

STRAUSS AND CHRISTIANITY: FRIENDS OR FOES?

Cecilia R. Castillo

Strauss admonished readers to understand an author as he understood himself. As such he took an author's words seriously and read texts closely. One may learn much from Strauss regarding textual analysis. However, sensitivity to the text does not imply agreement with the author. Strauss may give each author's words full weight and consideration and draw out the author's implications and concerns, but he goes on to give as careful a critique of the author's argument in light of his own understanding of the history of political thought. That is, Strauss had a framework within which he placed political philosophers, and he held a clear preference for the ancients. Although he was critical of the moderns, sympathy is evident in Strauss' approval of modern thinkers who cast faith aside as mere superstition and focused on science or on what unaided human reason can know.¹ Modern science was not the ancients' science "philosophy" but it was a return to "reason" alone and thereby a return to political philosophy proper. Recall Strauss' emphasis on the tension between reason and faith or Athens and Jerusalem, the great pillars of the West. Yet, Strauss' treatment of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Christian philosopher—a misnomer for Strauss—is brief and critical. The character of his critique and the degree of its severity are not completely agreed upon even by his students. Certainly St. Thomas, as he understood himself, does not fit into Strauss' framework.² Nor does it seem to me to be adequate to say Strauss accepts St. Thomas as an ancient and rejects him insofar as he reads like a modern. St. Thomas is neither ancient nor modern; therefore Strauss' paradigm itself is either incomplete or Strauss must not consider St. Thomas a philosopher. As Strauss opts for "pure" philosophy, Christianity is merely part of the history of political philosophy as a detour.³

If we set aside questions of the accuracy of Strauss' ancient/modern structure, we are nevertheless left with many related questions. Although Christianity may not be part of the history of political philosophy for Strauss, he accused it of contributing to the development of modern political philosophy, which Strauss strongly rejected. One must address this charge that Christianity opened the door to modern political thought. Moreover, while we may disagree with his contention, we must acknowledge the possibility that modern theology has lost its sense of its metaphysical premises and has adopted the misguided definitions of modern philosophy. Strauss' critique, correct

or not, allows us to focus our attention on the Catholic philosophic tradition and to better distinguish its view of man from that of modern thought. Ironically, Strauss is not only helpful but he strengthens and helps us to clarify the Catholic position while serving as an ally against the corrosive elements of modern philosophy. In keeping with St. Thomas, we are able to learn from those who may be misguided but thoughtful nonetheless.

In order to better address Strauss' critique of Christianity as the harbinger of modern political philosophy, it is necessary to review briefly the place of St. Thomas in the history of political philosophy. We must reflect upon St. Thomas' agreement with the truths discovered by the classical world, and in particular, those brought to light by Aristotle. We may find that both are distinct not only from one another but also from modern thought. There appears to be a consensus regarding the distinction between the classical and Christian understanding of virtue, the changes that Christianity brought to the classical understanding of the end of man, and the type of life appropriate to him. However, these distinctions are only part of this discussion, for from such distinctions emerge more profound distinctions regarding divergent conceptions of "the whole," or reality itself.

The classical notion of virtue is the perfection of human nature. According to Strauss,

The good life is the life that is in accordance with the natural order of man's being, the life that flows from a well-ordered or healthy soul. The good life simply, is the life in which the requirements of man's natural inclinations are fulfilled in the proper order to the highest possible degree.... The good life is the perfection of man's nature.⁴

There seems to be no difference between the Christian tradition's and Strauss' understanding of classical virtue—the perfection or realization of man's nature.⁵ Crucial to an understanding of classical virtue is the determination of man's nature. Thus, if man is to be virtuous, he must possess some knowledge of his nature and of his natural end. Aristotle and Aquinas offer understandings of man's nature and his natural end that are similar but ultimately quite distinct. For both the ancients and Christians, man is a rational animal. Reason and speech distinguish man from all other creatures. Man's end requires the perfection of his rational nature but man is not intellect alone. Aristotle also acknowledges man's corporeal nature and speaks of moral virtue in addition to intellectual virtue. St. Thomas also recognizes the natural sociability of man and the role of the political realm in the achievement of the end of man.

