

Interpretation

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Volume 20 Number 2

- 99 Charles Salman Phaedrus' Cosmology in the *Symposium*
- 117 Jeffrey S. Turner The Images of Enslavement and
Incommensurability in Plato's *Meno*
- 135 Leonard R. Sorenson Rousseau's Socratism: The Political Bearing of
"On Theatrical Imitation"
- 157 Hilail Gildin The First Crisis of Modernity: Leo Strauss on
the Thought of Rousseau
- 165 John Farrenkopf Nietzsche, Spengler, and the Politics of
Cultural Despair
- 187 Leah Bradshaw Tyranny: Ancient and Modern
- Book Reviews*
- 205 Will Morrisey *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas
Jefferson*, by Robert W. Tucker and David
C. Hendrickson
- 209 Christopher Kelly *Reading Rousseau in the Nuclear Age*, by
Grace G. Roosevelt
- 217 Terence E. Marshall *Political Philosophy*, Volume 1, by Luc Ferry

Interpretation

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The First Crisis of Modernity: Leo Strauss on the Thought of Rousseau

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The final chapter of *Natural Right and History* is entitled “The Crisis of Modern Natural Right.” It opens with the assertion: “The first crisis of modernity occurred in the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.”¹ In this paper I propose to consider two questions. Why is the crisis of modern natural right said to be the crisis of all modernity, of modernity simply? Furthermore, why is the thought of Rousseau singled out as the place in which this crisis first occurred?

Our first question is partly answered near the beginning of *Natural Right and History*. Strauss says: “The crisis of modern natural right or of modern political philosophy could become a crisis of philosophy as such only because in the modern centuries philosophy as such has become thoroughly politicized. Originally, philosophy had been the humanizing quest for the eternal order, and hence it had been a pure source of humane inspiration and aspiration. Since the seventeenth century, philosophy has become a weapon, and hence an instrument” (NRH 24. See NRH 319–21). What kind of weapon it became can be seen from the political philosophy of Hobbes. Strauss calls it “political hedonism” and describes it as “a doctrine which has revolutionized human life everywhere on a scale never yet approached by any other teaching” (NRH 169). Without entering into a longer discussion than would be appropriate here of what is meant by “political hedonism,” it should be noted that Hobbes’ teaching underwent profound transformations at the hands of some of his great successors in modern political philosophy, transformations the point of which was to improve on Hobbes’ solution without abandoning his project, his “political hedonism.” These transformations, undertaken by Spinoza and Locke (to mention only two of the thinkers in question) helped make “political hedonism” the power it later became. The most successful and most familiar form of modern political philosophy (as well as of “political hedonism”) was said, by Strauss, to be the modern belief in progress, which he characterized as the belief that the limitless progress of philosophy or science, and the diffusion of its results, tend to promote limitless social, political and moral progress.² According to Strauss, the crisis of modernity, as it is experienced today, “may be said to be identical with the climactic crisis of the idea of progress in the full and emphatic sense of the term” (IPP 263).

Turning to our second question, what in Rousseau’s thought led Strauss to

speak of it as the first crisis of modernity? One cannot ascribe this merely to Rousseau's attempt to restore parts of classical philosophy which had been jettisoned by his predecessors. Leibniz and Spinoza, to mention only two examples, can be said to have done the same in their attempt to supply a place for the classical notion of wisdom and of the wise man within modern philosophy. Strauss does affirm that "no modern thinker has understood better than Rousseau the philosophic conception of the *polis* . . ." (NRH 254, n.2). Rousseau's return to the classics is not limited to this point. But Rousseau is not unique in this respect. As Strauss also points out, Rousseau not only sought a return to the classics in important respects. He at the same time "jettisoned important elements of classical thought which his modern predecessors had still preserved" (NRH 252). Moreover, the power of Rousseau's influence is not, by itself, the source of the way in which Strauss describes him. It is, after all, John Locke whom Strauss calls "the most famous and most influential of all modern natural right teachers . . ." (NRH 165). Finally, Strauss's description of Rousseau is not merely due to the presence of the difficulty, in Rousseau, which one can sum up by saying that Rousseau needs nature but that nature has become a problem for Rousseau. For is the very same difficulty not conspicuously present in the philosophy of Hume? Reconciling Hume's naturalism with his skepticism has long been a major problem for interpreters of his thought. Is the very same difficulty not present, albeit less conspicuously, in the philosophy of Hobbes, as interpreted by Strauss? Does Hobbes not need a non-hypothetical account of nature on the basis of which he can oppose views of the world which support what he calls "fear of spirits invisible"? And does his philosophy not compel him to settle for a hypothetical account of nature? "Hobbes had the earnest desire to be a 'metaphysical' materialist. But he was forced to rest satisfied with a 'methodical' materialism."³ It should be noted at this point that all of the suggested answers that we have rejected as insufficient by themselves will prove to be ingredients of the answer we will propose.

