

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Corine Pelluchon, *Leo Strauss and the Crisis of Rationalism: Another Reason, Another Enlightenment*. Translated by Robert Howse. SUNY Series in the Thought and Legacy of Leo Strauss. New York: State University of New York Press, 2014, 309 pp., \$90 (hardcover).

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Robert Howse's translation of Corine Pelluchon's ambitious book marks another impressive addition to the fine series from SUNY Press on the thought and legacy of Leo Strauss. Pelluchon's book originally appeared in France in 2005 (Éditions Vrin), winning the prestigious François Furet prize in 2006. The book's enthusiastic reception in France reflects Pelluchon's success at introducing Strauss to a European audience and reclaiming him as a seminal European thinker. Nonetheless, she does not wish merely to present Strauss as a European "raised in Germany, [who] studied in Paris and Cambridge," but insists on the continuing relevance of Strauss's thought to contemporary readers, particularly his analysis of the crisis of the West: "Strauss provides strikingly new perspectives with a view to thinking through the crisis of our times" (3). The crisis is the loss of confidence in all claims about the good, including those grounded in reason, revelation, and liberalism. Ultimately, she argues, this crisis is rooted in the Enlightenment's conception of reason and, as Strauss gradually came to see, involves the theology and politics derived from it. Strauss remains relevant because the crisis was never resolved in Europe. The status of the Jews in Europe, for example, was hardly resolved by the annihilation of European Jewry. Pelluchon's book claims Strauss not only as a European, but also as a guide who can show Europeans out of their theological-political cul-de-sac.

Pelluchon approaches Strauss's intricate thought by presenting his intellectual biography, particularly his career in Europe. This is a prudent approach for an introduction aimed at contemporary readers, who are accustomed to grasping thought by seeing its relation to the context within which it emerges. It also follows Strauss's own presentation of the development of his thought in his Preface to the English translation of his *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*.<sup>1</sup> In that account, Strauss presents himself "as a young Jew in Germany" who gradually became aware of the depth of the crisis of the West, even as he struggled to unearth its truest causes. The crisis first comes to view as the inability of liberal democracy, particularly the Weimar Republic, to alleviate discrimination and defend itself effectively from its illiberal critics. In addition, Strauss describes the crisis in theological terms, as a man who had wished to honor his faith but struggled to find an intellectually honest means to take its claims seriously. At first glance the political crisis and the crisis of faith appear to have little to do with one another, but as Strauss gradually came to realize, they are closely related. As the political crisis worsens, modern thought slides into nihilism under the guise of "intellectual probity," a trait which initially appears compatible with the ancient "love of wisdom" but is distinguished from it by its indifference—if not contempt—for prudence and political philosophy.

In *SCR*, Strauss outlines the potential pitfalls of describing a serious thinker in terms of the development of his thought. For one thing, we may come to see his thought wholly as the product of its times; that is, we may historicize his thought. Closely related to this problem is the temptation to believe that we can understand an author better than he understood himself. Pelluchon does not succumb to this temptation; rather, by carefully following Strauss's autobiographical account, she teaches us how to avoid it. Her analysis supplements Strauss's account with background material in creative and informative ways, so that her picture of Strauss is sensitive to the context without reducing him to a mere product of his environment. In fact, she introduces readers to historicism by speculating that Strauss's first exposure to it was with the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, a movement with which Strauss was affiliated as a young man. This allows her to examine the historicist approach to texts, how the participants of that movement "understood an epistemological rupture with the past. They no longer read the Talmud in thinking of the intentions" of the authors. "Far from imagining that there's a timeless truth

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Strauss, Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 1–31; henceforth *SCR*.

necessitating several levels of reading, they embraced historicism...or the idea that all truth is relative to a particular historical period” (59).

