

Leo Strauss and Metaphysics

(comments on three papers at “Leo Strauss and Modernity,”

New School University, Fall 2005)

For Leo Strauss, more perhaps than for any thinker since Plato, the question of philosophy stands at the heart of human life. If the philosophical life is the best life, moral and intellectual questions will perforce be bound together. Thinking about human life, therefore, requires unraveling the complicated relation between the good and the true. All three papers considered here take this relation very seriously. For Professor Vaggalis, Strauss “engage[s] in political philosophy as first philosophy” (2). For Professor Gonda, Strauss’ understanding of political philosophy “is predicated on the possibility of metaphysics” (1). Professor Minkov speaks of the philosopher’s “subjective certainty” that “our interest in the whole—fueled by a tremendous theoretical energy and passion—is the deepest thing in us” (10). In one way or another then, each must deal with this nagging question: Since, on the surface of things, Strauss is clearly a political philosopher, what does it mean for his political philosophy if at the heart of things he is a metaphysician? It is worth noting that to understand Strauss as a metaphysician both Vaggalis and Gonda find it necessary to turn to other thinkers more obviously metaphysical—in the one case to Martin Heidegger and in the other to Jacob Klein.

Professor Vaggalis understands Heidegger and Strauss to be engaged in similar projects. For Heidegger, we have forgotten the question of Being; for Strauss, the question of natural right. Heidegger finds the origin of this forgetting in Plato and Aristotle, who launched the tradition of Western metaphysics out of which grew the dominance of reason understood as instrumental—the model is *technê*. The error in question is double—to treat Being as a being and

as derivative from the idea of the good. Accordingly Heidegger seeks to restore a pre-Socratic understanding of Being and of truth—*aletheia* as “unhiddenness” or showing forth rather than “correctness of apprehension” or adequation (I note in passing that this historical account of the Platonic origin of the forgetfulness of Being may not be quite so simple. Since *Being and Time* begins with a quotation from the *Sophist* in which the Eleatic stranger professes to have forgotten the meaning of Being, mustn’t this forgetfulness already be thematic and understood to be a problem?). According to Vaggalis, this Heideggerian insight is ethical and political. It recognizes that the essentializing of human beings common to all humanisms, in failing to understand the difference between Being and beings, fails properly to understand human being—*Dasein*. In so doing, it alienates us from our world. This homelessness engenders a longing to appropriate the world—to master it—that, in turn, further fortifies our alienation. Heidegger’s attempt to restore the question of Being thus amounts to an attempt to restore us to our authentic selves. Why this problem should be historical and not perennial is not so clear. Still, once released from our technical mode of thinking, we will be free to engage in a “thoughtful questioning of Being” (18). This freedom is fraught with moral and political implications. Put crudely, properly understanding Heidegger will change your life, for he has it in mind “to establish a more original relationship to the ethical and political, one that allows people to realize what their proper dignity is” (14). So far, one might say of Heidegger, as Vaggalis does in fact say of Strauss, that his goal is to restore “the true liberal vision of society” (4).

Vaggalis realizes, however, that there is something wrong here. Heidegger falls short of political philosophy. Morality understood in this way is simply philosophy. And since all beings both hide and reveal Being, any experience looks to be possibly authentic. Heidegger may correctly describe a preferred way of being in the world, but he does not really make it possible

to understand our manifest preference for certain beings in the world. Now, Vaggalis's way of stating this problem is that by falsely understanding the alternative paths to Being to be modern instrumental reasoning and ancient poetic reasoning, Heidegger omits a third path—*phronêsis* or practical reason, which he takes to be at the heart of Strauss' correction of Heidegger. The forgetfulness of natural right will be rooted in the forgetfulness of *phronêsis*. Here something rather important gets obscured. If Strauss' attempt to restore the question of natural right is a return to Plato, and Vaggalis seems to understand it this way, is this best described as a restoration of *phronêsis*? To take *phronêsis* in its Aristotelian sense seems anachronistic; to take it in Plato's sense is not in any straightforward way to distinguish it from a general faculty of thinking. Strauss is not so much concerned with a specific feature of thought, as though Heidegger was fine as far as he went but just left something important out. Rather, Strauss is concerned with the complete transformation of our understanding of what it means to think about anything at all once we realize the significance of the fact that not modern human beings, but human beings everywhere and always view the world through the lens of what is good and bad. In granting insufficient importance to ordinary distinctions everywhere present between good and bad, just and unjust, beautiful and ugly, Heidegger obscures the surface of things—beings—and thereby obscures the heart of things—Being. Perhaps the most curious thing about us is this way we have of preferring some pieces of our world to others.