Thomistic man's natural end is compatible with Aristotle's own understanding.⁶ For both classical and Christian thought, man's end is virtue. Where we begin to see a distinction between these views is in the understanding of man's nature. If man is a political and social being by nature, then virtue is only attainable through the political and cannot be understood outside of a political context. And as we know, the political virtue is justice. In other words, man belongs in civil society. Civil society encompasses all the other associations of men, including the family, and is more effective than the family in securing virtue. It seems that the only association "capable of securing the conditions of virtue and satisfying all of man's earthly needs and aspirations, is the city" whose end is "the complete human good."⁷ The political association not only promotes the "complete life," but also secures the existence of men.⁸

Although the final end of the city is the promotion of virtue, it must first secure its preservation. It must quell discord. For without peace there will not be a city and without a city there will not be virtue.⁹ Civil society may only be secured through justice.

For these virtues originate in our natural inclination to love our fellow-men, and this is the foundation of Justice.⁷ The key word, of course, is *natural*. The ground of justice is the ultimate character of nature, and a challenge to nature is a challenge to the very structure of reality. The Ciceronian call to virtue, though fundamentally Platonic, is one with the Stoic insistence that virtue is nothing other than nature itself perfected through right reason.¹⁰

Hence, if virtue is to flourish, man must secure justice. Insofar as men are to live together they must share a common end, a common good. As we know, the embodiment of right reason is law. Justice is to be secured through law. Thereby the preservation of the existence of the city is found in the rule of law.¹¹ Law on the one hand protects the city and on the other hand establishes an order within which virtue may flourish.

Thus far, Aquinas's political philosophy would appear to be quite compatible with Aristotle's. However, Aquinas has profoundly modified Aristotle's understanding of man's political nature and human virtue under the influence of Christianity and Stoicism. Both of these traditions offer an understanding of God as lawgiver such that the law of the city, human law, does not allow for the fulfillment of the nature of man.¹² For Aquinas, natural law limits human law. Moreover, the ultimate law giver, God, provides the final standard of moral virtue. At

this point, it becomes clear that divergent views of reality are at issue.¹³ Aquinas has introduced a new concept, natural law whose concreteness goes well beyond the natural right of Aristotle as Strauss understands it. As the natural order is now to be understood in the light of divine law, “civil justice and courage, the two virtues most closely connected with the welfare of the city, acquire a new and more noble status.”¹⁴ In contrast, Strauss concludes that Aristotle in the final analysis, not only considers intellectual virtue as superior to moral virtue, but also considers moral virtue irrelevant to man’s highest end.¹⁵ The philosopher’s justice is politically irrelevant.¹⁶ That is, Aristotle’s justice will not unite citizens of a real city because Aristotle does not recognize the dignity of man as such. He does not acknowledge the individual worth of men. Not all men are good, and pagan justice is without mercy for men without good natures. The classical philosopher must incorporate the illogical love of man for his own into his conception of justice in order to secure political life. Pagan justice alone is ineffective when “divorced from human affection and the deeper sources of love. The justice of the philosophers cannot existentially move men.”¹⁷ Thus, Strauss concludes “[c]ivil life requires a fundamental compromise between wisdom and folly.”¹⁸ Indeed, the justice of the philosopher can not secure the city because philosophers qua philosophers do not care about the city.¹⁹

Let’s look more closely into the implications for virtue and political justice in the realm of Christianity. Virtue and political justice can not be understood in terms of the classical definition of man and man’s end, because in classical thought there is nothing higher than nature. Christianity recognizes an authority higher than nature. Christian virtue fulfills classical virtue as it perfects nature and raises nature above itself. So how are we to understand the culmination of the Christian understanding of virtue and justice and how it is only attainable in society through charity?

With Christianity a new order in being is made manifest to the human mind—essentially distinct from the order of nature and at the same time perfecting that order—the order of grace and of supernatural realities....

[Nature] blossoms in grace, is “perfected” or fulfilled by grace...and...at the same time that it elevates nature to a life and an activity of another order, of which nature is not capable by itself, heightens it in its own order and in the domain of its own proper activities.²⁰

This is not the nature of Plato and Aristotle. It is not “the whole” of classical philosophy. As such, this is not the virtue or the justice of classical thought.

Aristotle recognizes political life is not the highest end of man. Although Aristotle aspires to transcendence, he fails.²¹ Aristotle’s reasoning is an exact accounting of man as man but nevertheless, Aristotelian virtue does not appeal to man and guide his will to its end.²²

Hence, “the Thomistic insistence that a reason divorced from faith can theoretically discover many truths necessary for salvation but that in practice reason sinks below its own potential if it is not bathed in the waters of faith.”²³ That is, justice, a human activity, is only possible after political inquiry, and political inquiry presupposes an ethical and theological position. If one’s ethical and theological positions are insufficient political justice will not be secured.²⁴ Aristotle may have clarified the questions raised by political philosophy but he could not answer them. Moreover, Strauss cannot accept the answers of St. Thomas as they emerge from biblical revelation and not simply unassisted human reason.²⁵