Once we adopt historicism, we foreclose the possibility of finding truth beyond the assertion that there is no truth as such. We no longer take seriously the possibility of philosophy nor even consider that previous thinkers might have achieved some insight into the truth which surpasses our own. The *Wissenschaft* movement applied this perspective to Jewish Law and ended up destroying it: “In turning the Law into an object of science, and in applying to Judaism progressive methods of historiography, they destroyed Judaism as a religion and lost a tradition they wanted to save” (58). In the words of Moritz Steinschneider, one of the movement’s most prominent scholars, “the task of Jewish studies is to provide the remnants of Judaism with a decent burial.”<sup>2</sup>

Pelluchon’s Strauss is acutely aware of the crisis of faith, of living in a world where the chain of tradition is broken and man is thus alienated from God. She recounts Kafka’s short parable “Before the Law” to illustrate the European Jews’ sense of the crisis. In the tale, an ordinary man wishes to gain “entry to the law,” but despite his lifetime of efforts is unable to get past the gatekeeper (57; see 62). Failing to discover the means to gain entry, the man dies heartbroken, outside the law. Pelluchon interprets the story as an expression of the modern crisis, namely, that the path to return is blocked in the first place by the historicist reading of the past.

Pelluchon describes Strauss’s efforts to find the key to this door even in his earliest work. In fact, shortly before his death, Strauss described the central theme of his thought as the theological-political problem. Pelluchon structures her analysis around each element of this problem by neatly dividing her book into two sections of three chapters each. The first section analyzes the theological question, or as Pelluchon calls it, “modern religious consciousness,” while the second analyzes “modern political consciousness.” Since these parts form a single whole, they are difficult to separate entirely, nor is that Pelluchon’s intention. Instead, she develops each question separately to show more clearly how they fit together.

She begins by examining Strauss’s earliest work, his dissertation on Jacobi, completed in 1921, which is often ignored by Strauss’s students on the advice

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<sup>2</sup> See Charles Mannekin, “Steinschneider’s ‘Decent Burial’: A Reappraisal,” in *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2006), 1:239–51.

of Strauss himself, who dismissed it as a “disgraceful performance.” But Pelluchon shows convincingly why it is important nonetheless for understanding Strauss’s approach to the Enlightenment (29ff., 51). One can see how Strauss already took the measure of the moderate, early phase of the Enlightenment in the thought of Moses Mendelssohn and others and judged it inadequate (37). The moderate phase of the Enlightenment sought to preserve some measure of religion, as long as it remained “within the limits of reason.” Jacobi, however, exposed the truly radical, atheistic vision of Spinoza and the Enlightenment which Strauss would trace back to Hobbes and Machiavelli. (Pelluchon here follows Strauss’s account in *SCR*, so she tends to put more emphasis on Spinoza than on Machiavelli or Hobbes.) The basis for this radical view is the dogmatic belief that reason is self-sufficient and, as such, is able to give an account of the whole. That such a premise is not self-evident and involves a kind of faith, the moderns attempted to conceal. The failure to create a religion of reason, à la Hermann Cohen, results ultimately from the insufficiency of reason, as well as from the atheism implicit in the Enlightenment.

Jacobi attacks the Enlightenment’s ambitious concept of reason in order to show that, despite its own atheism, we must abandon reason and return to religious orthodoxy. Clearly, Strauss does not accept this conclusion. But he learned from the defects in Jacobi’s conclusion the inadequacy of attempts by early modern thinkers, such as Moses Mendelssohn, to claim a moderate position (257). He also learned that the primary culprit for the modern crisis of faith is the Enlightenment’s narrow conception of reason, which claims to be sufficient for explaining the whole. As the inadequacy in this claim becomes more apparent, our confidence in reason is shaken and ultimately destroyed. The blindness to the limits of reason leads to its rejection and, ultimately, to the embrace of irrationality and political fanaticism. These defects ultimately help us grasp the superiority of Maimonides’s account of reason, which does not condemn revelation, and of revelation, which maintains some openness to reason: “Strauss would never become a man of the Anti-Enlightenment. . . . The return to orthodoxy that he proposes is less a struggle against the Enlightenment in the name of faith than a return to another type of Enlightenment proposed by Maimonides” (46; see 53). The moderns’ belief in enlightenment and their advocacy of reason reflects a forgetting of the limits of reason and the need for guidance in nonrational sources such as Law. This opens the path to Maimonidean enlightenment.

In the final chapter of part 1, Pelluchon compares Strauss’s projects to attempts by other German Jews—Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig (and

later Emmanuel Levinas), and Gershom Scholem—to reinvigorate the tradition of revelation. This further establishes Strauss’s place in a broader European project and also highlights his unique strategy of recovering the meaning of premodern rationalism as a prerequisite for a return to revelation (see 128).

