

CHRISTIANITY, LEO STRAUSS, AND THE ANCIENTS/MODERNS DISTINCTION

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Leo Strauss's effort to rekindle an appreciation of classical political philosophy in the face of the challenges posed to it, and to any serious effort to recover the truth about political things, is to be commended. Strauss's seeming "moral realist" approach to the study of political life was viewed by many of his contemporaries, influenced as they were by the tenets of value non-cognitivism, positivism, and historicism, as hopelessly naïve. These proponents of a "value-free" political science believed that one could understand the workings of political institutions and the ideologies that supplied justifications for those institutions without reference to some transcendent source of meaning and purpose. As Strauss ably pointed out, however, these "value-free" efforts were doomed to trivialize the study of political things, replacing political philosophy ("a doctrine which claims to be true") with the history of political philosophy ("a survey of more or less brilliant errors").¹ For Strauss, liberal modernity was incapable of providing sustenance for an experiment in self-government, most especially that experiment explicitly grounded in an acknowledgement of the "truthfulness" of natural rights claims.²

For Roman Catholics in particular, Strauss's work—and the work of the scholars who express an intellectual indebtedness to him—is of special importance. It has forced them to reconsider the relationship between the Roman Catholic intellectual tradition and classical political philosophy. It has also forced them to consider the wisdom of any full-throated embrace of liberal modernity, particularly in light of the development of Catholic social and political thought as embodied in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Moreover, as Father James V. Schall has noted, Strauss (along with Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin) has "forcefully raised the question about the relation of reason and revelation, of modern and classical political philosophy to each other," thus challenging "the very philosophy upon which the modern state has rested."³

Central to the Roman Catholic tradition's quest for a fuller understanding of its own intellectual premises, however, is a need to understand the relationship of the tradition to Strauss in particular and to the reading of intellectual history upon which the Straussian distinction between "ancients" and "moderns" rests. The use of the word distinction here is important, for few Roman Catholics would argue that

there is indeed a *distinction* between a type of philosophical and moral realism that acknowledges the existence of a hierarchy of ends within nature itself—usually associated with the tenets of “classical” or “ancient” philosophy—and a philosophical and moral voluntarism and nominalism that acknowledges no natural teleology and reifies human choice as the highest human good—usually associated with “modern” philosophy. To the extent that the Straussian distinction between “ancients” and “moderns” points Catholics back to this fundamental philosophical “turn,” thereby assisting Roman Catholics to appreciate the consequences of liberal modernity’s rejection of the aforementioned transcendent norms and standards that are not a product of human will, it is helpful. To the extent to which it is hardened into something more than a useful distinction—that is, into a principled dichotomy whereunder the person who employs it seems to be pushed into embracing either classical or modern philosophy, especially as Strauss characterizes the distinction—it might fail to do full justice to the richness and integrity of the Catholic intellectual tradition and that tradition’s reflections upon the nature, purpose, and limits of political life. I will argue that Strauss’s distinction between “ancients” and “moderns” in general and between “classical” and “modern” political philosophy in particular does tend toward a dichotomizing of intellectual history whereunder even an ostensibly Catholic view of political life is, upon even a favorable reading of Strauss’s distinction, more classical than Catholic in its philosophic orientation and political ramifications.⁴

Ted McAllister has pointed out that “Strauss devoted little space [in his works] to an examination of Christianity,” but that “he often employed a more expansive language” in his analysis of natural right and natural law, “designed to suggest to the uninitiated reader a broad Judeo-Christian tradition when he meant the Jewish heritage simply.”⁵ McAllister’s reference to “the uninitiated reader” and the inference he draws from it is based at least in part on Strauss’s famous hermeneutic distinction between exoteric and esoteric writing and the need for the philosopher, in the interest of the commonweal, to cloak or disguise his true philosophic intentions. On this reading, “the great quarrel” and tension between Jerusalem (representing revelation-based societal adherence to divine law) and Athens (representing the corrosive character of reason and of true philosophic inquiry) is “the root of Western civilization,” not the transition from Greek particularism to Roman universalism.⁶ The recovery of the root of western civilization, therefore, requires not merely a return to classical political philosophy as Strauss understands it, but to an awareness of the tension between the conflicting demands of reason and revelation. The effort to dissolve the

tension in the interest of revelational norms or philosophic truth is one of the hallmarks of modern philosophy and its proclivity toward political utopianism. Even as sympathetic a Roman Catholic reader of Strauss as Gary Glenn acknowledges that Strauss “lived that tension: he understood that the claims of reason, when fully developed as philosophy, were incompatible with those of revelation. But he regarded their mutually exclusive claims as not resolvable on any basis that both could accept.”⁷

