relativism and nihilism—was unacceptable to Strauss:

> Weber contended that his notion of a "value-free" or ethically neutral social science is fully justified by what he regarded as the most fundamental of all oppositions, namely, the opposition of the Is and the Ought, or the opposition of reality and norm or value. But the conclusion from the radical heterogeneity of the Is and the Ought to the impossibility of an evaluating social science is obviously not valid. Let us assume that we had genuine knowledge of right and wrong, or of the Ought, or of the true value system. That knowledge, while not derived

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> from empirical science, would legitimately direct all empirical social science; it would be the foundation of all empirical social science. For social science is meant to be of practical value. It tries to find means for given ends. For this purpose it has to understand the ends. Regardless of whether the ends are "given" in a different manner from the means, the end and the means belong together; therefore, "the end belongs to the same science as the means" (Aristotle, *Physics*, 194a26–27). If there were genuine knowledge of the ends, that knowledge would naturally guide all search for means. There would be no reason to delegate knowledge of the ends to social philosophy and the search for the means to an independent social science. Based on genuine knowledge of the true ends, social science would search for the proper means to those ends; it would lead up to objective and specific value judgments regarding policies. Social science would be a truly policy-making, not to say architectonic, science rather than a mere supplier of data for the real policy-makers. The true reason why Weber insisted on the ethically neutral character of social science as well as of social philosophy was, then, not his belief in the fundamental opposition of the Is and the Ought but his belief that there cannot be any genuine knowledge of the Ought. He denied to man any science, empirical or rational, any knowledge, scientific or philosophic, of the true value system: the true value system does not exist; there is a variety of values which are of the same rank, whose demands conflict with one another, and whose conflict cannot be solved by human reason. Social science or social philosophy can do no more than clarify that conflict and all its implications; the solution has to be left to the free, nonrational decision of each individual.[4]

Strauss contests the stance of Weberian social science on all fronts: with reference to the Kantian horizon of "must be," he revealed its philosophical weakness; in relation to its dependence on historicism, he revealed its scientific inconsistency; as regards the relationship between facts and values, he established its lack of ethical weight;

finally, in relation to his concrete work as interpreter of the sociology of religions, he revealed its contradictory nature, to the extent of indicating the Weberian methodological principles as an obstacle to his own historical-social research. Indeed, everything that Weber had strived to expunge from sociological theory—in particular the possibility of passing value judgments—comes into play in his works dedicated to the analysis of individual religious ethics, in which it is essential, for example, to distinguish between ethos and living techniques, between religion and superstition, between religious conviction and liturgical formalism, and so on. Weber insisted in the conviction that the conflict between values and ethical choices cannot be resolved by reason because there are no objective rules and there is no hierarchy of values: for Strauss, however, this conviction had not been demonstrated by Weber, but only postulated on the basis of his moral preference (which Strauss identified as the Weberian preference for conflict rather than peace). Furthermore, by following the Weberian methodology, the social scientist arrives at the point of no longer being able to justify his or her own philosophical or scientific activity, because it is no longer based on obvious suppositions but on a decision without foundation, on a preference in relation to the search for truth perceived as a value, not as a fact: in Strauss's view of Weber, science and philosophy are not capable of perceiving their own basis because the search for truth is a value that can be chosen or rejected. Social science can thus not avoid issuing value judgments on social behavior, but under the handicap of not being able to formulate prescriptions, even descriptions of social structures. Indeed, it is impossible to study societies without referring to their aims, which thus serve as precepts for the judgment of the societies themselves.

