

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 1992-93

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- Subscriptions Subscription rates per volume (3 issues):
individuals \$25
libraries and all other institutions \$40
students (four-year limit) \$16

Single copies available.

Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$4.50 extra;
elsewhere \$5.40 extra by surface mail (8 weeks
or longer) or \$11.00 by air.

Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by
a financial institution located within the U.S.A.
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Composition by Eastern Composition, Inc.,
Binghamton, N.Y. 13905
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co.,
Lancaster, PA 17603

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Luc Ferry. *Political Philosophy*. Vol. I, *Rights—The New Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns*, translated by Franklin Philip (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 151 pp., \$21.00.

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Luc Ferry is a leading member of a group of young Parisian intellectuals, including Tzevetan Todorov, Olivier Duhamel and Alain Renaut, who, since the collapse of Marxism and the decline of Postmodernism, have sought to guide political and philosophical debate in France. This recent debate principally engages those aligned with Ferry against disciples of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, but it involves associates of the review *Commentaire*, including friends or disciples of Raymond Aron, François Furet and particularly of Leo Strauss. Whereas Bourdieu aims at an antiphilosophical, sociological empiricism based on a composite of Marx and Weber, the other groups represent a return to forms of liberal constitutionalism founded on either classical or modern idealism. Ferry's reflections, elaborated in six books published in as many years, amount to an expository defense of human rights that is "resolutely modern" (p. 3), in opposition to alternatives from positivist, postmodern, or classical traditions.

Starting from his defense of political philosophy against logical empiricism and historicism, Ferry had earlier played a role in encouraging the translation into French of the complete works of Leo Strauss. But beyond his defense of political philosophy, Ferry's more specific aim has been to sustain its modern form, and thus to attack Strauss and promote an idea of human rights derived from Kant and the early writings of Fichte (p. 25). This initial volume of Ferry's vast project is in fact the first of his three-part *thèse d'état*, published in France to considerable journalistic plaudits in 1984.

In 128 pages of text Ferry here proposes, at age thirty-three, to develop his most ambitious theme: a confrontation of ancient and modern philosophy as a whole. He simplifies the task, however, by focusing in the protasis of the book not on the classical texts themselves, but only on Strauss' redintegration of the question of the ancients and the moderns. He further simplifies by examining, of Strauss' seventeen books, only *Natural Right and History*, and of Strauss' eighty-some articles, only "What is Political Philosophy?" and "The Three Waves of Modernity." A searching analysis of these texts might indeed have sufficed. Instead, Ferry confines himself to a general summary and concludes from it that Strauss' teaching on the ancients and moderns amounts to the re-

ductionist argument, that modern philosophy leads inexorably to historicism, or to nihilism, thus undermining the idea of human rights on any ground other than that of the ancients (pp. 1–4, 33, 48–52). To this familiar theme Ferry adds that “it is undeniable” that Strauss’ critique of modernity “proceeds from the same inspiration” as Heidegger’s, with whom Strauss had studied, and both critiques derive, not from a properly reasoned examination of the problem, but from a “romantic” or “nostalgic” desire to return to “the Greeks” (pp. 18–19 in relation to pp. 2–4, 21). Echoing a common refrain, addressed by Strauss in the very works here cited, Ferry claims that the attempts to recover the original idea of natural right must fail: based on a refuted cosmology, it is also dangerous, because “hierarchical” and thus antidemocratic, comporting with “the neoconservative tendency to sacralize natural inequalities” (pp. 20–21, 24). Taking no heed of Strauss’ examination of these points, Ferry argues that in fact the writings of Kant and the young Fichte, notably the *Wissenschaftslehre* and the *Grundlage des Naturrechts*, provide a modern basis for human rights which escapes the manifold problems of cosmology, scientism, and historicism, and yet cohere with the requirements of reason and the equal freedom of human beings (p. 25, cf. pp. 24, 73).

Nearly two-thirds of Ferry’s volume is devoted to the critique of Strauss. Of the remaining fifty-five pages, all but eight represent a somewhat repetitive exposition, relying on the exegeses of Ferry’s teacher Alexis Philonenko, of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*. Ferry concentrates especially on Fichte’s quest for a ground resolving the antinomy of Berkeley’s solipsist “idealism” and of Spinoza’s materialistic “realism” (pp. 74 ff.). According to Ferry, the resolution of this antinomy (in a text he calls “the most difficult and obscure . . . possibly in the whole history of philosophy”) provides the basis for a critical philosophy escaping the “dogmatic metaphysics” of either and founded in the “intersubjective” reflection of humanity’s rationality and freedom (p. 107, in relation to pp. 55–56, 74 ff., 83, 94, 103–4, 106, 116). Only five of the final eight pages sketch the political significance of this argument, reserved for volumes two and three and avowedly similar to Habermas’ theory of communicative action (cf. pp. 1 and 144 n. 48). More specifically, Ferry’s argument for a return to modern humanism is founded not in the universals of the categorical imperative but in the application of Kantian aesthetics to Fichte’s doctrine of rights (pp. 96, and 135 n. 2).