Under Glenn’s favorable interpretation of Strauss’s contribution to the recovery of political philosophy, Strauss’s view that the claims of reason and revelation are “mutually exclusive” need not be accepted by Roman Catholics. Rather, the Roman Catholic political philosopher can appropriate Strauss’s teaching in support of moral realism in the battle against subjectivism and relativism. In other words, Strauss shares with Roman Catholics an aversion to liberal modernity and provides a powerful philosophical argument for rejecting it, particularly in its positivist and radical historicist dimensions. The “ancient”/ “modern” distinction is a powerful hermeneutic tool through which one can embrace the moral realism of the “ancients” and reject the increasing nihilism of the “moderns.”⁸

And yet a closer reading of even the exoteric Strauss should give Roman Catholics pause before they embrace Strauss’s distinction. First, Strauss’s brand of “moral realism” is one which seems to be, at best, ambivalent to Christianity’s contribution to the history of political philosophy, particularly in its political ramifications. Second, Strauss’s distinction between ancients and moderns seems to be based primarily on the relationship between the philosopher and the city, not on whether the human mind has the capacity to grasp truths grounded in the nature of things. The first point is addressed obliquely in *Natural Right and History*, the second more directly *What is Political Philosophy?*

In his introduction to *Natural Right and History*, Strauss seems to indicate that “Roman Catholic social science” is preferable to most of “present-day American social science” in that it is not necessarily committed to “the proposition that all men are endowed by the evolutionary process or by a mysterious fate with many kinds of urges and aspirations, but certainly with no natural right.”⁹ In short, Strauss implies that Roman Catholic social science is at least open to the possibility of some view of natural right, implying for political philosophy the argument for a hierarchy of natural ends. The problem, however, is that “the modern followers of Thomas Aquinas” (i.e. neo-Thomists) have been forced to accept “a fundamental, typically modern, dualism of a nonteleological natural science and a teleological science of

man” that seems to break with the views of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas himself, thus pushing, one infers, much of contemporary Catholic social thought in a non-teleological, imperativist direction.¹⁰ A possible implication: for Roman Catholics to salvage their own tradition from the shoals of the liberal politics of modernity, they must embrace a more fully (as envisaged by Strauss) Aristotelian Christianity and its hierarchical, prudentialist view of politics rather than a form of Kantian Christianity with its egalitarian and imperativist implications.¹¹

And yet, at the very end of Strauss’s chapter on “Classical Natural Right”—at the virtual center of the work itself—Strauss indicates that the problem with even St. Thomas Aquinas himself, a Thomas not read through the prism of neo-Thomists such as Jacques Maritain and Heinrich Rommen, is that “the Thomistic doctrine of natural right, or more generally expressed, of natural law, is free from the hesitations and ambiguities of the teachings, not only of Plato and Cicero, but of Aristotle as well.” Thus, for St. Thomas, there are certain immutable first principles of natural law that “suffer no exception, unless possibly by divine intervention.” Under a Thomistic dispensation, reason and revelation are reconciled in such a manner as to imply (1) that all men are conscience-bound to obey the natural law, even in its immutable first principles, and (2) that this places an undue burden on the latitude exercised by statesmen in their pursuit of the common weal. Thus, Montesquieu (a “modern” under any reasonable interpretation of Strauss’s “ancients”/“moderns” distinction) “tried to recover for statesmanship a latitude which had been considerably restricted by the Thomistic teaching.” The seeming gap between the “ancient” teleological view of political life and at least the early “modern” view (embodied in the writings of Machiavelli and Montesquieu) is bridged by a common rejection of immutable first principles that would limit the statesman’s capacity to do what might be necessary to serve the regime.¹² It would seem, therefore, that the only way for political philosophers to salvage political wheat from the chaff of St. Thomas’s effort to reconcile reason and revelation is to return to a more overtly “classical” view of politics, or perhaps to argue for a Christian view which more greatly minimizes the difficulties caused by the “Christianizing” of “classical” political philosophy by portraying the Christian view of politics as an interesting footnote to Greek classicism.¹³