Social science can avoid value judgments only if it surrenders to the interpretations (and thus the falsifications) those social subjects provide for themselves: but such a social science is pointless—because it inhibits any form of critical awareness—as well as being dangerous, since it justifies, at least on a methodological level, any moral inclination and more generally, conformism. A refusal of value judgments puts the objectivity of historical-social research at risk: research that aims to understand the social actors in the way that they understand

themselves is undoubtedly useful and fertile, but only if it is preparatory to a critical interpretation from which value judgments are not excluded. This type of social science is conformist by nature because, within its theoretical construction, it cannot but level itself with the reference values of the present society, which cannot be called into discussion. Political philosophy thus loses its critical potential and its inclination for truth, instead limiting itself to an instrumental dimension available to every power here and now. The conception of values as dependent on society implies their dependence on history: the objective answers of science draw their meaning from subjective questions; that is, from the specific interests of the subject and not from logic, so that science itself is demonstrated to be historical:

> One must conceive of the values embodied in a given social science as dependent on the society to which the social science in question belongs, *i.e.* on history. Not only is social science superseded by historical studies; social science itself proves to be "historical" [. . .]. It is only at this point that we come face to face with the serious antagonist of political philosophy: historicism. After having reached its full growth, historicism is distinguished from positivism by the following characteristics. 1) It abandons the distinction between facts and values, because every understanding, however theoretical, implies specific evaluations. 2) It denies the authoritative character of modern science, which appears as only one form among many of man's thinking orientation in the world. 3) It refuses to regard the historical process as fundamentally progressive, or as rational.[5]

Historical understanding becomes the basis for empirical science and society, and the categories of theoretical understanding imply principles of evaluation that are historically determined: social positivism is thus transformed into historicism, abandoning the distinction between facts and values, simply because every theoretical understanding implies specific evaluations. The refusal of the idea of a 'good life' is the necessary consequence of the short circuit between philosophical relativism and scientific absolutism: due to the essentially historical nature

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of human thought, philosophy gives way to *Weltanschauungslehre.* In the view of the historicism of the period there can be no natural knowledge through which philosophy becomes possible, understood as the search for truth, and consequently natural rights. But in the Straussian interpretation, philosophy (in the Platonic tense of the term), and thus natural right, cannot exist unless there is an absolute horizon that does not change through the changes of history: for historicism and social positivism instead there is a historical-cultural multiplicity of principles of the good and right that reciprocally contradict each other and that cannot demonstrate their superiority or justify their foundations.

3. AGAINST COLLINGWOOD

Strauss widely contested the modern confusion between history and philosophy, which was the origin of the various versions of contemporary historicism, especially in his long discussion of the book *The Idea of History* (1946) by Collingwood. In this discussion clearly emerge the affinities between different formulations of scientific history, epistemology of history, and philosophy of history, all closely linked to the reformulation of the historic nature of modern philosophy, in which there is the implicit idea that thought is historically conditioned. The point of view of the historian—but also of the scientist and the philosopher—is thus without universal or objective validity, given that the philosophical thought of every era, being essentially an expression of the spirit of the times, is equally true, every form of knowledge is uniquely relative and present, and, above all, every truth is valid only within its own historical period. The main subject of historicism assumes the existence of a plurality of planes of historical-cultural reference, all equally legitimate; so every form of theoretical understanding presupposes a specific plane of historical reference within which it lies. Nevertheless, precisely because, if one starts from the experience of history, any form of teaching can be justified, so the argument of historicism cannot be founded on a historical experience, but on a philosophical analysis that demonstrates the essential and "natural" changeableness of the categories of thought. But in the Straussian interpretation, it is precisely this lack of

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demonstration that historicism exhibits, in a self-contradictory manner, its own metahistorical and dogmatic nature: by imposing the basic historicity of thought, historicism confirms its own historicity, and so the provisional nature of its own validity. At the very moment in which the historicist sustains the metahistorical truth of his or her own theses, he or she admits, contradicting these theses, that thought can achieve a universally valid truth: the argumentation is thus founded on a particular interpretation of philosophical knowledge, certainly not justified but only masked, by the historical data on which this interpretation is based. According to Strauss it is necessary to carefully verify the characteristics of historical research implicit in Collingwood's philosophical position, precisely because there is a fatal gap between historical research and historicism:

> The same belief, which forced [Collingwood] to attempt to become a historian of thought, prevented him from becoming a historian of thought. He was forced to attempt to become a historian of thought because he believed that to know the human mind is to know its history, or that self-knowledge is historical understanding. But this belief contradicts the tacit premise of all earlier thought, that premise being the view that to know the human mind is something fundamentally different from knowing the history of the human mind. Collingwood therefore rejected the thought of the past as untrue in the decisive respect. Hence he could not take that thought seriously, for to take a thought seriously means to regard it as possible that the thought in question is true. He therefore lacked the incentive for re-enacting the thought of the past: he did not re-enact the thought of the past.[6]