By downplaying the categorical imperative, with its universal or world-historical implications (cf. p. 135 nn. 2 and 7), Ferry seeks to escape the Hegelian idea of a necessary historical progress overcoming the tension between “the real” and “the rational” (pp. 58–61, 127–29). Instead, he argues for reconciling the two by resuscitating Kant’s historical vision of asymptotic progress, a vision which, when believed, preserves vitality or hope, beyond necessity, in terms of a never-fully-realized “horizon of expectation” (p. 123). The unending historical task of politics is thus vaguely seen as the mediation of human beings

through “the application of the pure principles of the science of rights to historical facticity by means of the state” (p. 102; cf. pp. 103, 122). Again following Kant and Fichte, Ferry argues that to realize this task, however, politics must be separated from both civil society and ethics or morals (cf. pp. 60, 102–3), even while guided by an idea of humanity in terms of a maieutic education in the beautiful (p. 124), rather than in the systematic terms of scientific reason.

Since versions of this argument have appeared many times over the past two centuries, one would expect Ferry to have confronted its critics in detail. In particular, such a confrontation might have appeared in the major portion of the book devoted to Strauss. But there, in his study of Strauss’ critique of historicism, Ferry is primarily absorbed by the question of history in Hegel and Heidegger. Through such a focus, Ferry wholly ignores Strauss’ primary concern, which is not with Hegel but with the radical historicism of Nietzsche. Attention to this question, and especially to Strauss’ commentary on *Beyond Good and Evil*, might have enabled Ferry to consider why Strauss did not think that the critique that Kant undergoes in that work allowed for a simple reaffirmation of critical philosophy as the basis for transcendental rights. By ignoring Strauss’ reflections on Nietzsche, Ferry confuses Strauss’ defense of natural right with Nietzsche’s defense of natural aristocracy (cf. pp. 2–3, 21). Indeed, Ferry’s failure to discriminate among diverse meanings of nature leads him at times to conflate the classical ideas of *physis* and *nomos* with those of Locke, Nietzsche and Darwin, and to assert that Strauss’ *Natural Right and History* may be read as “one of the most vigorous critiques of the very idea of human rights” (p. 21).

Curiously, even in concentrating on the question of Hegel’s historicism, Ferry altogether disregards Strauss’ *On Tyranny*, available in French since 1954, in which Strauss debates this issue with the greatest Hegelian of the time, Alexandre Kojève. Had he considered the argument in this book, no less than in Strauss’ writings on Carl Schmitt, Ferry might have been induced to confront the distinction Strauss draws not only between tyranny and constitutional government, but also between ancient and modern constitutionalism. Moreover, the French edition of *On Tyranny* concludes with a critique of Heidegger which Ferry might also have considered in light of these distinctions. Remarkably, in a book claiming originality by associating Strauss and Heidegger, the reader finds no consideration of Strauss’ published critiques of Heidegger, even though examples of such appear in the three works by Strauss that Ferry cites. The only allusion thereto, other than glancing qualifying remarks at the beginning, appears in a one sentence footnote remark, without textual reference, that Strauss’ critique amounts to “poor polemics” (p. 132, n. 48, cf. pp. 2–4, 21). At a minimum the footnote reveals that Ferry knew better than to identify Strauss’ thought with Heidegger’s on the problem of modernity, and yet Ferry goes so far as to assimilate Strauss’ classicism with Heidegger’s postmodernity at the very place where he links Heidegger’s thought with Nazism (cf. pp. 2–3,

20–21). Although he later modifies this, generally Ferry's critical procedure is first to assimilate, then to qualify, and then to return to an analysis based on assimilation (cf. pp. 2–4, 20–21, 23–24). Indeed, the cover itself of the French edition of Ferry's book portrays a bust of Plato bombarding the innocents of Guernica.

By such an association of Heidegger and Strauss on the question of modernity, Ferry barely notices, at page 3, the fact that Heidegger's return to "the Greeks," like that of Nietzsche, Machiavelli, Bacon or Descartes, is in fact a return to the pre-socratics and against the classics. Ferry accordingly ignores Strauss' studies of Socrates' revolt against his predecessors, which launched a "second sailing" in his philosophy by dint of "human" as opposed to "divine wisdom." Indeed, Ferry almost entirely overlooks the very question of "human wisdom" in classical political philosophy, just as he ignores, in the one book and two essays that he cites, the discussion by Strauss of why the questions of ancient cosmology and democracy pose no barriers to the possibility of classical natural right. (This is a point Ferry might have developed from page 50 and the notes 25–27 thereto.)

