

**THE PASSION OF UNDERSTANDING: PRELIMINARY  
REMARKS ON STRAUSS' QUARREL BETWEEN ANCIENTS  
AND MODERNS**

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**I**

Why did Leo Strauss frame the central philosophical conflict of our day as the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns? Why not the quarrel between the ancients, the medievals, and the moderns, or between the ancients and the medievals, on the one hand, and the moderns, on the other? The answer seems to hinge on the role of faith in philosophy, or, more specifically, on Strauss's position on the relationship between faith and reason. What is it that, according to the general view, sets the medievals apart from the ancients? Let's take Thomas Aquinas, whom Strauss discusses to a certain extent: he was a Christian theologian and philosopher, and he tried to integrate faith and reason. For Strauss, this is an uneasy mix—or, rather, an impossible one: “No one can be both a philosopher and a theologian or, for that matter, a third which is beyond the conflict between philosophy and theology, to a synthesis of both.”<sup>1</sup>

According to Leo Strauss, philosophy is a discipline that uses human reason to deal with things human; it is an inquiry into the whole, and its instrument is reason. According to Strauss, faith can not bring anything to reason's works, as all that to which reason can attain belongs to reason, and that to which it can not attain is not its concern. According to Strauss, when Thomas Aquinas tried to integrate the gains of Christianity and the achievements of Aristotle, he had to set one above the other, and we can safely say that in Aquinas's case theology was the winner. Thus Aquinas used some of the works of the Greek philosophers, but could not contribute to their achievements significantly, since the source of his contribution, faith, can not bring anything to the philosophical pursuit as such. Then why deal with the medievals?

The moderns, on the other hand, attempted to break with Christianity. They endeavored a (re)turn to using the tools of reason only. Strauss's diagnosis of modernity, however, is that it has never recovered ancient thought on its own terms, and therefore it has never truly returned to the tools of reason; it remained encumbered with the previous centuries' luggage of that uneasy mix of faith and reason. Not even brave attempts such as Heidegger's have succeeded in advancing on the path of philosophy, because the work of the ancients has not been

recovered on its own terms yet. The quarrel, therefore, is between two types of attempts on the path of philosophy proper, between the only two periods when the instrument of the pursuers was reason, and reason only (even if in the modern case we have that only as an attempt).

Setting up the problem as the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns is due therefore to Strauss's particular understanding of reason and faith, and of their relationship; his choice hinges on his sharp separation of the two. From this perspective, publishing something called the Catholic Social Science Review looks like a very doubtful endeavor, since at its core there is an irresolvable conflict. Philosophers or social scientists who want to be true to their vocation, yet who are also Christians, are in a dilemma. On the one hand, "philosophy is meant, and that is the decisive point, not as a set of propositions, a teaching, or even a system, but as a way of life, a life animated by a peculiar passion, the philosophic desire or eros."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, "the one thing needful proclaimed by the Bible is the opposite of that proclaimed by philosophy: a life of obedient love versus a life of free insight."<sup>3</sup> Are they ready to renounce that quest of free insight?

## II

What is it, that puts the philosopher on his path? In Strauss's letters to Eric Voegelin, he mentions quite frequently the passion or mania that is the characteristic, driving force of the philosophic attempt.<sup>4</sup> The philosopher is engaged in an erotic pursuit of knowledge, a pursuit that has its origin in the original attitude of wonder toward all that exists (the whole). "According to the Bible, the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord; according to the Greek philosophers, the beginning of wisdom is wonder," states Strauss.<sup>5</sup> The person with an attentive soul responds to the call with an enthusiasm that becomes a life-long pursuit of the understanding of the whole. The call is so definitive and powerful because it puts in question the very existence of the philosopher, as it puts in question the whole of existence. It would be hard for the philosopher not to respond with his entire being. In fact, it is in search of his own truth, of understanding himself as much as of understanding the world, that the attentive person travels on this path; and one goal could not be pursued without pursuing the other, too, since the meaning of the person is part of the meaning of the whole.

Yet how can we explain this call, this curiosity? What makes the mind so inquisitive and passionate, that it is not satisfied with tending to the needs of everyday existence, but wants more? Moreover, how come the human being can actually inquire into the whole? There is a call, a

need to know, but before that call there is the question of the very possibility of knowledge; why is it possible to know? What is this thing we call reason or understanding; and, in fact, what is this thing we call faith?