The writing which first made Rousseau famous—his *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*—is an attack on what Strauss called "the idea of progress in the full and emphatic sense of the term." It is of interest that Nietzsche, who opened what Strauss calls the second crisis of modernity, is also introduced by Strauss as challenging the idea of progress: "Post-Hegelian thought rejected the notion that there can be an end or peak of history, i.e., it understood the historical process as unfinished and unfinishable, and yet it maintained the now baseless belief in the rationality or progressive character of the historical process. Nietzsche was the first to face this situation" (IPP 95). To return to Rousseau, his first writing is an attack on one of the chief assumptions underlying the Enlightenment. Rousseau was aware of this. He knew that he was "running counter to everything that men admire today . . ." and he adds: "A man who plays the free thinker and philosopher today would, for the same reason, have been only a fanatic at the time of the League." Rousseau's attack on the En-

lightenment, however, does not prevent him from agreeing with Enlightenment thinkers regarding one crucial point. He did believe that significant intellectual progress had taken place. He only denied that the popularization of its results tended to promote moral and social progress. Viewed by itself, that is, viewed apart from its effects on society, the rise and progress of the sciences fills Rousseau with admiration, as he makes clear at the beginning of Part 1 of this *Discourse*:

It is a grand and fine spectacle to see man go forth as it were out of nothing by his own efforts; dispel by the lights of his reason the darkness in which nature had enveloped him; raise himself above himself; soar by the mind to the celestial realms; traverse the vast expanse of the universe with giant strides, like to the sun; and, what is grander and more difficult still, return into himself, there to study man and to know his nature, his duties, and his end. All these wonders have occurred anew in the past few generations.⁴

The science which crowns natural science is the science of man, from which men learn to know themselves, their nature, and their duties.

The reference in the passage we quoted to the recent revival of the marvels described there points to the rise and progress of modern philosophy or science. From the rest of the work in which that passage occurs, when supplemented by information supplied in Rousseau's subsequent writings, it is evident that he thought modern philosophy or science superior to its ancient counterpart. He calls Bacon, rather than, say, Socrates or Plato, "perhaps the greatest of the philosophers." He refers to Bacon, Descartes and Newton, but to no ancient philosophers, as "teachers of the human race." The only ones who should devote themselves to the study of the sciences, he declares, are those "who feel strong enough to walk alone in their footsteps"—the reference is to these teachers—"and to go beyond them." Rousseau does not seek to effect a return to the philosophy of Plato or Aristotle. In the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau's authority on natural philosophy is Buffon rather than Aristotle or Pliny.

With regard to the science of man, however, matters are a good deal more complicated in Rousseau. In the first place, he denies that any such science has as yet been adequately developed, which is not quite the same as denying that important contributions to it have been made. "The most useful and the least advanced of all human knowledge seems to me to be that of man . . ." (JRR/VG 129). In addition, insofar as Rousseau seeks to effect a kind of return to the polis, and because he renews the classical understanding of the relation between knowledge and political life, he exhibits more respect for classical political philosophy than did his predecessors. He does so for the very reasons that made Hobbes condemn as seditious the teachings of "Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Plutarch, and the rest of the maintainers of the Greek and Roman anarchies" (Hobbes, *The Citizen*, chap. 12, sec. 3): because of their opposition, for all practical purposes, to monarchy and because of their preference, for all practi-

