

The Madness of King Leo (Or Strauss on Natural Right)

As it has been characterized (and *caricatured* à la Aristophanes, Cervantes, Swift, Derrida, etc.), philosophy, or the love of wisdom, would seem to necessitate the recognition of a value standard, as that which measures (and therefore determines) the good; to be good and to be wise would then be equivalent, or at the least mutually dependant. And being good would be equivalent to being *right*; for how could the *wise* be *wrong* (thus contradicting the wisdom of good sense), or better, how could the wise recognize themselves as such without *justice* (as the judgment necessary to recognize the good)? But such judgment would then be the very justification of philosophy itself: would this not reduce the lover of wisdom to a clever, but thoroughly deceived and distracted Narcissus? To an unwitting lover of *self* reflection (or a pulpit fetish for the *legislator's* gable: a masked desire for power?) Being so, would philosophy then be a ratio-romantic (and tragic-comic) suicide of the psyche (love as the *demand* for a wisdom that does not exist)? Would this not be a 'fatal' flattery (and a pseudo intellectualism)? A self deception (and a revealing ignorance) that could hardly be considered wisdom (Socratic confessions notwithstanding); anything like a genuine love of wisdom would at least *seem* to require a value standard arising not in reflection (opinion) but an authority independent of it: the *creators* of wisdom perhaps? "The madmen credited with the strange powers of revealing hidden truths, of predicting the future, of revealing, in all their naiveté what the wise were unable to perceive" (Foucault, 1972, p. 217); the lunatic fringe, however indispensable (and disposable) to the philosopher, are in no position to justify philosophy (because they're nuts); lest we be deceived, the matter at hand is not madness, but justice (and by consequence injustice.)

This is the work of *political* philosophy: the justification of philosophy, as that which makes of philosophy something more than irrelevant (a status reserved for the madmen.) And it is to political philosophy that we respond: *Natural Right and History* attempts to account for the independent value standard necessary for the justification of philosophy: the idea of natural right (a value standard discoverable in nature.) Specifically, the origin of the *idea* of natural right begins not with the scientific discovery of political things, but from their "natural" understanding: "natural right had to be discovered, and there was political life prior to that discovery" (1950, p. 81). To have knowledge of natural right is to have knowledge of nature; where there is no philosophy, there is no nature. The Old Testament explicitly

rejects philosophy, and by consequence the idea of nature (as Strauss rejects theology.) To study philosophy is to quest for “principles” or the beginnings of things (Strauss’ concern and predicament.) While myth is in accord with philosophy in this regard, it precedes not from nature, but from the gods. It is philosophy that rejects the divine for the natural, and discovers nature, and by consequence natural right (and thus the silencing of Socrates as Socrates? To the Delphic oracle and Socrates’ mocking daemon?)

Custom is the equivalent to nature that precedes philosophy; it evokes tradition (and the ancestral) as the good versus the new and strange as bad. The evocation of tradition is that of the divine; it is ancestral custom that is passed down through divine laws. And it is the authority of divine laws that philosophy opposes; “the emergence of the idea of natural right presupposes, therefore, the doubt of authority” (p. 84). Divine laws are forbidden to be discussed; philosophy is practiced under threat of death (reenter Socrates.) It is the variety of divine laws (and their contradictory nature) that first calls their authority into question. Thus, a distinction forms between the good and the ancestral; this marks the emergence of the quest for good by nature versus good by convention.

Not hearsay, but personal experience is that which begins to undermine the faith in divine laws; “it is thus that the I is enabled to oppose itself to the We without any sense of guilt” (p. 87). And it is not the subjective experiences of man (as found in dreams and hallucinations), but the objective experiences of man in shared reality (man as man) that begins to judge what is right in opposition to the divine laws. The further development of the arts leads to the idea of nature: it is art that distinguishes between hearsay and experience as well as man and non-man made things; artifacts are devalued in this relation; what comes to be recognized as having more value and status is the natural:

“...the discovery of nature is identical with the actualizations of a human possibility which, at least according to its own interpretation, is trans-historical, trans-social, trans-moral, and trans-religious (p. 89).

This actualization of human possibility is the work of philosophy: the quest of that which is fundamental, unchanging, and eternal; of being (nature) as that accorded value over non-being (convention.) Once nature is “discovered,” the primitive notion of custom splits into the notions of nature and convention. Nature is discovered because it was at first hidden; it is that which hides nature that is referred to as convention; nature becomes the authority of authorities. It is philosophy which first recognizes this; hence, the gods are dethroned (a veiled pantheism?)

Socrates may best exemplify the emergence of natural right (literally.) But first, Heraclitus is cited as an example of the prior conventionalism:

“In God’s view, all things are fair (noble) and good and just, but men have made the supposition that some things are just and others are unjust” (p. 93).

The distinction between just and unjust, right and wrong is a human or conventional one; God is beyond such distinctions. Strauss goes on to explore the question, is there such a thing as human nature? This results in the distinction of a human life in accord with nature. The controversy emerges as to “whether the just is good (by nature good) or whether the life in accordance with human nature requires justice or morality” (p. 95); and philosophy emerges from the conflict as the necessary corrective for the imperfections of human nature.

To unravel the controversy between nature and convention requires a tracing of origins. This leads to the origin of right in civil society; man is found to be imperfect (hence the need for civic law), the philosopher emerges as the example of a life lived in accord with nature. Thus, human nature is not naturally “right” as given, but requires effort. The differing forms of natural right found in civil societies, or justice in the form of law is also due to the corruption of human nature; this variety only indicates how necessary and effective natural right is for society. Natural right emerges as the common good of the whole (of civic society) versus the conventional good of the part (the ruling class.) On closer inspection though, the natural right, or justice of the city is only another form of injustice, in part because of the force and fraud it exercises on other cities, and the common good reveals itself to be collective self-interest. Justice appears as a means to an end, the kindness one exercises on others as a selfish desire to be treated kindly by others; the conflict between collective selfishness and individual selfishness is inevitable. This is the heart of the conventionalist argument: right is conventional because the city (which legislates right) is conventional.

A common variation of conventionalism states that what is naturally good is pleasure (as found in the classical hedonism of Epicurus.) Strauss cites Plato’s argument that wrong reasoning can lead not only to the pursuit of the greatest pleasure, but toward the useful, or toward the noble as well. It would be sensible to imagine Strauss as sympathetic to the noble, yet he clearly discerns nobility as founded on the pleasure of conventional praise. Thus, Strauss’ quest for the origin of natural right makes what may be an ignoble, but perhaps ultimately just turn: that of classical philosophy. How this is not the inversion of

the argument Athens made when sentencing Socrates to death is a question left opened: the tradition that Socrates undermined, and for which he was put to death for the crime of corruption, can now be viewed as the tradition of classical philosophy as such in opposition to the corruption of our modern liberal democracy and its morally repugnant (and non-existent) relativism; how this conservative reformism is not a failure to create new values a la Socrates, or simply not to vegetate (rejecting the future for an irrevocable past) is left unanswered.

Bibliography

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