Vaggalis's Strauss in a way derives from Vaggalis's Heidegger. As the *Being and Time* of political philosophy, *Natural Right and History* is the story of the decay of natural right into the natural law tradition on the one hand and modern natural rights theories on the other. These changes are reflections of a still deeper change in the understanding of philosophy. But for Strauss, the golden age is not as it was for Heidegger pre-Socratic; it is pre-Machiavellian. This

is a long story, deserving of more attention than I can give it here, but perhaps it will suffice to indicate several difficulties. On Vaggalis's account, Strauss' critique of modernity is primarily a critique of the instrumentalizing of reason. When philosophy is put in the service of non-philosophic ends, it becomes inauthentic.¹ But, if simply true, this would mean that the moderns from Machiavelli on are not really philosophers. This cannot be the view of the author of *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Furthermore, this view would be difficult to reconcile with another of Vaggalis's claims. Modern philosophy is supposed to have "lost the detachment that marked ancient philosophy" (23)—"a private activity where the philosopher was interested in what furthered the quest for knowledge" (23). But this detachment is then defined in terms of the public good—"philosophy ... must be independent of the demands of society in order to prevent harm to the city and to see how it can most effectively serve the needs of society" (24). Why is this not simply philosophy as instrumental?

Vaggalis characterizes Strauss' project as the attempt to return *phronêsis* to its proper place in political life by restoring an older view of a philosophy that recognizes the necessity to begin its inquiries from ordinary opinions and not directly from nature. Now, while this turn to opinion yields interesting contradictions that may be our only access to the truth of things, it is not at all clear that the philosophy grounded in such inquiry is as potentially friendly to the *polis* as Vaggalis seems to hope it will be. Plato certainly never lost sight of the execution of Socrates. So, while it may be necessary to replace the simpler nature/convention distinction of the pre-Socratics with the more subtle understanding of human beings as the beings who are by nature conventional, this does not mean that the content of conventional opinions is any the less endangered by the activity of philosophy. For Professor Vaggalis, human beings are by nature

¹ Thus modern political philosophy concentrates on externals—on institutions; ancient political thought concentrates on education—on the rule of the wise.

political—what “brings us together” is “an idea of the good that includes others” (31). This is the “best life according to nature” and requires that one act “moderately and with virtue” (31).

Whether a reference to *Republic*, Book 2 or *Politics*, Book 1, this is not quite correct. In both cases necessity brings us together; only later, as an afterthought, do we discover the good life. Sociality is not the result of a simple natural teleology; it happens to us behind our backs and is grounded in principles that society can never afford simply to acknowledge. Social virtues are thus never altogether identical with natural virtues. In whatever way “philosophy is marked by ... moderation” (32), its moderation is not quite the same as political moderation.

In smoothing over the tension between philosophy and political life, Vaggalis makes philosophy more moral than it really is. He cites, but does not really get to the bottom of, Strauss’ well known remark to Jacob Klein that “you attach higher importance to morality, as morality, than I do” (23). In the end Vaggalis measures the success of philosophy politically. He thinks Strauss is primarily engaged not in an inquiry into the nature of things but in a political project to restore us our dignity by putting us once again more authentically in contact with the nature of things. Yet, while philosophy may be of necessity edifying, it must nevertheless beware of wishing to be edifying. Having pointed to the moral character of Heidegger’s thought, Vaggalis has, I think, unwittingly also placed Strauss within the same horizon—one in which, because the distinction between philosophy and morality has vanished with the assimilation of the true to the good, philosophy itself has vanished.

Professor Gonda begins with the astute claim that “the seriousness of the Straussian perspective is predicated on the enduring possibility of raising the fundamental questions of philosophy” (1). He then identifies the raising of such questions with metaphysics. One might object that it is not obvious that what Plato and Aristotle are doing is really the same as what is

later called metaphysics, for one ought not automatically identify Plato with his Eleatic Stranger nor forget that when Aristotle characterizes being as the “what is?”, the fundamental metaphysical question becomes “What is ‘What is?’.” For Plato and Aristotle “metaphysics” thus has a curiously dialogic character. But Gonda knows this, and, as one cannot say everything, no doubt skips over it. Still, about Gonda’s claim that “Strauss never directly addressed his metaphysical views,” one might certainly say this as well of Plato, and, in my admittedly quirky view, even of Aristotle. That said, there are more places than Gonda acknowledges where Strauss expresses views on metaphysical issues—one thinks, for example, of the discussion of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* in the seventeenth and final paragraph of the central section of “What is Political Philosophy?” These would be mere quibbles were it not for the fact that Gonda turns rather quickly away from Strauss to Jacob Klein as his model for metaphysical inquiry.

The very bare bones of Gonda’s argument seem to be this. For Strauss philosophy must begin from ordinary opinions. These opinions enclose us in a cave of ignorance. If there is a way out, they must also make it possible for us to wonder. As the fundamental question of philosophy is “What is being?”, if philosophy is to be perennially possible, this question—Heidegger to the contrary notwithstanding—must be somehow available to us no matter what the ordinary opinion from which we begin. Accordingly, it is worth looking at our own world—our cave—to ask how the opinions available to us can be understood to provide such an access to the question of being qua being. But mathematical physics is a large part of the opinion—the *doxa*—constituting our cave. Gonda invokes Jacob Klein’s understanding of the difference between ancient and modern mathematics to show why the conclusions of modern physics are inexpressible apart from their mathematical formulations and then asks whether there is in our physics any ground for the sort of wonder that is the beginning of the ascent from the cave. He finds such a ground in the

inexplicable harmony that our mathematical physics assumes between mathematics and the world. Why, after all, should it be the case that the “great book of the world is written in mathematical characters?” This problem would not have emerged in the same way for Greek mathematics, according to which number is always understood as a number of definite things. For us, though, it is a profound puzzle. In not understanding, and yet assuming, the bond between *mathemata*, things understood, and *phusis*, nature, mathematical physics reproduces as a fundamental *aporia* its own version of Parmenides’ famous claim that “being and thinking are the same.”