cal purposes, for republican political orders. Moreover, ancient authors, according to Rousseau, understood better than do modern ones the moral preconditions of self-government in a republic. But though Rousseau is in broad agreement with many of the practical conclusions of the ancient authors, he finds their teachings concerning the foundations of moral and political life utterly unsatisfactory: “the ancient philosophers . . . seem deliberately to have set out to contradict one another on the most fundamental principles” (JRR/VG 131). He is in agreement with his great predecessors in modern political philosophy regarding how knowledge of these foundations must be achieved, although he disputes the conclusions at which they arrived in seeking to achieve it: “The philosophers who have examined the foundations of society have all of them felt the necessity of going back to the state of nature, but not one of them has arrived there” (IPP 89, Strauss translation). The central importance for Rousseau of themes such as the state of nature, the state of civil society, the institution of a legitimate sovereign, the concern with self-preservation from which legitimate rule is derived, all point to the link between his thought and the modern innovations within political philosophy commonly associated with the names of Hobbes and Locke.⁵ Rousseau is a member of the post-Hobbesian effort to guarantee the effectiveness of the Laws of Nature, and in particular to guarantee that the sovereign, who is, according to Hobbes, instituted to render the Laws of Nature effective, would not himself (or itself) violate them. Rousseau had many great predecessors in this effort, all of whom believed, as he did, that the security for the sake of which men form political societies had to include security against oppression by the sovereign. It was in this way that the solution proposed by Hobbes, which had leaned towards absolute monarchy, was turned into an essentially republican solution, a central ingredient of which was political freedom, a solution which was utterly incompatible with absolute monarchy. Hobbes himself had faced forthrightly the problem of the effectiveness of the Laws of Nature vis-à-vis the sovereign and he declared it to be insoluble. While he refused to concede that an absolute sovereign would inevitably abuse his power, he had the intellectual honesty to acknowledge: “It cannot be denied but a prince may sometimes have an inclination to do wickedly.” This, he argued, was an evil for which no cure existed, because “he that hath the strength to protect all, wants not sufficiency to oppress all.”⁶ Hobbes laid the blame for this incurable evil not on his solution, but on human nature, which required an absolute sovereign to keep men from relapsing into the state of nature. Rousseau, and his great predecessors in the effort of which we have been speaking, regarded what Hobbes considered an impossibility to be only a difficulty which could be overcome, though overcoming it required favorable circumstances. Rousseau’s general will is intended to be precisely an embodiment of the Law of Nature on whose effectiveness one can depend.

But it is not only Rousseau’s solutions to the political problem which distinguish him from his modern predecessors. He bases these solutions on premises

which are equally novel, although they result from his independent efforts to think through what he had learned from his modern predecessors. Where he found their reasoning defective, he proceeded to improve on their conclusions and to transform them. It would be difficult for anyone who had been convinced by the teachings of Rousseau's modern predecessors not to be impressed by the criticisms he brings to bear on the assumptions underlying their accounts of the state of nature and of natural man. As is well known, Rousseau accepts the necessity, urged by Hobbes, of seeing man and the human condition prior to and independently of the molding influences of society, of seeing natural man and the state of nature, if one is to have a clear understanding what problem political society is brought into being to solve. He accepts Hobbes' contention that the tradition was mistaken in regarding man as by nature political and social. He infers that Hobbes should have seen that this implies that man is not by nature rational either, since the development of man's reason presupposes society. The portrait of original natural man at which Rousseau arrives is one in which man lacks all the traits that the traditional definitions had referred to when they spoke of man as being by nature the social, political and rational animal. Natural man is not a being we would recognize as human. Accordingly, Rousseau discusses, in a long note, whether the pongos described by various voyagers may not after all be relics of natural man, and he tentatively concludes that they are human, although he concedes that more, and better, information is needed before this question can be regarded as settled once and for all. What we consider to be man's humanity is not due to his nature. It is the product of a long development which brings about, as an unintended by-product, conflicts within and between men, conflicts which finally make the formation of political society unavoidable. Rousseau's notion of what man's nature is apart from the distorting influences of society arises from his account of the state of nature. That notion, in turn, determines, or at any rate serves to justify, his conception of how men should live. Yet precisely his account of the state of nature, by thinking that state through to its end, compels one to wonder whether the stupid, subhuman animal which he finds natural man to have originally been can serve as any kind of standard for what man has become since. Rousseau's appeal to nature and his reliance on nature are an essential part of his teaching. Yet his very teaching compels one to wonder whether he is entitled to that appeal and reliance.

It is here that we come to the source of Strauss's description of Rousseau's thought as the crisis of modern natural right and the first crisis of modernity.

In Rousseau's doctrine of the state of nature, the modern natural right teaching reaches its *critical* stage. By thinking through that teaching, Rousseau was brought face to face with the *necessity* of abandoning it completely. If the state of nature is subhuman, it is *absurd* to go back to the state of nature in order to find in it the norm for man. Hobbes had denied that man has a natural end. He had believed that he could find a natural or nonarbitrary basis of right in man's beginnings. Rousseau

showed that man's beginnings lack all human traits. On the basis of Hobbes's premise, therefore, it became *necessary* to abandon altogether the attempt to find the basis of right in nature, in human nature. (NRH 273–74. Italics supplied.)