### III

In the Strauss-Voegelin correspondence, the theme of “experience” comes up quite often. Given the role that wonder and the erotic passion play in Strauss’s understanding of philosophy, it seems that it would be relevant to inquire into the nature of these phenomena. What occasions them? How are they structured? Interestingly enough, Strauss is reluctant to deal with the experiential dimension of the philosophic quest, although he insists that only the true philosophers know what the Socratic “mania” is. On the other hand, it is no wonder that Voegelin keeps bringing up the experiential dimension, given the central place that the examination of the bases of knowledge has in his work. In fact, we could safely say that trying to understand how and why the human beings have pursued paths of knowledge, throughout history, constitutes one of the main drives of the Voegelinian quest.

According to him, the very possibility of knowledge is due to the fact that the whole—or what he calls the complex of consciousness-reality-language—is internally intelligible.<sup>6</sup> Man’s consciousness is a part of this internally cognitive reality, and is, in fact, the locus where the whole becomes intelligible. Consciousness is thus both the subject within this complex, when reality is its object, and also an object, in the sense that the complex consciousness-reality-language becomes luminous in and through the consciousness. Perhaps another way of expressing this would be to say that consciousness does not “achieve” this capacity of knowing through its own voluntary efforts, but is endowed with it from birth, by virtue of being constituted in a certain way, within this intelligible whole. Or, one could say with a Buber or a Ricoeur that the self is born open to the whole within which it is constituted.

The intelligibility of the whole (and of human existence) means that the experience of the whole is communicable, and it is this communication (intercourse) that grounds society. What allows for the human beings to be constituted in what we call humankind, and to have a history, is the fact that reality is intelligible, and that the human beings are constituted as the *loci* of intelligibility. The source or ground of the existence of the whole is also the source of its intelligibility, and the human beings are connected to this intelligibility by being connected

with the ground of existence. This connection with what Voegelin calls the “ground of being” is what allows for each and every human being to transcend its “here” and “now,” and to constitute humankind and history.

Both the knower and the objects known are constituted within this internally cognitive consciousness-reality-language complex by the same ground of existence. This shared constitution is the explanation of the fact that the human being’s capacity to know is structured so that it can reflect the structure of the whole. The quest for knowledge, therefore—which, according to Strauss, is always a quest for the understanding of the whole—is, in fact, a quest for the ground of existence itself. In Voegelin’s writings, therefore, this quest for attunement with what he calls the “divine ground of being” will occupy a central place.

This divine ground of being is the source of all existence, and thus the only possible source of meaning for (the whole of) existence. Human beings have been in an ongoing search for attunement with this (divine) ground of being, and from those experiences of encounter emerged the symbols of order that have shaped human history (works of philosophers, meditative texts etc). In this sense, all the attempts at attunement with the divine ground of being in the history of humankind are, in fact, related. According to Voegelin, if they are true attempts of right souls, they are essentially equivalent *qua* movements, albeit not in terms of the quality of the experiences themselves, or the accuracy of the symbols produced.

Plato was just as conscious of the revelatory component of the truth of his logos as the prophets of Israel or the authors of the New Testament writings. The differences between prophecy, classic philosophy, and the gospel must be sought in the degrees of differentiation of existential truth.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, such a statement raises significant problems, and charges of relativism will come very swiftly, and quite understandably. Why these problems? We have to remember that the Voegelinian attempt is based on the awareness of the fact that consciousness is constituted within the intelligible whole as the *locus* of luminosity. *This* is the framework that is shared by all human beings and that occasions knowledge. From *this* perspective, notwithstanding the qualitative differences between the pursuers’ instruments, and barring some pathologies affecting them, all attempts will be essentially the same, being occasioned by the same structure of existence. This, of course, is not true—and one of the problems with Voegelin’s paradigm is that it can not accurately account for differences that go deeper than “more” or “less” knowledge. Although Voegelin will talk about hybris and about

other diseases of the soul, which can cause deformations of the soul's response to the pull of the divine ground of being, the emphasis will remain on the searchers' instruments. How can this be explained?

Well, if these problems seem similar to the ones encountered by Plato, in his account of the pursuit of the good, the true, and the beautiful, that is not accidental. Voegelin's is a Socratic pursuit on the path of understanding towards attunement with the source of order (the ground of being). Both attempts are constituted on the assumption of the intelligibility of the whole, and in both attempts the instrument of the ascent is reason. If understanding is the instrument, and if the framework is the same, the differences can only be in terms of the quality of the instrument: of understanding more or less. Yet we all know that those are not the main differences—that error has deeper roots. The problem is that both Voegelin and Plato are unable to adequately account for the root causes of evil.