In Strauss's view, Collingwood's philosophy of history is not just epistemology of history but, above all, metaphysics of history: the apparent relativism present in the consideration of the historically conditioned character of every thought turns out to be, on the contrary, a form of imperialistic dogmatism. The historical understanding rendered possible in the present is, for the modern historian such

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as Collingwood, superior both to the historical understanding possible in the past and to the way that the thought of the past interpreted itself, given that the thought of the past can be known only through the method of re-enactment, or in other words through a form of criticism. The thought of the past is thus studied starting from a historical supposition (simultaneously relativistic and dogmatic) that is completely extraneous to the thought itself. In the Straussian interpretation, the philosophy of history of Collingwood aims, through the organic unity of the total experience of the modern historian, to the accumulation of knowledge that tends to form a universal philosophical history in which the materials provided by the past are understood and assessed from the privileged perspective of the present. The result resides in the legitimization of the idea of progress and in the creation of a perspective model of history, linked only to a specific tradition—here and now—that, due to a lack of interest in difference, is unable to understand the specific nature of facts and ideas of the past. In this sense the opposition between nonhistorical classical philosophy and modern historical philosophy brings to light the inversion in the relationship between history and philosophy, characterized by the abandonment of the distinction between philosophical problems and historical problems. By reformulating the historical character of modern philosophy, Collingwood had transformed philosophical issues into historical issues relative to the future. To escape from the prison of historical subjectivity, unjustified from a philosophical perspective, it is instead necessary, according to Strauss, to abandon the attempt to understand the past in the light of the present. Collingwood sustains that it is possible to understand authors better than authors can understand themselves. However, this understanding, that claims to be the true understanding, is marked by a clearly antihistorical prejudice.

In Strauss's view historical understanding is an interpretive reconstruction through which it is possible to understand the way in which authors of the past understood themselves. We cannot be seriously interested in the past if we consider that the present is superior to the past: whatever the reason for addressing historical and historiographic issues, we must at least provisionally accept the coordinates applied by the thinkers of the past and attempt to understand them within their

original, authentic meaning before formulating critical assessments of them. In this sense, understanding must precede criticism. Historians of philosophy must not substitute their own ideas for those of the authors they are interpreting and must not presume to judge them before understanding them: making a history of philosophy means, for Strauss, attempting to recover lost forms of knowledge. It is possible to recover areas of objectivity in historical research and it is possible to understand correctly the texts of the authors of the past, as they intended them. If they do not want to confuse arbitrarily criticism and interpretation, the historians of thought must preliminarily subordinate their own issues to the issues that their sources sought to resolve. Naturally Strauss is aware that every interpretation is a form of criticism: the choice itself of a specific theme, author, or text considered relevant is a critical act that precedes interpretation. Nevertheless, interpretation and criticism are not the same thing: they are not only distinguishable but also separable. Interpretation necessarily precedes criticism:

> History as history, as quest for the understanding of the past, necessarily presupposes that our understanding of the past is incomplete. The criticism which is inseparable from interpretation is fundamentally different from the criticism which would coincide with the complete understanding. If we call "interpretation" that understanding or criticism which remains within the limits of Plato's own directives, and if we call "criticism" that understanding or criticism which disregards Plato's directives, we may say that interpretation necessarily precedes criticism because the quest for understanding necessarily precedes completed understanding and therewith the judgment which coincides with the completed understanding.[7]

Historians of philosophy must have an initial act of loyalty in relation to the object of study, because they must take into account the real possibility of learning something of important philosophical relevance from the study of the thinkers of the past, rather than from the study of the thinkers of the present. It is possible to understand the philosophy of the past if one is willing to learn something not only about the