Strauss’s concern about the practical political dangers caused by (the Christian) adherence to immutable first principles of natural law arises precisely because Strauss (and, one could argue, many of those who adopt a Straussian reading of intellectual history) believes that “the

guiding theme of political philosophy is the regime rather than the laws.” The fundamental questions of political life become “regime questions.” In his analysis of Plato’s *Laws* in *What is Political Philosophy?*, Strauss provides the following definition of “regime”:

Regime is the order, the form, which gives society its character. Regime is therefore a specific manner of life. Regime is the form of life as living together, the manner of living of society and in society, since this manner depends decisively on the predominance of human beings of a certain type, on the manifest domination of society by human beings of a certain type. Regime means that whole, which we today are in the habit of viewing primarily in a fragmentized form: regime means simultaneously the form of life of a society, its style of life its moral taste, form of society, form of state, form of government, spirit of laws. We may try to articulate the simple and unitary thought, that expresses itself in the term *politeia*, as follows: life is an activity which is directed towards such a goal as can be pursued only by society; but in order to pursue a specific goal, as its comprehensive goal, society must be organized, ordered, constructed, constituted in a manner which is in accordance with that goal; this, however, means that the authoritative human beings must be akin to that goal.¹⁴

In short, “classical political philosophy”—that form of political philosophy which Strauss most admires—“is guided by the question of the best regime.” And the best regime itself is, in principle, concerned with the comprehensive ordering of society consistent with its collective telos.¹⁵

To argue that Strauss wants merely to return to the classical model of *politeia* as the self-sufficient and comprehensive form of human association is to miss the point here. For example, Strauss would undoubtedly find the modern liberal regime’s commitment to religious liberty to be an improvement upon the classical view of society. Yet in his very adoption of the classical idea of “regime,” he seems to endorse at the political level what John Courtney Murray described as “a single, homogenous structure, within which the political power stood forth as the representative of society in its religious and in its political aspects.”¹⁶ Strauss’s very embrace of the question of what constitutes “the best regime” and his philosophical assumption of a conflict between reason and revelation cannot permit him—or anyone, for that matter, who commits himself to classical regime questions in the same manner as

Strauss—to appreciate the extent to which a revelation—inspired worldview renders such classical regime questions largely irrelevant.

John Courtney Murray has cogently argued that Christianity has “freed man from nature by teaching him that he has an immortal soul, which is related to matter but not immersed in or enslaved to its laws. . . . It has taught him his uniqueness, his own individual worth, the dignity of his own person, the equality of all men, the unity of the human race.”¹⁷ For the committed Christian, this conception of man’s personal spiritual dignity does not sit atop the classical conception of man as a rational animal. Rather, it transforms that conception with the light of its radiance into something other than “Platonic,” “Aristotelian,” or “Kantian” Christianity. In freeing man from nature, it has rendered the most fundamental of classical regime questions largely irrelevant since no “regime” short of the Kingdom of God in its fullness can satisfy man’s thirst for heaven. In fact, the very effort to answer such a question (i.e. “What is the best regime?”) in anything resembling political terms (either “ancient” or “modern”) might be indicative of the fact that one has applied categories of political analysis more characteristic of a resident of the earthly city.

Strauss’s discomfort with any premature reconciliation of the possible truths made known through reason itself and the truths known through promulgation of the Divine Law forces him to “distinguish” political philosophy from political theology. “By political theology we understand political teachings which are based on divine revelation. Political philosophy is limited to what is accessible to the unassisted human mind.” Moreover, “political philosophy rests on the premise that the political association—one’s country or one’s nation—is the most comprehensive or the most authoritative association.”¹⁸

Why one should base one’s political philosophy on any such premise Strauss does not answer fully, but it does provide insight into his distinction between “ancients” and “moderns.” Ancient political philosophers defined “the best regime” as one in which moral virtue was promoted and the hierarchy of natures within human nature itself was given its due; modern political philosophers lowered man’s sights and grounded “the best regime” in man’s passions, self-interest, and some conception of human equality. In other words, the fundamental shift in political philosophy for Strauss is a shift in what characterizes the best regime. For Strauss, to begin from the revelation-inspired premise that any effort to define the most comprehensive or authoritative association in political terms is itself impious is to be untrue to the goals of political philosophy, whether ancient or modern.