But these same problems also point to the reasons why the Voegelinian attempt is so useful, for the purposes of this examination. The Voegelinian analysis reveals that the very passionate quest for truth that, according to Strauss, is the essence of philosophy, is only possible because we are constituted as active parts of this internally cognitive consciousness-reality-language complex. This is what makes it possible for the human beings to know, and this is what makes us able, today, to follow Strauss's advice and attempt a recovery of the gains of those who lived yesterday. In other words, the noetic community that is occasioned by the way in which existence is constituted is also what makes philosophy possible.

This same structure of existence, however, means that there are inherent limits to consciousness' efforts. These limits can be perceived by the pursuer, but it is not him who sets them. From the perspective of the searcher, which is the perspective through which Voegelin sees and describes the endeavor, the source of the call remains an "other" that one can never attain or possess completely. Indeed, unless Voegelin (or Socrates) becomes that "other," both the pursuit and the narrative of the pursuit will remain partial. Understanding has limits, because it is not the source of the truth that it pursues. Compared to the "other" that emitted the call, who is the very truth that is pursued, all those pursuing are (in) untruth.

#### IV

Voegelin follows Socrates on the path of understanding, and praises him for the acuity of his vision and for the accuracy of his

results. Yet understanding has its limits, and as Strauss reminds us, Socrates was the wise one because he knew that he was ignorant, that he did not know everything. To use Søren Kierkegaard's expression, Socrates stood at the borders of understanding, sometimes confused about his position, but always cautious. Why this caution?

As Kierkegaard puts it, all (Socratic) knowledge is recollection, as the reason that we can know is that we already have that knowledge within. This is just another way of expressing the Voegelinian description, that knowledge is occasioned by consciousness finding itself constituted as a knowing part of a knowable reality. There is a givenness to the knower's situation. The question is, can the knower ever attain complete knowledge? In Platonic terms, can it attain completely and comprehensively to the sun outside the cave; can it encompass and possess the divine ground of existence, completely? Since this divine ground of being is what makes reality comprehensible, complete comprehension of the whole would only happen when the knower would become the divine ground of being itself, when it would be one with the source of the good, the true, the beautiful.

But consciousness is only a part of the whole. It is not even the whole, and it is even less the source of the existence of the whole; it isn't even the source of itself. Understanding—or recollection—has limits, therefore. Of its own powers, the pursuer can not become (one with) the source of his own existence, and of the existence of the whole. Socrates, acknowledging those limits, showed that he was wise, that he knew that he is not the unknown, the god, the ground of being that called him on that erotic pursuit; Socrates could only ever be a midwife, and not the one who delivers the truth (gives birth to it).

Understanding has limits. What happens at the borders, though, and how could man ever surpass the limits that understanding sets him, because of its very nature? Can one stop following that initial call, just because understanding fails him? If he was on the right track, the same passion that has guided the pursuer to the end point of understanding, wants to draw him further. Yet the pursuer seems to be unable to go any further, because that is where understanding stops; and on the Socratic path, reason has been the instrument.

What Kierkegaard, the very Socratic philosopher, brings to this discussion, is something that neither Voegelin, nor Strauss can bring. While Voegelin deals with the grounds and structures of knowledge (*nous, sapientia*), and Strauss strictly with *episteme*, Kierkegaard takes all these into consideration, and in addition studies what happens at and beyond the borders of understanding, the borders on which Socrates stood guard:

as far as it was possible for a pagan he was on guard duty as a *judge* on the frontier between God and man, keeping watch so that the gulf of qualitative difference between them was maintained, between God and man, that God and man did not merge in some way, *philosophice, poetice*, etc., into one. That was why Socrates was the ignorant one, and that was why the deity found him to be the wisest of men.<sup>13</sup>

What happens at those borders? Understanding, guided by the erotic passion, tries to attain to the very source of truth, order, reality. Yet it discovers it can not go any further. Does this mean that all that to which reason can not attain of its own powers, is irrational? Of course not; the pursuer is not the *origin* of truth, and thus he is not the source of knowledge. Being constituted within the whole, he is neither the whole, nor is he the ground of its existence. The very same situation within existence that makes knowledge possible for the human beings, also points to the fact that there are inherent limits to this knowledge. It is not in man's *powers*, it is beyond man's *powers of knowing* to attain to the whole of existence, and to the source of existence itself... but does that mean that it is *impossible*? If truth itself wants to reveal itself to that which could not attain to it of its own powers, then it is not impossible.