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philosophers of the past, but also from them: in some cases a study of classical texts represents the sole possibility for recovering knowledge of fundamental philosophical problems. This possibility becomes a concrete reality in the present era, characterized in Strauss's view by a profound intellectual crisis of the West, the solution for which required a form of emancipation from modern philosophy. Furthermore, the history of philosophy itself is a product of the modern world, which assumed philosophical relevance only after Hegel: in this sense, historians of philosophy have not only the responsibility for the accuracy and objectiveness of their research, but also and above all the responsibility to bring to light the extended duration or indeed permanence of philosophical issues, the question of truth. Historical understanding cannot avoid facing up to the philosophical question: the most important issue always remains philosophical truth, so much so that historians of philosophy must convert themselves to philosophy keeping clearly in mind the philosophical relevance of their historical studies, in view of the rediscovery of the fundamental philosophical issues:

> History has the further task of explaining why the proper understanding of the fundamental problems has become lost in such a manner that the loss presents itself at the outset as a progress. If it is true that loss of understanding of the fundamental problems culminates in the historicization of philosophy or in historicism, the second function of history consists in making intelligible the modern notion of "History" through the understanding of its genesis. Historicism sanctions the loss, or the oblivion, of the natural horizon of human thought by denying the permanence of the fundamental problems. It is the existence of that natural horizon which makes possible "objectivity" and therefore in particular "historical objectivity."[8]

This criticism of modern subjectivity is not extraneous to the Straussian analysis of logical positivism which, rejecting the Kantian a priori and every form of pure intellect, cannot but find itself involved in psychology and in the empirical genesis of science based on what determines its range of possibilities.[9] Positivistic science is not autonomous

because its hypotheses, its imagination, and its results depend on external conditions—social, environmental, cultural—that science itself does not generate. Furthermore, science is a necessary activity of a specific human organism that needs to understand causal relations. Without doubt logical positivism attempts to consider science as autonomous, thanks to the distinction between 'origins' and 'validity': nevertheless it does not succeed, according to Strauss, also because it refuses the possibility of making rational judgments of value. But the opinion that value judgments are not subject to rational control encourages the inclination to make irresponsible affirmations regarding right and wrong, good and bad. All this, basically, is caused by the radical reformulation of modern philosophy as a historical philosophy that claims, contrary to classical philosophy, to possess the status of science, radically distinguishing the how from the why.

For Strauss, instead, the possibility of philosophy and of political philosophy in particular, is an eternal opportunity, not tied to the dimension of here and now, for the confrontation of human life and politics. Political philosophy has the task of rendering explicit the attempt that every political action implicitly contains within itself: the attempt to know what is good and what is bad for the political community (and not simply to have opinions). The political philosopher is, in fact, primarily interested in finding the truth. Political philosophy, as a part of philosophy, is research for—not knowledge of—the truth in political issues: given the incapacity to achieve full understanding of everything, people are at least capable of grasping the fundamental issues, of recognizing what each knows and does not know. In this collocation as a borderland between research into truth and opinions, political philosophy is obliged to take into account the beliefs that characterize the life of a community. Opinions and beliefs necessarily conflict with the philosophical search for truth, which is an essentially transpolitical activity: philosophy is the attempt to replace opinions with knowledge, but opinions are the foundation of political life. Strauss underlines, against all conciliatory traditions, the gap between philosophy and politics. Strauss often recalls Plato's definition of the greatest enemy of philosophy: the greatest sophist is the people of the city; that is, the political society. The only discourse politically

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pronounceable is thus far from the only philosophically true discourse, because philosophy is a discourse on the truth that exists outside of the Platonic cave.

4. HERMENEUTICS, PHILOSOPHY, AND HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

Throughout his life Strauss read classical texts: from Spinoza to Maimonides, Plato to Hobbes, Xenophon to Machiavelli. His studies included an analysis of the forms in which these texts were written. From this point of view, it would be correct to define his work as a history of political philosophy, although it needs to be remembered that his historical research was not limited to the characteristic themes of scholarly literature, instead extending across the theoretical areas of reflection addressing all the main categories of political philosophy. Most of Strauss's scientific production is imbued with an unusual copresence of philosophical reflections, hermeneutic investigations, and historical reconstructions, filtered by his arguments against positivism and historicism. Strauss appears to philosophize by minutely reconstructing the structure of certain texts from the past, tracing lines of dialogue and genealogical links between philosophers that set out new historiographic pathways. At the same time his way of constructing the history of philosophy is clearly founded on a specific conception of philosophical activity. The understanding of the relationships between philosophy and the history of philosophy in the thought of Strauss cannot thus be separated from a reflection on his conception of hermeneutics (with particular reference to reticence in philosophical writings), in a radical distinction between history and historicism.

