LEO STRAUSS'S READING OF THE BIBLE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

BY

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1 Dec. 1990

As one begins to look more closely at what Mr. Strauss wrote and said about the Bible one begins to feel a greater and greater need to consider what I must whimsically call Strauss' good natured theory of history. I believe that what I mean by *whimsy* is clear; I hope that what I mean by *good natured* will become less opaque during the course of this talk.

Strauss begins with the notion of man as a rational animal. By this, he meant nothing more than that by day men work together and in the evening they talk. Of what do they speak? Of the way to plant corn, the way to go out on the hunt; the way to bake bread, the way to bury the dead, and of the way to live as *one of us*. Without these ways, there would be no corn, there would be no bread, there would be no life. These ways must be taught and they must be learned. They must be taught, some by the fathers and some by the mothers, and it is the children who must learn them. But men are such that the stories that teach these ways cannot be shared unless they touch upon *the first things* and tell of a world which holds all of our ways together. Without a whole, men are empty and life is without taste.

Unity meant a cause, and a cause meant a beginning, and a beginning meant a god or the gods. But how united is the world? Did not the wind destroy what the sun had built? And if the Sun God was at war with the God of the winds, what determined the outcome of that war and the terms of its battles? The world had become a world

of consciously willing gods and a world of necessity.

Then things began to happen. A traveler came to a village one day and found a different way of baking bread and a different way of planting corn. The bread back home was better because it was *real bread*, but he could see with his own eyes that their corn was higher and fuller and richer than his corn.

Then too there was the half-breed; the man with two stories instead of one. For Strauss, we of the western world are such a half-breed, perhaps the bastard *par excellence*.

What holds our parents, Jerusalem and Athens, The Bible and Greek Philosophy together and distinguishes them from myth, is that each of them came to grips with the problem of the corn and the bread. What holds them apart is the way in which they grasped that problem. Eventually, we shall have to ask ourselves whether that which holds them apart is not ultimately that which holds them together as well.

Of this moment when myth began to fall apart, Strauss wrote "Unfortunately, the divine law, the *theos nomos*, to use the Greek image, leads to *two* fundamental alternatives: one is the character of Greek philosophy: the other is the character of the Bible." However much this statement may require revision in the course of our study we may not forget that its first formulation begins with

the word *unfortunately.*

Someone among the ancient Greeks whose name I do not know, must have been the first to say: "There is a vast difference between the bread and the corn. It is we who prefer the bread because we have grown up with it; but there must be something about the corn itself which makes it grow best in the way in which it does". In some such way as this, *nature* was distinguished from *custom.* This man, or another like him was then forced to ask the same question of the first things and of his way of life, of the just and of the unjust. Were they like the bread? or were they like the corn? Others joined him and some said one thing while others said another. Necessity was transformed into nature, while the willing gods either withered away, or were transformed into man.

To what extent did the man or men who set down the text of the Bible divine or sniff out something of the consequences of the way taken by Greek philosophy? It is doubtful that anyone will ever have a clear answer to that question, but we can try to clarify for ourselves something of the way taken by the bible

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To deny the distinction between the corn and the bread, once a hint of that distinction is in the air, would be to assert that our God who has given us a law concerning the bread dedicated for use in the temple worship is the same god by whose command the corn

and all other green things come forth from the earth. This would imply one God who is both Lord over the sun and Lord over the winds, and that He has chosen a particular people to be His people.

Mythic duality was replaced by an omnipotent God in the fullest sense. The willing gods became the one omnipotent God, and necessity fell under His command. As you may know there is no Biblical word for nature, and it should be noted that even the medieval term tebha' comes from a word meaning "to dip". The reference is to a signet ring. Nature is stamped into a thing from the outside; it does not grow from within the object itself. Man does not beget man nor dog beget dog because of its own nature, but in obedience to the command "Go forth and multiply."

I believe that what struck Strauss most about the Bible is the depth of insight with which it presents what for him was the fundamental alternative to Greek philosophy.