This is an elegant demonstration of how a conflict within opinion is a necessary condition for philosophical wonder. One wonders, though, whether it is a sufficient condition. Gonda has taken his cue from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* A.2 without reflecting on the account of the natural desire to know in *Metaphysics* A.1. He has shown how our contemporary cave makes it possible for us to raise the question of being without speaking of why it should seem good for us to do so. He has, in other words, assumed in us a disposition to philosophize without which such contradictions in our experience might very well register in us without making us care. In thus assimilating morality to philosophy, Professor Gonda has perhaps replicated Klein’s unselfconscious attachment to morality as Strauss characterized it in the aforementioned “Giving of Accounts.” I think Strauss thought Klein did not wonder sufficiently about why he so loved the truth. It is perhaps worth mentioning that Seth Benardete reports that Klein “put up tremendous resistance to Strauss’s interpretation of the cave”—i.e. as the city—and that when Strauss, upon overhearing Klein speak of the effects of co-education at St. John’s College, inquired mischievously “And what about vice?”, Klein laughed and responded, “Oh, there’s that too.” Strauss would never have had to be reminded of vice.

Of the three papers, Professor Minkov's is most openly concerned with the strange status of the philosophical life as governed jointly by the true and the good. What does Strauss mean when he claims that "we have learned from Socrates that the political things, or the human things, are the key to the understanding of all things" (1)? Both practical and theoretical questions may be asked out of a longing to live one's life well; both questions about the human things and questions about the world may be asked simply for the sake of getting at the truth. In the first part of his paper Minkov traces what he takes to be Strauss' way of relating these two understandings of the philosophic life when "in the course of looking for the best way of life one can discover that progress in understanding is the most intrinsically satisfying activity" (9). This would make "it difficult to distinguish the desire to live well from the desire to know the truth" (6). Presumably Aristotle was correct, and every human action must begin from a longing for what seems good for oneself. This longing is refined, however, by our realization that what we want may not be real. This, in turn, leads us to political philosophy as what "aims at bringing us clarity on questions about which we care deeply" (5). As Minkov puts it "the legitimate arbiter of the nature of philosophy is the person who cares deeply about his life and about what is noble and good in his life" (2). This seems at first at odds with the fact that "the best way of life ... is not characterized ... by asking the question 'what is my life about'" (2), and yet ascertaining the truth of our longings proves to turn us away from ourselves for the sake of ourselves. This experience, born of our most urgent needs but transfigured by the investigation into these needs, provides our deepest satisfaction.

Pursuing answers to the urgent questions of my own life leads me to wish to verify this urgency by way of understanding the human things generally. This—political philosophy—in turn, according to Strauss, "provide[s] a clue to all things, to the whole of nature." Minkov

presses Strauss here; how do we know this to be true? We are directed first to Strauss' notion of the noetic heterogeneity, by which Strauss seems to mean that the whole cannot be understood from a single vantage point. At first he uses this to justify a specifically political philosophy—the polis being unlike all other beings. But Minkov also cites a later passage where noetic heterogeneity (which Strauss elsewhere connects to the variety ends present in the human soul) is said vindicate common sense. We are never allowed simply to leave behind our beginning points on surface of things; the appearance of difference is difference and can never be grounded in homogeneity. So far, so good, but Minkov seems sometimes to mistake this vindication of the existence of difference for an endorsement of differences as they appear to common sense. Yet the problem inherent in the surface of things and only in the surface of things can be the heart of things only because the surface of things is not simply what it first appears to be. Political philosophy, the true study of the surface, transforms the surface.

Minkov's second question is this: How do we know that the theoretical life that is thus made possible by political philosophy is good? Here he points to an answer in Strauss that is at once true and necessarily unsatisfying—"subjective certainty." Seth Benardete used to describe it this way. You are reading a book and see things falling into place. You realize that if you are correct the author will have to introduce a certain point in a certain way. When you read on and discover exactly what you predicted, you have subjective certainty that you have understood. But you will never be able to convince anyone of this, for it always look to them as though you peaked ahead and then worked backwards from what you saw. Minkov has nevertheless done us a service, for sometimes something is gained simply by pointing to subjective certainty—it is, I think, what Strauss had in mind when in a letter to Gadamer he claimed "not to recognize in [Gadamer's] hermeneutics [his] own experience as an interpreter" because Gadamer was not

sufficiently attentive to the “irretrievably ‘occasional’ character of every worthwhile interpretation.” Strauss goes on to provide what he calls a few “rhapsodic” examples. Stitching together persuasive particulars may be the best one can do when it comes to the good and the true.