More than in "Persecution and the Art of Writing" (1941), it is in "The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*" (1941) that Strauss elaborates his hermeneutic approach together with a successful formulation of a correct methodology for historical research, raising the issue of reticence in principle. In this essay Strauss's work consists essentially in setting down a series of interpretative instruments that permit penetration through the numerous esoteric schemes of the

Guide for the Perplexed by Maimonides. This explains his great attention to the contradictions, silences, ambiguities, and repetitions in the text, with the aim of defining in the smallest detail and without any reference to any mystical or initiatory esoterism, the political nature of Maimonides's reticence.

For Strauss, Maimonides is not a depository of a *philosophia perennis*, nor the representative of an initiatory-esoteric tradition: his teachings founded on the use of speculative premises, and so rational, are secret only because the aims and needs of philosophy do not coincide with those of the political society, just as the search for truth does not coincide with the search for consensus.

Straussian hermeneutics is neither a theory of hermetic experience nor a universal theory of the hermeneutic experience, but rather a rational research method, concrete and flexible.[10] Strauss's hermeneutic conception is closely linked to a rational, antitraditional, and anticonformist conception of philosophical activity, in which reticence is seen as a direct consequence of the need to interpret philosophical activity as education. Also present in societies in which there is no censorship, reticent literature does not depend only on the presence of forms of political and religious persecution. Without doubt the influence of persecution on literature pushes heterodox authors towards the elaboration of a particular literary technique that uses silences, repetitions, contradictions, and ambiguous words in order to communicate the truth on fundamental issues exclusively between the lines. From this perspective, reticent writing—used in different forms by Plato and Xenophon, Averroes and Avicenna, Maimonides and Spinoza, Machiavelli and Hobbes—is a necessary form of defence of philosophy (and of philosophers). For this reason reticent writing can be identified with a certain facility in all those authors who have found themselves in situations of political or religious persecution. However, the ambit of Straussian hermeneutics extends well beyond an analysis of historical contingencies, applying in principle to all authors in the past who accepted the distinction between esoteric and exoteric thought, leaving various aspects of their teaching implicit. By limiting themselves to providing only a few hints towards the theoretical truth within a discourse in other ways coherent, the philosophers manage to remedy the

essentially limited nature of writing: the art of reticent writing provides a method for saying different things to different readers. The attention of the interpreter must therefore focus on the obscurities, contradictions, repetitions, omissions, errors, and silences in the text with the aim of bringing an indirect light to the true designs of the author, since the presence of these irregularities, thematic and formal, consists in the formulation of unconventional opinions. A reticent book contains two teachings: one edifying and found on the surface and one philosophical and appearing exclusively between the lines. The reader of a reticent text can thus follow a path that leads from common opinions to theoretical concepts and truths, but can also remain inseparably linked to the world of the imagination. Exterior conformity with the opinions of the community in which one lives is an indispensable prerequisite for a philosopher, and the process of substitution of opinions with truth can be conducted only gradually and in an esoteric manner.

In direct contradiction with the historicist tradition, which claims the priority of the historical-social dimension above that of the individual, Straussian interpretation aims to grasp what might be defined as oral teachings—in other words, private teachings—found hidden within publicly visible, written teachings. No historian can understand the secret thoughts of an individual personality starting from the given historical context: on this basis it is possible to reconstruct only the most obvious facts and opinions that represent the common denominators of the era. The mere existence of reticent literature therefore implies the abandonment of all prospects of historical reconstruction determined and oriented in idealistic, historicist, or sociological terms. No Hegelian and post-Hegelian Zeitgeist has the right of citizenship in the study of classical texts: modern historic knowledge arose in coincidence with the interruption of the esoteric tradition. For this reason, in his reading of the *Guide*, Strauss considers the nuances in their minimum details: no word is superfluous or accidental in a work of great literary and conceptual perfection. In this sense Strauss strives to define down to the smallest details a procedure for legitimate reading between the lines, trying to circumscribe the characteristics and the functions of the methodologies, the analytic instruments, and the rhetorical figures implied in his interpretation of the *Guide*, arriving at the definition of