Christian political philosophers need not accept Strauss's charge precisely because, unlike Strauss, they do not assume that reason and revelation are in conflict with each other. Rather, they begin from a contrary premise, laid out eloquently by Etienne Gilson:

If we admit, as we really should, that the miracles, the prophecies, the marvelous effects of the Christian religion sufficiently prove the truth of revealed religion, then we must admit that there can be no contradiction between faith and reason. . . . When a master instructs his disciple, his own knowledge must include whatever he would introduce into the soul of his disciple. Now our natural knowledge of principles comes from God, since He is author of our nature. These principles themselves are also contained in the wisdom of God. Whence it follows that whatever is contrary to these principles is contrary to the divine wisdom and, consequently, cannot come from God. There must necessarily be agreement between a reason coming from God and a revelation coming from God. Let us say, then, that faith teaches truths which seem contrary to reason; let us not say that it teaches propositions contrary to reason. . . . Let us rest assured that apparent incompatibility between faith and reason is similarly reconciled in the infinite wisdom of God.¹⁹

Gilson's account of the reasonable basis for assuming a fundamental compatibility between faith and reason reflects the view of St. Thomas Aquinas, whose main point, as Gilson notes, was "not to safeguard the autonomy of philosophy as a purely rational knowledge; rather, it was to explain how natural philosophy can enter into theology without destroying its unity."²⁰ By seeing the Divine as "infinite wisdom," St. Thomas—as well as those Christian philosophers who follow in his footsteps—renders such an explanation less problematic. By construing the Divine primarily as supreme lawgiver, Strauss actually seems to adopt a more voluntaristic view of revelation-inspired norms, thus making his desire to protect the autonomy of philosophy against the incursions of political theology more understandable. At the same time, however, it leads the careful reader to wonder precisely what a purely autonomous natural (as opposed to political) philosophy—as Strauss understands that term—can tell us about the nature of things.

The Christian philosopher begins with an assumption that the universe is intelligible, Strauss with the assumption that "philosophy is essentially not possession of the truth, but quest for the truth. The

distinctive trait of the philosopher is that ‘he knows that he knows nothing,’ and that his insight into our ignorance concerning the most important things induces him to strive with all his power for knowledge.”²¹ Whether a purely autonomous natural philosophy can take us anywhere beyond the acknowledgement that there are important questions to be asked is a question that Strauss leaves unanswered.

The Straussian hermeneutic thus sees the course of intellectual history as an ongoing conversation about important philosophical questions, a conversation within which ‘ancients’ and ‘moderns’ provide two distinctively different sets of answers to the question of the role (and dangers) of true philosophy and its place within a political regime grounded either in the promotion of moral virtue (for the ancients) or the satisfaction of the appetites (for the moderns). If there is a dramatic moment in the course of that history, it is the moment at which “Machiavelli radically changed, not only the substance of [classical] political teaching, but its mode as well.”²²

The Christian philosopher can certainly appreciate the extent to which modern political philosophers such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau elevated what Servais Pinckaers describes as a nominalistic freedom of indifference over both a classical and/or medieval freedom for excellence.²³ The movement away from the philosophical and moral realism of St. Thomas Aquinas toward the nominalism and voluntarism of Ockham and his disciples was an important intellectual moment that has had profound historical consequences. And yet the most profound of historical moments, for the Christian, is not a philosophical moment at all, though the latter moment’s impact on a revelation-inspired philosophy is profound. The true moment of significance for the Christian is that of the Incarnation. Christopher Dawson describes that moment, and the doctrine which it inspired, in the following way:

For the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is not simply a theophany—a revelation of God to Man; it is a new creation—the introduction of a new spiritual principle which gradually leavens and transforms human nature into something new. The history of the human race hinges on this unique divine event which gives spiritual unity to the whole historic process.²⁴