What makes Rousseau's thought the crisis of modern natural right, and the first crisis of modernity, according to Strauss, is that his teaching, which is the culmination of modern natural right teachings based on the state of nature, reveals the impossibility of these teachings. In making this assertion, Strauss does not claim to be reproducing Rousseau's understanding of himself. He is criticizing Rousseau. To paraphrase a later remark, without the state of nature it is impossible to enter modern natural right and with the state of nature, at least after Rousseau's account of it, it is impossible to remain there. This is not meant to suggest that Rousseau would have accepted this conclusion. Rousseau was aware of the difficulty to which Strauss refers. His awareness of it, and his repeated efforts to grapple with it in various ways gave his thought its richness and was responsible for his immense influence on so many outstanding thinkers in the nineteenth century. Yet, as far as I know, none of Rousseau's great successors found it possible to retain his state of nature and natural man as the positive standards that they remained for Rousseau.

Rousseau's influence was also due, in part, to his having shown ways out of this difficulty, ways which he himself refrained from taking. Strauss comments on this as follows:

And Rousseau seemed to have shown an alternative. For he had shown that what is characteristically human is not the gift of nature but is the outcome of what man did, or was forced to do, in order to overcome or to change nature: man's humanity is the product of the historical process. For a moment—the moment lasted longer than a century—it seemed possible to seek the standard of human action in the historical process. (NRH 274)

Yet Rousseau was deterred from following this path by a recognition of the difficulties to which doing so was exposed.

This solution presupposed that the historical process or its results are unambiguously preferable to the state of nature or that that process is "meaningful." Rousseau could not accept that presupposition. He realized that to the extent to which the historical process is accidental, it cannot supply man with a standard, and that, if that process has a hidden purpose, its purposefulness cannot be recognized except if there are trans-historical standards. The historical process cannot be recognized as progressive without previous knowledge of the end or purpose of the process. (NRH 274)

On the basis of this one can understand both why Rousseau's successors, who found it impossible to leave matters where Rousseau had left them, were tempted to turn from natural right to History and why Rousseau refrained from

doing so. As Richard Kennington has observed, the argument of *Natural Right and History* circles back on itself. The subject of the opening chapter of the work is historicism. The subject of the closing chapter is the turn from natural right to history, a turn which Rousseau correctly anticipated would lead to insurmountable difficulties, according to Strauss.

In conclusion, let us revisit the three reasons for regarding Rousseau's political philosophy as the first crisis of modernity which we rejected earlier with the caution that all would prove to contribute something to the answer we would propose. Rousseau's return to the polis is an important ingredient in his opposition to the Enlightenment belief in progress, and his opposition to that belief is the most massive manifestation of the crisis of modernity in his thought. Moreover, the fact that Rousseau was a great thinker and a great writer was an indispensable ingredient of the crisis he embodied. His enormous influence over his contemporaries and over subsequent generations is what made it possible for his thought to be *where* the first crisis of modernity occurred. Finally, the fact that Rousseau needs human nature for his moral and political philosophy, but that human nature has become a problem for Rousseau *is*, properly understood, the first crisis of modernity. One can say that the same difficulty can be found in Hobbes, but it is necessary to do a great deal of digging in order to unearth it. In Rousseau it is conspicuous. It cannot escape the attention of the intelligent, critical and thoughtful reader. It did not escape the attention of his great successors. As for Hume, in whom the same difficulty is as conspicuous, it manifests itself in his writings on human knowledge rather than in his political and moral philosophy. And it is with the crisis in modern political and moral philosophy that we have been concerned here.⁷

NOTES

1. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 252, hereafter referred to by the abbreviation NRH. A witty remark of Lawrence Birns alerted me to the question which this article raises and seeks to answer.

2. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1964), p. 3, hereafter referred to by the abbreviation CM; *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), pp. 259–64, hereafter referred to by the abbreviation IPP.

3. Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 180–81, hereafter referred to by the abbreviation WIPP; NRH 174.

4. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, trans. and ed. Victor Gourevitch (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 4, hereafter referred to by the abbreviation JJR/VG.

5. In *Letters Written From the Mountain* Rousseau goes so far as to say that his treatment of political life in the *Social Contract* is based on exactly the same principles as those of Locke. Cf. *Oeuvres complètes*, 4 vols., published under the direction of Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959–69), 3:812.

6. *The Citizen*, chap. 6, sec. 13, n. Compare Abraham Lincoln's observation that "it has long been a grave question whether any government, not *too* strong for the liberties of the people, can be strong *enough* to maintain its own existence in great emergencies." The ability of the United States

to conduct a contested election in the midst of a civil war proves to the world, according to Lincoln, that this question can be answered in the affirmative. Cf. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 8:100–101.

7. Consider CM 1: “Modern political philosophy presupposes Nature as understood by the modern historical awareness. Eventually these presuppositions prove to be incompatible with modern political philosophy.”