a genuine interpretive technique that takes into consideration—alongside the content—the formal structure, because in works of literary perfection the content depends on the style. Philosophy is a discourse of a particular genre that requires the fine tuning of a procedure of gradual introduction to the philosophical discourse itself, concretely expressed in the art of reticent writing. In the Straussian interpretation, the gradual but necessary introduction to philosophy is defined as "liberal education"; that is, education for the perfection of people, because philosophy, as a search for wisdom, is simultaneously virtue and happiness.

Persecution and conformism are not capable of impeding the existence and public expression of independent thought. In the Straussian interpretation, the influence of persecution on literature pushes heterodox authors towards the elaboration of a particular literary technique, using silences, repetitions, and contradictions to communicate the truth on fundamental issues exclusively between the lines. But to sustain the correctness of historical research that emerges from this hermeneutic conception, Strauss writes explicitly of a legitimate use and an illegitimate use of reading between the lines.

> The historian will merely, and rightly, demand that in spite of all changes which have occurred or which will occur in the intellectual climate, the tradition of historical exactness shall be continued. Accordingly, he will not accept an arbitrary standard of exactness which might exclude a priori the most important facts of the past from human knowledge, but will adapt the rules of certainty which guide his research to the nature of his subject. He will then follow such rules as these: reading between the lines is strictly prohibited in all cases where it would be less exact than not doing so. Only such reading between the lines as starts from an exact consideration of the explicit statements of the author is legitimate. The context in which a statement occurs, and the literary character of the whole work as well as its plan, must be perfectly understood before an interpretation of the statement can reasonably claim to be adequate or even correct. One is not entitled to delete a

passage, nor to emend its text, before one has fully considered all reasonable possibilities of understanding the passage as it stands—one of these possibilities being that the passage may be ironic. If a master of the art of writing commits such blunders as would shame an intelligent high school boy, it is reasonable to assume that they are intentional, especially if the author discusses, however incidentally, the possibility of intentional blunders in writing. The views of the author of a drama or dialogue must not, without previous proof, be identified with the views expressed by one or more of his characters, or with those agreed upon by all his characters or by his attractive characters. The real opinion of an author is not necessarily identical with that which he expresses in the largest number of passages.[11]

Strauss's hermeneutic vindication, explicitly at odds with modern historical and historiographic trends, concentrates on detailed textual analysis with the aim of making the classical texts—rather than their contemporary interpreters—speak. The attention of the interpreter must contemplate the obscurities, contradictions, repetitions, omissions, errors, and silences of the text with the aim of bringing an indirect light on to the true design set out by the author, because the presence of these various irregularities, simultaneously thematic and formal, consists in the simulation of unconventional opinions. The words require an interpretation: the typeface of the text is often a facade intended to hide the truth. Of course, the true meaning of certain terms is not always the literal meaning, also because it is impossible to establish the meaning of a term without considering the context in which it is found. In this sense, whenever an unexpected change, an elementary error, an obvious contradiction, or a marked silence is encountered in texts of the highest level, an explanation must be found through conjectural analysis of these apparent irregularities.