The second section of the book, on “the foundations of modern political thought,” explores Strauss’s account of the three waves of modernity. Readers of Strauss will recall his seminal essay “The Three Waves of Modernity,” which presents a detailed account of the origin and development of modern political consciousness in three closely related, but ever more radical phases.<sup>3</sup> Pelluchon uses this framework to present Strauss’s reading of modern politics, the prevailing opinions on rights, power, the state, pluralism, justice, and so forth. Although the focus throughout is on modern politics, the underlying question is the possibility of return to a premodern mode of analysis, namely political philosophy. Ancient political philosophy begins from the various opinions that pervade the nonphilosophic political community. The goal is not primarily to choose a side, but rather to ascend from the opinions to knowledge about justice, virtue, and the good: “Philosophical inquiry is the attempt to transform opinions into knowledge, but it is also a matter of reflection on the categories that formed our understanding of the world and that may come from philosophy itself” (139). Strauss employs this mode of analysis, in Pelluchon’s reading, and thereby demonstrates the relevance of classical political philosophy.

This mode of analysis is evident in his three-waves thesis, which allows students to see the threads connecting the thought of Machiavelli and Hobbes to that of Nietzsche and Heidegger: “Man, in the absence of a consideration of the hierarchy of ends, will be the measure of all things. Free to obey his own gods and demons, he will find in the glorification of power, in the exercise of a will oriented to itself...the possibility of self-affirmation. Barbarism will be the exultation of the Will to Power” (151). Her nuanced account of Strauss’s critique of Carl Schmitt shows that though Strauss may have shared some of Schmitt’s criticisms of liberalism and democracy, like Tocqueville he resisted the temptation to reject them altogether (160–77). Indeed, Schmitt inspired Strauss to develop a philosophical defense of liberalism by examining its origins in the first wave, as well as fundamental criticisms of liberalism that emerged in the second wave. Strauss’s moderation results from an evaluation of these criticisms, rooted in a critical awareness of the limits of political

<sup>3</sup> Leo Strauss, “The Three Waves of Modernity,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 81–98.

life. Such an evaluation cannot be derived from modernity itself, but only by reaching beyond modernity toward classical political philosophy. For example, on the Socratic view, not everyone can leave the cave and make the ascent; not everyone can be a philosopher. Thus Schmitt's contempt for democracy as fostering and encouraging constant entertainment is misplaced. The desire for distractions is not particular to democracy, nor is it possible to create a society where everyone engages in philosophical speculation (see 167). Schmitt expected too much from politics, and simultaneously he undermined all claims of justice as the mere arbitrary will of the sovereign. Not surprisingly, he was unable to recognize or resist barbarism.

Pelluchon describes Strauss's thesis without insisting on dogmatic certitude. Her lively exposition stresses the open-ended interpretative questions in Strauss's thought by focusing on the original works of the thinkers who for Strauss typify each wave of modernity: Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others. By describing the thought of each individual author, she encourages the reader to return to the primary texts. She skillfully weaves other elements of Strauss's oeuvre into the narrative in interesting ways. For example, after describing the first two waves of modernity, she introduces the dialogue between Strauss and Alexandre Kojève to show how a novel type of tyranny, typified by communism, emerges as a result of the second wave. Indeed, she uses Kojève and Schmitt to show how radical and horrible alternatives of liberalism emerge from the waves of modernity: "Strauss and Kojève form a trio with Carl Schmitt: the critique of modernity is a triologue. ... But Strauss reveals the contradictions of Schmitt and Kojève: just as [Schmitt's] decisionism becomes nihilism, the universal and homogenous state [advocated by Kojève] makes inexplicable how someone like Kojève could be possible" (192).

The purpose of Strauss's analysis of modern political consciousness is to strengthen and support liberalism. Pelluchon summarizes his project as follows: "The work of Strauss is, in its critique of historicism, relativism, and the deconstruction of modernity in three waves, but also in its study of pre-modern texts, an attempt to understand that it is possible to reconsider the foundations of our society. It is a matter of supplementing liberalism, which has allowed the promotion of subjective rights—of which Strauss does not contest the legitimacy but only the absoluteness—by the idea that the end of man is not reduced to his preservation" (203). The remedy Strauss proposes is not to impose a perfect society by force, but rather to reconsider the definition of man which refers only to self-preservation and egoistical passions.