The common recognition of a virtue or happiness superior to that of the city and a positive though not identical view of nature provide common ground to Strauss and Catholics. Both understand a standard external to man’s will.²⁶

Strauss traced modern political thought to Machiavelli’s rejection of both classical virtue, in particular philosophy as transcendent, and Christianity as other worldly. Machiavelli wanted to free politics of the limits imposed by external authority, be it natural ethics or God. As such he eliminated good and evil and just and unjust from the political realm. Once Machiavelli confined man to the city by severing man from a natural transcendence through reason and/or faith, modern thinkers turn to the only source of intelligence left—the human intellect. Man is now free to order nature including human nature. There is no good or evil nor just or unjust, only the successful imposition of will on the city.

Although Strauss’ reading of Aristotle and his rejection of St. Thomas might lead one to conclude that Strauss sought to do the same, Strauss rejected modernity’s own aims.²⁷ Strauss understood that:

According to the modern project, philosophy or science was no longer to be understood as essentially contemplative and proud but as active and charitable; it was to be of service to man’s estate; it was to be cultivated for the sake of human power; it was to enable man to become the master and owner of nature through the intellectual conquest of nature.²⁸

Virtue is no longer the end of man whether it be classical virtue or Christian virtue. Man's preservation and comfort are now his sole concerns. The individual is now free to pursue whatever he thinks will secure his life and comfort. Strauss argued that "The quarrel between the ancients and the moderns concerns eventually, and perhaps even from the beginning, the status of "individuality."²⁹ The movement towards individuality would slowly erode the concern with virtue found in the ancients and Christianity. However, the modern individual is not the Christian individual. To become more of an individual in the Christian sense one must become more perfect, more virtuous, more human, more in the image of God.

Modern political philosophy's concern with the individual utilizes Christianity and co-opts the language of Christianity but not the truth of it, thus corrupting it. Thus Strauss' charge against Christianity and St. Thomas are suspect. As Schall argues: "I would not...admit...that the premises of St. Thomas, as he himself argued them, gave rise to [modernity]."³⁰ Nevertheless, the Straussian critique of Christianity requires Christian political scientists to return to "The doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation" which had "caused Christians to include philosophy in the curriculum of their clerical and academic studies....the reason for this inclusion was because of these two doctrines that urged further consideration of the Aristotelian God...St. Thomas's 'presumption' that the theoretical questions did in fact also deal with moral questions was justified if we allow the revelational questions to be really considered by the philosopher."³¹

Unfortunately, unlike St. Thomas, Strauss is not open to the responses to the questions of political philosophy if they do not fit his own philosophical position. Nevertheless, both Strauss and St. Thomas take the questions seriously and in that sense are allies against modern thinkers who cannot even recognize the questions.

Notes

1. See James V. Schall, "A Latitude for Statesmanship? Strauss on St. Thomas," *The Review of Politics* 53, 1, (Winter 1991), 132.
2. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 164.
3. *Ibid.*, 132.
4. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 127.
5. Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *Christianity and Political Thought* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1978), 88.
6. Ernest Fortin, "St. Thomas Aquinas," in *The History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (University of Chicago Press, 1972), 228-29.
7. *Ibid.*, 229.
8. *Ibid.*, 230-32.
9. Wilhelmsen, *Christianity and Political Thought*, 40.
10. *Ibid.*, 40.
11. Fortin, "St. Thomas Aquinas," 230-32.
12. *Ibid.*, 232-33.
13. As Strauss explains, "[a]ll knowledge, however limited or "scientific," presupposes a horizon, a comprehensive view within which knowledge is possible. All understanding presupposes a fundamental awareness of the whole: prior to any perception of particular things, the human soul must have had a vision of the ideas, a vision of the articulated whole" (*Natural Right and History*, 125).
14. Fortin, "St. Thomas Aquinas," 242.
15. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 151-52.
16. Wilhelmsen, *Christianity and Political Thought*, 91.
17. *Ibid.*, 91.
18. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 152.
19. *Ibid.*, 152.
20. Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy*, (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 79-80.
21. *Ibid.*, 49-51.
22. *Ibid.*, 49.
23. Wilhelmsen, *Christianity and Political Thought*, 90.
24. Willmore Kendall, *Willmore Kendall Contra Mundum* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1971), 151-52.
25. Schall, "A Latitude for Statesmanship," 129.
26. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 91-95.
27. Schall, "A Latitude for Statesmanship," 134.
28. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 3-4.