An omnipotent God was an essentially unknowable God. For Strauss, this consequence is fully expressed by the Bible in the verse which he translates as "I will be what I will be." For both Plato and the Bible our daily lives are based on trust. You all trust that the sun will rise tomorrow morning, that your coats and hats will keep you warm, and that when you leave this room, your

homes, and the rest of the world will be out there waiting for you. For philosophy, this trust is based on the intrinsic intelligibility of what lies behind the world, whether that be as natures or as atoms and a void; whereas for the bible, our trust is in God's love, and the covenant which He has freely entered into with us, first with Noah and through him with all living things; then with Abraham. While the argument between Abraham and God prior to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah shows that a pious man will have a care for God's justice in human terms, the binding of Isaac shows that God is not bound by His covenants in any humanly intelligible way, but that through His steadfast love He will freely keep them.

Much as these two ways, the Bible and Greek philosophy, stand as inverted images one of the other, there is one common agreement between them. Not riches nor even courage, but justice is the highest human virtue. There is also this further agreement: That the right way is not immediately to hand but must be sought. There is, however, less agreement on where and how this search is to begin. For each, this search is the most important act that a man can undertake, and for neither can it be undertaken directly. For each, there must be something underlying justice supporting it. To this extent, we share the same conditions that led the earliest of men to look for a story that touched upon the *first things*. For the Bible that underlying something is the *will of God* which must be heard with humility and with awe; for Greek philosophy it is *theoria* which must be looked into with boldness and with wonder.

This means inquiring into the world round us and into the nature of all things. But the Bible plays down the role of the world around us and in particular the role of heaven. What for Plato is a visible god is, for Genesis no more than a time piece and from it man can learn nothing more than the time of day unless he sees it as the handiwork of an all powerful, all loving God; whereas for philosophy, the discovery of nature essentially means that there is no conclusion to be drawn from the things that are made by man and hence rely upon man, concerning the things that are not man-made, but have within themselves their own source of motion and rest.

While God's warning to Cain *If thou dost well* does seem to imply that there is available to man some sense of God's will from within himself, the remainder of the account shows only the inadequacy of this inner sense. While it may be enough to rouse a man to search out the word of God, it is not sufficient for human existence. Man is in need of divine revelation. In both traditions the goal of this search is called wisdom.

For the Bible, this simple sense of awe is most at hand in the desert and among the shepherds, but if man cannot or will not live that way, God is willing to allow him to live in a city, provided that it is holy city ruled over by His anointed shepherd as king. Greek philosophy is at home in the *polis*. Its rise presupposes the leisure that only the city can provide. It is therefore willing to live with that certain amount of injustice which political life

necessarily entails.

Where does this leave us? Mr. Strauss had a wonderfully dumb way of putting it. *One believes in miracles, the other does not.* I believe that this intentionally bold and austere formulation of the question was meant to draw a clear and sharp line between what Strauss saw as the two fundamental alternatives for human existence. The reason for the harsh formulation is that much of western thought during the last two thousand years has been an attempt to harmonize our two roots and, in a sense, return us to a time before that "unfortunate" discovery which lead to the splitting up of myth into Greek philosophy on the one hand and the Bible on the other.

For Strauss, this attempt was doomed to failure. The one thing needful for man, as things looked to philosophy, autonomous understanding, was the one thing denied him according to the Bible. This being the case, the only harmonization to be looked for would be a kind of handmaidenship. Either philosophy would be reduced to a method of deduction from received principles, or religion would be reduced to political exigency. In either case, neither would prosper, and the slave was sure to revolt.

Or one might try to raise oneself above the conflict. Needless to say, I am not referring to skepticism. Skepticism, in its own terms, must reply to others in their own terms. Skepticism,

therefore, must be willing to place itself in the middle of the conflict. Rather I am speaking of what Strauss called by the term *historicism*. Historicism is the attempt to understand each thought in terms of where it was, and when it was. In so doing it prevents itself from coming to grips with the thought of the thinker as it was thought by the thinker because what was of prime importance to the thinker cannot be of prime importance to the historicist. To see a thought as being important in its time and in its place is to deny it importance simply; But this would imply certain knowledge that the thought of the thinker was unimportant in itself, and this, of course, could only be established by returning to the plane of the conflict and again asking the question - what is justice, how is it to be found?