The final section of part 2 outlines Strauss's efforts to remedy the crisis with a pedagogic rather than political program. According to Pelluchon, "Husserl put Strauss on the path of a phenomenological reduction that determines the task of philosophy as the transformation of opinions into knowledge" (212). At the same time, Strauss learned from Heidegger that one cannot simply return to a natural understanding of the world apart from one's historical and political horizon. Strauss discovered the most nuanced view of this process in Socrates, who begins with the diverse opinions of the city and makes an ascent toward knowledge, fully aware of his ignorance. The citizens themselves, whose opinions are directed by poetry and the law, never attain perfection, but an excellent city allows individuals to make the ascent. In a whirlwind tour of Strauss's analysis of ancient philosophy, Pelluchon introduces readers to the role of poetry in the city and its tension with philosophy, a tension that is moderated by what Strauss describes as philosophy's "recognition of essential differences and noetic heterogeneity" (217). Liberal education nurtures this desire for human perfection among the few, but at the same time must moderate its students lest they overturn the opinions of the city, which allow for the ascent to philosophy in the first place. One expression of such moderation is the emergence of a certain art of writing, which Plato describes in the *Seventh Letter*, as capable of articulating only part of the whole. Strauss's discovery of Platonic political philosophy came from an unlikely source: the medieval philosophy of Maimonides. In Maimonidean jurisprudence, Strauss finds the truest and the best solution to the theological-political problem. By balancing the needs of the community with the demands of reason, Maimonides is able to teach us the most just relation between reason and revelation. This final section ties together the theological and political problems and helps us find a way out of the modern crisis: "The superiority of the Enlightenment of Maimonides to that of the Moderns derives from the fact that in the former, truth and knowledge are preserved, whereas the latter leads to relativism" (231). Nor does Maimonidean Enlightenment lead to the exclusion of faith or the overconfidence in reason to guide man (see 236).

Pelluchon concludes that "the Enlightenment occurred in awareness of all the essential problems, but its evolution and the increasing rigidity of the position of the philosophers toward religion resulted in a regression and an obfuscation" (98). She has in mind here not Strauss but Tocqueville, "who lost his faith at sixteen, [yet] held that religion is necessary because democratic man, who is content with the search for personal happiness and profit, can degrade himself of his own accord" (99). Like Spinoza, who appears to

have advocated a religious view to which he himself did not subscribe, Pelluchon's Tocqueville sees clearly the looming crisis, but is unable to check the tide of secularization. Pelluchon locates Strauss firmly in this tradition: "The reality described by Tocqueville was experienced by Strauss" (101). But Strauss's efforts at return via Maimonides uncovered dramatically different possibilities.

Pelluchon's efforts to portray Strauss as a European help American readers see Strauss's achievement in a new light. She attempts, for example, to situate Strauss on the European political spectrum. But Strauss's place is difficult to locate if we associate conservatism with a reactionary hatred of modernity and liberalism with a hatred of traditions, religious and political. Strauss creates an alternative to these extremes. His view shares some common features with conservatism, but there is a crucial difference: "Unlike the reactionary, who favors a return to the past, the conservative thinks that modernity destroys the conditions of its own existence and brings about that which it wished to combat. This political sensibility corresponds to the spirit of the Straussian critique of modernity, to the way in which he shows the destructive dialectic of Enlightenment. It sets the tone also for Strauss's reflections on the internal threat to mass democracy" (53). Like Tocqueville, Strauss is a friend to liberal democracy, but this does not blind him to its defects or prevent him from criticizing its flaws.

Pelluchon's biographical account describes the way Strauss liberates himself from historicism and discovers philosophy. Like Wittgenstein's ladder, the historical account turns out to be a means which can be discarded once we have recognized the possibility of philosophy. In fact, the discovery of philosophy exposes the triviality of such claims as that Strauss can be understood historically and that his mature thought should be understood in light of the earlier work. Strauss playfully makes the same point in the preface to *SCR*, where he catalogs various misreadings of Spinoza, including Hermann Cohen's and Franz Rosenzweig's. These erroneous readings reveal the problems one encounters when trying to understand an author better than he understood himself. But, once we recognize that they are errors, they are less interesting than pursuing and engaging in the actual thought of the author. In fact, the two lines of inquiry are so different from each other that we may wonder whether the account of historical development contributes very much to grasping philosophy. Pelluchon's account of Strauss's thought helps us make this ascent.