Naturally, reticent writing can be identified with a certain facility in all those authors who have found themselves in contexts of political or religious persecution, but the ambit of reference of Straussian thought goes beyond analysis of historical contingencies, extending in principle to all authors of the past who accepted the distinction between esoteric

Lastra_Leo.indd 37 10/20/15 8:22 PM

and exoteric thought, leaving various aspects of their teaching implicit. The problem of reticence is not identifiable *tout court* with the problem of religious or political persecution, and the fundamental political role played by the reticent writing method in favor of philosophical thought is not lost even in the context of an authentically liberal society. Even in societies in which there are no forms of censorship or persecution, reticent literature fulfils the task of responding to the problem of education, one of the central issues for political philosophy. Nevertheless, as regards the relationship between education and reticent writing—also relative to the distinction between two different human types—Strauss notes a great change between the ancients and moderns:

> What attitude people adopt toward freedom of public discussion, depends decisively on what they think about popular education and its limits. Generally speaking, premodern philosophers were more timid in this respect than modern philosophers. After about the middle of the seventeenth century an ever-increasing number of heterodox philosophers who had suffered from persecution published their books not only to communicate their thoughts but also because they desired to contribute to the abolition of persecution as such. They believed that suppression of free inquiry, and of publication of the results of free inquiry, was accidental, an outcome of the faulty construction of the body politic, and that the kingdom of general darkness could be replaced by the republic of universal light. They looked forward to a time when, as a result of the progress of popular education, practically complete freedom of speech would be possible [. . .]. They concealed their views only far enough to protect themselves as well as possible from persecution; had they been more subtle than that, they would have defeated their purpose, which was to enlighten an ever-increasing number of people who were not potential philosophers [. . .]. The attitude of an earlier type of writers was fundamentally different. They believed that the gulf separating "the wise" and "the vulgar" was a basic fact of human nature which could not be influenced by any progress of popular

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> education: philosophy, or science, was essentially a privilege of "the few." They were convinced that philosophy as such was suspect to, and hated by, the majority of men. Even if they had had nothing to fear from any particular political quarter, those who started from that assumption would have been driven to the conclusion that public communication of the philosophic or scientific truth was impossible or undesirable, not only for the time being but for all times. They must conceal their opinions from all but philosophers, either by limiting themselves to oral instruction of a carefully selected group of pupils, or by writing about the most important subject by means of "brief indication."[12]

The radical nature of the schism between ancient and modern leads naturally not only to two distinct popular conceptions of education, but also to two distinct conceptions of philosophical activity, basically two distinct conceptions of the relationship between philosophy and political society. This epochal schism, brought into sharp focus by the theme of reticent writing, cannot be characterized from a historical point of view only, as the progressive abandonment of inquisitional practices by the political and religious authorities. It involves the issue of the limits to the freedom of expression in the various stages of communication and public education. Against the contingent imperfections of the "realm of shadows," modern philosophers concentrate their attention on the progress achieved by education and popular instruction, because they consider that philosophy and political society are corresponding. In contrast, in the eyes of the classical Greeks, the aim of philosophers is radically different from that pursued by non-philosophers: independently of any incidental progress of the educational system, "the philosopher and non philosophers cannot share decisions that are sincere."[13] In this sense, the radicalism of philosophical thought is not possible except through the moderation of reticent writing, this art being the form in which philosophy shows itself to the city. In the Straussian interpretation, reticent writing is the sphere in which the problematic relationship between the world of philosophy and the political world is revealed.

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The city needs philosophy only in a moderated form: politics is characterized by principles of prudence in relation to tradition, gods, and private and public interests, in relation to which philosophy is, and has to be, indifferent. This means acknowledging and justifying the moderated, nonradical character of the requests that can be directed to the political realm, with the consequence that unconditional philosophical truths cannot be realized within the political field. In this perspective, for Strauss, political conservatism appears to be simply the other side of the medallion of philosophical radicalism.

Political philosophy cannot be conservative, given that it is founded on the knowledge of the superiority of the good and noble above the traditional and old; on the other hand, it is aware that every political society is a particular society, closed to the exterior, founded on a myth which is belief, not knowledge, but is necessary in order to preserve the possibility of a social order. The logical superiority of private life (philosophical) over public life (political) is thus an inverse reflection of the chronological precedence of political life over philosophical life: philosophy is superior to politics, but philosophical activity is impossible without a social life. Theoretical truth is therefore not politically realizable and is also socially dangerous both for politics, because it risks undermining the convictions and beliefs that underlie the system of social cohabitation, and for philosophers, because it leads to widespread social precariousness that gives rise to the phenomenon of persecution.