Part of what I mean by Strauss's "good natured theory of history" is an account of history that does not abandon the plane of history. But what would it mean then, this "returning to the plane of the conflict?" A great and totally meaningless battle would ensue, for each side argues its case in a court not recognized by the other. Spinoza's rational arguments against miracles presuppose reason. That is, they presuppose that there can be no miracles - the very same thing itself which was to have been proved. Reason has acted unreasonably. In the same way, as Strauss goes on to argue, even Pascal's argument about wager presupposes faith. Neither side can ever defeat the other because each is wholly impervious to the weapons of the other.

There is one other way in which philosophy might win. If someone could give a completely satisfactory account of the whole, that would settle the matter. But, as Mr. Strauss was so fond of putting it, so far as we know that has never occurred. Note, there is no theoretical proof that it cannot happen, or that it will not ever happen. Thus, each future claim will have to be met and we will be forced either to accept it or to articulate our doubts.

Now we seem to be at a standstill. We cannot withdraw, and we have no good reason for going one way rather than the other. The only solution, then, would seem to be simply to pick one side over the other, either at random or according to our natural bent. For Strauss this would necessarily imply accepting the way of Jerusalem over the way of Athens. To him it was perfectly clear that if it was a matter of choice alone, then to have faith in faith was simply more honest than to have faith in reason.

Strauss was very moved by these considerations, and I believe that in spite of his natural sense of curiosity, he would have accepted them simply, had it not been for Socrates, the man who knew that he did not know.

Perhaps we can understand that better by considering a passage from the *Meno*. As you remember, at first no one believed the that boy knew how to find the square that is the double of a given

square except Socrates, and that by the end of their discussion every one believed that the boy had come to know how to find the square except Socrates. Instead, Socrates says *And at this moment those opinions have just been stirred up in him, like a dream; but if he were repeatedly asked the same questions in a variety of forms, you know he will have in the end as exact understanding of them as anyone*. Well, what was the boy missing? Let's first take a closer look at what he did see. He had seen that the square on the diagonal of a square is equal to double the square on the side. But, let us only slightly reword the proposition and see what happens. It now reads: The square on the diagonal of a square is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides.

Now we can begin to see what Socrates meant. The truth of the proposition has nothing at all to do with the equality of the two sides. It is simply the Pythagorean Theorem and would be true in any case. Of course, the boy does not know that yet, and it will require all the care and effort he has to discover it. But when he does, he will never again consider what he now has as a piece of knowledge in itself. It will become only a minor case of a much larger proposition scarcely worth mentioning in itself. For the present, the boy's horizons are small, but one day, he might wonder to himself, "What would happen to what I have seen if the sides were no longer equal." Or, he might go on to ask himself, as Euclid once did; "What would happen if the angle were no longer a right angle." This time, he would find that the square on any side of any

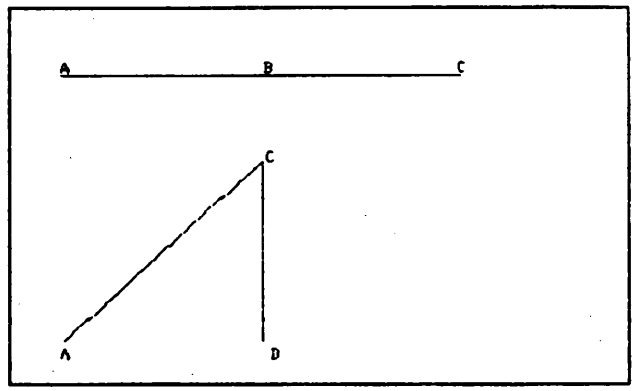
triangle is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides minus a certain rectangle which, in the case of the right angled triangle has shrunk to nothing. What he has seen up to now, then, is only a part and, as we have seen, it will disappear into a larger part as if it were a dream.

For Socrates, there are still so many ways in which the boy does not fully understand what he has done. It will not be until he tries to double the cube that he will begin to understand that his work on that day with Socrates was relatively simple only because he had limited himself to the surface. I beleive that for Socrates, knowing the beguiling character of the theorem is itself part of knowing the theorem itself.