Revelation, then, and most crucially, Incarnation, is *the* self-revelation of truth, of the origin of the whole of existence, and of the existence of the searcher. This self-revelation of the truth is something that understanding could not have obtained through its own powers—unless he were truth itself, which he is not. This is why we can say, with a slightly misleading analogy, that the self-revelation of the truth happens beyond the borders of understanding. Once again, however, we have to note that this experience, just because it does not happen *through* the powers of understanding itself, is by no means “irrational.” To the contrary, it is the self-revelation of that which has constituted the whole as an internally cognitive consciousness-reality-language complex; it is the self-revelation of the very origin of *intelligibility*. By definition, therefore, it can only be intelligible.

Because this self-revelation must, by definition, happen beyond “the borders of understanding,” this self-revealed truth is recognized by understanding as something that cannot be comprehended. For understanding, therefore, it looks paradoxical—since it can not contain it within itself. Yet even if it looks like a paradox, being as it is beyond understanding's own powers, the pursuer must continue to follow the pull, the call, the passion that led him on this pursuit. The call led him to this point, and here understanding recognizes it cannot get any further—then what is the pursuer to do?

The understanding certainly cannot think it, cannot hit upon it on its own, and if it is proclaimed, the understanding cannot understand it and merely detects that it will likely be its downfall. To that extent, the understanding has strong objections to it; and yet, on the other hand, in its paradoxical passion the understanding does indeed will its own downfall.<sup>9</sup>

It wills its own downfall, because it can not deny the call of truth. What happens then, if truth chooses to reveal itself, and the pursuer follows the passion that led him there?

[W]hen the understanding and the paradox happily encounter each other in the moment, when the understanding steps aside and the paradox gives itself, [then] the third something [appears], [and] the something in which this occurs..., that happy passion ... [w]e shall call faith.<sup>10</sup>

The movement of faith, therefore, is the movement of assent to the self-revelation of the truth that has been pursued throughout. “Philosophy is quest for knowledge regarding the whole,” states Leo Strauss. It is “essentially quest,” and it is “not able ever to become wisdom,” because of the inherent limits of understanding.<sup>11</sup> But if philosophy, according to Strauss (and Voegelin, and Socrates), is a quest for the truth, then the self-revelation of truth is the answer, and this is why one can talk about “the gospel as an answer.”<sup>12</sup> The “life animated by a peculiar passion” for the truth can only be satisfied by truth itself. Given the constitution of existence, the only way truth can be revealed, is if it reveals itself.

The assent to this self-revelation, however, is an act of an individual. This act of assent to the self-revelation of truth is called the act of faith, and in a way, it might seem to be the “completion” of the pursuit of truth. The pursuit, however, does not end. What is revealed is what the truth reveals, but the pursuer does not become the origin of existence, or truth itself. The pursuit of understanding continues therefore for as long as the pursuer does not become one with the source of truth, of meaning, of existence; and that can not happen in a perfect form during the pursuer’s temporal existence, given the constitution of *this* existence (the world).

## V

The fullness of knowledge is obviously not possible, as Strauss reminds us; not here, according to Paul. Yet the partiality of our knowledge will cease, and the knowledge will be complete, once we will be one with the truth, when we will encounter it “face to face.”

And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. (...) If there are prophecies, they will be brought to nothing; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be brought to nothing. For we know partially and we prophesy partially, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things. At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known. So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love.<sup>13</sup>

The source of this intelligible existence is the source of truth. Consciousness is part of the intelligible whole, and it can learn, study, advance within this reality. It cannot know the whole, since it cannot contain the whole; it cannot even know itself, completely. Knowing itself happens through knowing about the whole, and vice versa. But knowing oneself and knowing the whole, completely, can only happen through that which itself is the source of all that exists—and thus of all true knowledge.

What is it, that keeps things in existence? According to the self-revelation of Truth, existence is an act of love on the part of the “I am who am.”<sup>14</sup> True, complete knowledge can only be of those things that one has created and that one maintains in existence. According to the self-revelation of the Truth, that act of creation and of maintaining in existence is an act of love. Love, then, seems to be the true knowledge; no wonder that understanding's pursuit of the Truth is a passionate endeavor.

## Notes

1. Leo Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy," in *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1964*, trans. and ed. Peter Emberley & Barry Cooper (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993) 216.
2. Strauss "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy," 223.
3. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1965) 63.
4. Eric Voegelin, Letter 26, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 63.
5. Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections," in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 112.
6. Eric Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, vol. 5 , *Order and History*, in *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 18 (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000).
7. Eric Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 145.
8. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 19., ed. and trans. Edna A. Hong & Howard V. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 99.
9. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments or A Fragment of Philosophy*, in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 7, ed. and trans. Edna H. Hong & Howard V. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 47.
10. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 59.
11. Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy," 223.
12. Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 141.
13. 1 Cor 13:1-2, 8-13.
14. Ex. 3:14.