“Viewed from this centre the history of humanity became an organic unity. Eternity had entered into time and henceforward the singular and the temporal had acquired an eternal significance,” says Dawson.²⁵ The whole of human history “finds its centre in the life of an historic personality who is not merely a moral teacher or even an

inspired hierophant of divine truth, but God made man, the Saviour and restorer of the human race, from whom and in whom humanity acquires a new life and a new principle of unity.”²⁶ True Christian freedom, as Walter Kasper notes, is “the freedom of the sons and daughters of God, a freedom we have only in Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.”²⁷ Under this new dispensation, and the light it sheds upon the whole of human creation, the true choice for man is not limited to the choice between Athens—representing a truly autonomous view of human reason and the political consequences that flow therefrom—and Jerusalem—representing societal adherence to Divine Law. Nor does it require a political choice between “ancient” political philosophy—and its ultimate practical commitment to some variant of Aristotelian regime (whether baptized or unbaptized)—or “modern” political philosophy—and its ultimate commitment to an individualist regime of radical personal autonomy. Any effort to embrace one or the other pole represented by these dichotomies—or to portray Christian political philosophy simply as some variant of either is to lose sight of the distinctiveness of a truly Christian differentiation on political things and to harden Christian political philosophy into an old and discredited political and legal monism.

Notes

1. Leo Strauss. *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 8.
2. Leo Strauss. *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).
3. James V. Schall. *Reason, Revelation, and the Foundations of Political Philosophy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 12.
4. One need not go so far as to embrace the claims of Shadia Drury (in *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988]) that Strauss was an esoteric Nietzschean in order to question whether one's adoption of the Straussian distinction between "ancients" and "moderns," conjoined with a hermeneutic that encourages the reader to believe that most great philosophers engage in the art of secret writing, to wonder whether Strauss's brand of moral realism fits altogether comfortably with a Christian worldview.
5. Ted v. McAllister. *Revolt Against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, & the Search for a Postliberal Order* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 198-199.
6. Ibid.
7. Gary Glenn. "Defending Strauss Against the Criticism that His Ancients/Moderns Reading of the History of Political Philosophy Unjustly Depreciates Christianity's Contribution to that History" (a paper presented at the 2007 meeting of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, St. John's University School of Law, Jamaica, NY, October 2007), 1.
8. Ibid, 6-8.
9. *Natural Right and History*, 2.
10. Ibid., 8.
11. For one of the best examples of a Christian Straussian reading of intellectual history, see Robert P. Kraynak. *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001). See also *Ernest Fortin's Collected Essays*, 3 vols, ed. J. Brian Benestad (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996). Both Kraynak and Fortin believe that any principled Catholic embrace of human rights and democracy constitutes a surrender to the intellectual forces of modernity. Kraynak's Christian commitments seem at times to be subordinated to a view of human nature that is more overtly Platonic in its desire for "a culture that aspires to spiritual, philosophical, artistic, and heroic greatness" rather than "one dedicated to mundane pursuits and the tastes of ordinary people" (26-27). His seeming rejection of the tastes of "ordinary people" seems, to say the least, to fly in the face of a truly Incarnationally-inspired humanism.

12. Ibid, 164.
13. Kraynak, 236-237. For another interesting effort to minimize the differences between Aristotelian natural right and Thomistic natural law, see Edward A. Goerner. "On Thomistic Natural Law: The Bad Man's View of Thomistic Natural Right." *Political Theory* 7,1 (1979): 101-122. Goerner applies the Straussian hermeneutic of secret writing to Aquinas, arguing that St. Thomas didn't really believe in exceptionless moral norms. Ironically, Goerner's effort to refute Strauss's claims about the inflexibility of Thomistic natural law in matters of statecraft is resolved not by arguing in favor of what appears to be Aquinas's natural law position, but by pushing Aquinas in the direction of Strauss's position. Again here, it seems that the only way to salvage Aquinas and the tradition he represents is to transform him into something other—a baptized Aristotelian—than what he seems, at first glance, to be.
14. Leo Strauss. *What is Political Philosophy?* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1959), 34.
15. Ibid.
16. John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 202.
17. Ibid, 192.
18. *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 13.
19. Etienne Gilson. *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), 18.
20. Ibid., 14.
21. *What is Political Philosophy?*, 10.
22. Ibid., 44.
23. Servais Pinckaers. *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, translated from the third edition by Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).
24. Christopher Dawson. *Dynamics of World History*. Edited by John J. Mulloy, with a new introduction by Dermot Quinn (Wilmington DE: ISI Books, 2002), 248.
25. Ibid, 268.
26. Ibid., 288.
27. Walter Kasper. *The Christian Understanding of Freedom and the History of Freedom in the Modern Era: the Meeting and Confrontation Between Christianity and the Modern Era in a Postmodern Situation* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1988), 8.