As we have seen, the equation $AB^2 + BC^2 = AC^2$ is the diagonal of a square, and $AB^2 + BC^2 + CD^2 = AD^2$ is the diagonal of a cube. Thus,if ever in my wanderings I should happen to meet an equation of the form $AB^2 + BC^2 + CD^2 + DE^2 = AE^2$ as once happened to Pappus, it might make me begin first to talk about, and then to wonder about some kind of a suppersolid or, if we are talking about sensible objects, it might even tempt me to speak about a fourth dimension as it did to Minkovsky.

With this in mind, let us go back to the form $AB^2 + BC^2 = AC^2$, it reminds one of the form $AB^2 + 2AB,BC + BC^2 = AC^2$ except for the missing 2AB,BC. I now see that AC^2 is less than it was. The missing

term now means to me that I have found a shorter path from A to C than by going through B. Why, I must have somehow turned a corner and be going in a new dimension. The Pythagorean Theorem no longer means to me exactly what it meant before reading Minkovsky. I do not mean to imply that Socrates had read Einstein: only that his formulation, all that talk about seeing things as if in a dream, seems to leave room for the fact that some day someone might.



What I have said is, of course, not wholly true. If, in our diagram, we let AB = BC, we can see that the straight line ABC is equal to the bent line ABC. The boy had first identified the straight line AC as being the line that gives the square double the square on AB, and indeed, it is. What the boy did not see was the need to bend the line into a new dimension.

I sometimes wonder what would happen to our poor little theorem if it suddenly found itself in a world in which the fifth postulate was no longer within its horizon. Would it simply disappear, or would it just transform itself again. Since it is not clear to me what measurment would or could mean on such grounds, I'm not sure that our proposition will live through it all. Socrates' contention, however is that the possibility of anything

even appearing to making sense within any horizon must be present within the grandest horizon.

Well then, if, as Socrates says, to know something is to be able to recognize it wherever and whenever we happen to meet it, then perhaps I don't know the pythagorean theorem as I had thought I did, but have only seen it as if in a dream. Don't kid yourself, however, I can usually recognize it in my own freshman math class, and I think we have been able to spy it out even when it was hiding in the straight line, or turned up one day without its right angle.

I also wonder what the boy will think of that day that he spent with Socrates, when he learns the full Pythagorean Theorem and sees the limited nature of his earlier horizons and hence, perhaps of his present horizon as well. I hope that it will not lead him into despair. Strauss had a wonderfully pithy way of putting it; *to see your own horizons is already to have seen beyond them.*

Although I have been speaking about the hypotenuse of a right triangle, I have partly been thinking of some days last summer which I spent reading *Mein Kampf*. It seemed important to me to try to see for myself what it was within that horizon that so dazzled men's eyes that they never looked beyond that horizon's unspeakable narrowness. I also wanted to see if I would have seen my own way out if I had been there. If Strauss is right and *thought leads*

beyond itself, the way to burst out from within should have been there.

Such questions lead one to remember Socrates's account of his discussion with Thrasymachus. Thrasymachus saw a world in which justice was the advantage of the stronger. Socrates begins by asking him whether if eating a great quantity of beef is to the advantage of Polydamas the pancratiast, does that mean that it is to the advantage of all of us to do so. It was a silly question, not what Thrasymachus had meant at all. Not one word was used in the right way, but it made Thrasymachus a bit nervous all the same to see his words leading to a larger world than he had focused on. What he had meant, of course, is that justice is the advantage of the ruler and that all must follow his command. As it turns out, somewhere on the periphery of his world was the notion that stronger knows what is truly to his own advantage and what is not. Somehow Thrasymachus must have always known that or his world would never have made any sense to him, but he could not focus in on that notion without having to make a radical reinterpretation of his understanding of the world.

Once Thrasymachus had been forced to consider the environment of his own thought, however, he embraced it with vigor although Socrates had given him the opportunity of rejecting it.

"It doesn't make any difference, Polemarchus," I said, "if Thrasymachus says it that way now, let's accept it from him. Now tell me, Thrasymachus, was this what you wanted to say the just is, what seems to the stronger to be the advantage of the stronger, whether it is advantageous or not? Shall we assert that this is the way you mean it?"

"Not in the least," he said. "Do you suppose that I call a man who makes mistakes 'stronger' at the moment when he is making mistakes?"