The solution to this problem is provided by reticent writing, which enables philosophers to say different things to different people. In the Straussian interpretation, reticent writing and political philosophy appear, together and simultaneously, to indicate the problematic relationship between the world of philosophy and the world of politics. 'Political' in this sense does not denote only a specific sector of philosophy, that of political philosophy; 'political' here denotes a fundamental aspect of all philosophy. Political philosophy is the political management of philosophy.

Philosophers of the past normally wrote their texts in the same way that they had encountered in the authors who had preceded them; and so the characteristic model for reticent writing that permits the transmission of philosophical knowledge is *mimesis*. Philosophy is a

Lastra_Leo.indd 40 10/20/15 8:22 PM

discourse of a particular genre that requires, in the transition through the various generations of philosophers and the relationship between philosophers and young potential philosophers, the fine-tuning of a gradual process of introduction to the philosophical discourse itself. In the Straussian interpretation the gradual but necessary introduction to philosophy is defined, starting from the example of the classical Greeks, as education in reading and writing particular genres: philosophy is liberal education in the highest sense; it is education for the perfection of people. Liberal education consists in the careful study of the works left to us by the great philosophers, which means acquiring profound awareness of the fact that the great thinkers do not say the same things on the most important issues. Even without being philosophers, we can find that it is possible to love philosophy—in other words follow the dialogue between the great philosophers through the study of their works. However, this dialogue cannot take place without study: all the great philosophers express themselves in monologues, even when they write dialogues. The task of the scholar consists in trying to transform these monologues into dialogues: the scholar lives within an enchanted circle, protected by the work of the philosophers that confronted issues without remaining in the shadow of any form of authority. In this sense the great works reveal their full meaning, as was intended by the authors, only by our meditating on them day and night:

> Those to whom such books are truly addressed are neither the unphilosophical majority nor the perfect philosopher as such, but the young men who might become philosophers: the potential philosophers are to be led step by step from the popular views which are indispensable for all practical and political purposes to the truth which is merely and purely theoretical [. . .]. All books of that kind owe their existence to the love of the mature philosopher for the puppies of his race, by whom he wants to be loved in turn: all exoteric books are "written speeches caused by love" [. . .]. In Plato's *Banquet*, Alcibiades compares Socrates and his speeches to certain sculptures which are very ugly from the outside, but within have most beautiful images of things divine. The works of the great writers of the past are very beautiful even from without. And yet their visible

Lastra_Leo.indd 41 10/20/15 8:22 PM

beauty is sheer ugliness, compared with the beauty of those hidden treasures which disclose themselves only after very long, never easy, but always pleasant work. This always difficult but always pleasant work is, I believe, what the philosophers had in mind when they recommended education. Education, they felt, is the only answer to the always pressing question, to the political question par excellence, of how to reconcile order which is not oppression with freedom which is not license.[14]

NOTES

1. Plutarch, *Quomodo quis suos in virtute sentiat profectus*, 79a.
2. cf. *RKS* in *GS 1* (English translation in *SCR*); *Philosophie und Gesetz* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1935) in *GS 2* (English translation in *PL*).
3. On the relationships between philosophy and the history of philosophy in Strauss, cf. Thomas L. Pangle and Nathan Tarcov, "Epilogue: Leo Strauss and the History of Political Philosophy," in *HPP*; Rémi Brague, "Athènes, Jérusalem, La Mecque. L'interprétation *musulmane* de la philosophie grecque chez Leo Strauss," in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 94 (1989): 309–336; Nathan Tarcov, "On a Certain Critique of Straussianism," in *Review of Politics* 53 (1991): 3–18; Carlo Altini, "Beyond Historicism: Collingwood, Strauss, Momigliano," in *Interpretation* 34 (2006): 47–66.
4. *NRH*, 40–42.
5. *WIPP*, 26.
6. OCPH, 575.
7. OCPH, 583–584.
8. OCPH, 585–586.
9. cf. R.
10. cf. CCWM.
11. *PAW*, 29–30.
12. *PAW*, 33–35.
13. cf. *LAM*, 14.
14. *PAW*, 36–37.