"I did suppose you to mean this," I said, "when you agreed that the rulers are not infallible but also make mistakes in some things." (340 c)

This step was fatal to Thrasymachus's argument 'though it was hardly fatal to the man. It meant that Thrasymachus was forced to step outside his hero to see his wisdom rather than remain inside to feel his power. He does this partly because he has to make sure of his power in the future, but partly because he wants to be admired, and to be admired means to be admired from the outside. This means the he wants to be recognizes as possessing an art. But, when Socrates threatens to make Thrasymachus step beyond his art as

those who care for horses are judged by those who can tell whether a horse has been well cared for or not, Thrasymachus turns on him:

> "Tell me, Socrates, do you have a wet nurse?" "Why this?" I said. "Shouldn't you answer instead of asking such things?" "Because," he said, "you know she neglects your sniveling nose and doesn't give it the wiping you need, since it's her fault you do not even recognize sheep or shepherd." [343 a]

Shepherds, according to Thrasymachus, only rule for the good of the sheep in so far as it makes them fatter and gives the shepherd more meat. Stepping outside in order to to see what is best for the sheep themselves can at best only be ancillary. The only real question is "what is best for the shepherd." Thus Thrasymachus has escaped Socrates but in so doing, he has failed to escape himself.

Near the end of their discussion, Thrasymachus readily agrees to the statement:

> "Let us say it, then, as follows," I said, "the just man does not try to better what is like but what is unlike, while the unjust man tries to better both like and unlike?" [349d]

For example, the musical man able to best the unmusical man prisicely by tuning his lyre in the same way that other musical men do, not by bettering them and the same is true of the wise and of the just, but unlike the artisans, the unjust man who wishes to better, that is to better anybody or anything, can have no common goals outside himself in terms of which he could be praised. Thrasymachus, who so wanted to be seen and to be heard has finally been pried out of himself in order to see if he could be seen. He blushes and remains as silent as one who has been seen by a bear.

Socrates's goal, then, is not to defeat Thrasymachus or to prove that he is wrong. Perhaps that can't even be done. What he may be able to do is to help him find those bit on the periphery of his vision which might lead him beyond his own horizon.

The case of Meno is a different mater. Meno has a teaching, or dogma, or one might even say, an ideology. It is only the dead remains of a thought which first grew up in an other mind, the mind of Gorgias. People like Meno do not speak with their own voice. Their voice is not home-grown because it did not arise from within their own horizons. Our own voices is the only voice able to articulate all those blurred and obscured thoughts which are first stirred up from within our own particular partial awareness of the surface of things as it lies within our own particular shaggy and ill-defined horizon. Other thoughts may have a brilliant central

focus, but when they have been poured from one mind into another, they loss that particular periphery which once connected them to the land in which they ware born. For this reason there are no pathways which could lead a student back to his own horizons and beyond. To often, what is a living thought for the teacher becomes a hardened dogma for the student precisely because he cannot reach out to the horizon but is continually forced to return to the center which he can repeat in comfortable repetition.

We can now restate Stauss's diferance from and objiction to historicism. Historicism sees itself as giving a scientific account of the thoughts of the past in terms of the horizons within which those thoughts were thought. That scientific account presupposes a closed and well defined horizon in terms of which the activity of thought whithin that horizon can be made inteligible. But for Strauss, no partial horizon is well defined. Hence, it cannot be concidered closed no matter how closed they may be to a man like Meno.

For Strauss it was more a matter of how wide or how narrow our horizons are, how deep we are willing to look, and how willing we are to look at their shaggy edges and hence to look beyond them. It is also a question of whether we have such a nature as to thrive *entre les deux infinites* or whether we find it a frightful land from which we must escape today.

For Strauss, the existence of a realm that lay between knowledge and ignorance meant that there was a land in which inquiry could be perused with honesty. This implies that while philosophy can proceed only by examining the way things seem to be, as long as the horizons are open, it must learn to coexist with theology. Only theology, he thought, can prevent philosophy from mistaking itself for *sophia*, and such presumed *sophia* had no other choice than to express itself as ideology which would soon congeal itself into tyranny. I also believe that he thought that only philosophy was in a position to return the favor. It is in connection with this conclusion that he makes it clear that for both philosophy and theology, the love of justice must be prior even to love of country if love of country is to have any meaning at all.