It is indeed curious that in a book devoted to the quarrel of the ancients and moderns, there appears no analysis, nor even a single textual reference to any of Plato's or Aristotle's writings, other than indirectly by citing Heidegger's interpretation of Aristotle's *Physics* (p. 18; cf. p. 20). Moreover, in a book devoted largely to a critique of Strauss on this matter, there is no analysis, nor even any exposition of Strauss' specific interpretations of the ancients. By failing to explore Strauss' arguments, Plato's texts or any by Aristotle, most particularly the *Ethics* or the *Politics*, Ferry fails to observe that the classical natural right that Strauss defends is based not on the primacy of "the doctrine of the spheres," as Ferry elsewhere asserts, but on the primacy of philosophy (cf. p. 24 in comparison to p. 135 nn. 25–27). To the extent that cosmology appears to be primary, as in the *Timaeus* or in *Politics* 1325b 25–30, their authors make clear and Strauss emphasizes that this appearance amounts to a metaphor for the primacy of attempting to understand the whole, viz. of that quest for wisdom rejected not only by the sophists or the historicists, but by the critical philosophy that Ferry purports to defend.

Such rudimentary defects in a book so widely acclaimed result in a clumsy parody of the ancients and prevent the author from confronting, examining or even noticing what really distinguishes the two traditions over the question of right. Not altogether surprisingly, therefore, despite Ferry's initial claim to defend "resolutely" the moderns (pp. 3, 24–25), he later practically rejects the distinction of ancients and moderns (p. 23 in comparison with p. 24) and instead alleges that Strauss' "periodization" of the history of philosophy in these terms is itself a form of Hegelian historicism (pp. 23–24, 51, 135 n. 3). Though restoring a typology of philosophical schools (p. 24), the effect of Ferry's procedure is that he fails to explore not only what Strauss himself

means by the quarrel, but in addition, what the early modern philosophers meant when referring to it.

Indeed, to the book's weak acquaintance with classical philosophy corresponds a similarly thin understanding of the early modern writings. For example, ignoring Bacon and others, Ferry flatly asserts that Fichte "was the first and perhaps only philosopher" to reject the eternal return (p. 136); disregarding textual subtleties, Ferry unequivocally portrays Descartes' idea of the soul as deduced from his idea of God (p. 122); and paying scant heed to the discursive character of Strauss' composition, Ferry blandly claims that Strauss considered Spinoza to "'almost' belong with the ancients" (p. 24). Consistent with Ferry's Kantianism, the result of his cursory procedure is to ignore the question of human nature, or psychology, in early modern transformations of the idea of natural right. Moreover, by ignoring this question Ferry also misperceives how the analysis of human nature explains Rousseau's subsequent break with the early moderns, and how that break, according to Strauss, prepares for the Kantian and Fichtean problematic.

Without examining why Strauss links these authors, a linkage avowed by Kant, Ferry simply asserts that Strauss fails adequately to distinguish them (pp. 51, 60), and moreover that by stressing self preservation as a basis of Rousseau's idea of civil right, Strauss again imposes a reductionist interpretation, failing to account for the edifying character of Rousseau's texts (pp. 52, 134 nn. 13, 18–19). Yet when the reader consults the Straussian essays to which Ferry refers, he finds that those same essays begin by stressing Rousseau's edifying charm. Among the paradoxical twists issuing in the "Second Wave of Modernity," Strauss observes Rousseau's affirmation, in the *Second Discourse* and *Emile*, that self-preservation and pity form the low foundations from which his new principles of right devolve. It is Rousseau's subliminal transformation of the low to the high that Strauss seeks to explain. In the very texts faulted by Ferry for reductionism, Strauss emphasizes Rousseau's argument that desire for self-preservation is not primary but derivative from the pleasures of the sentiment of existence. Accenting the secondary as the principle of right is not only consistent with Rousseau's argument that the citizen is alienated from his nature, but also with the rhetorical task of promoting such alienation, by obscuring from his perception the origin of what he is. Rousseau's edifying tone, shaping a new idealism, inflames the imagination as a determinant of thinking by appealing to another epiphenomenon, *amour propre*, metamorphized from *amour de soi*, through love of *humanité*, into public spirit or virtue, the guardian of ideas about men's equal dignity.

Combined with his dismissal without argument of Strauss' argument for careful reading (p. 56), Ferry's disinterest in human nature, or psychology, contributes to ignoring this problem and focusing instead on Fichte's logical resolution of antinomies for the proper foundation of rights. According to Ferry, this resolution discloses a "non-metaphysical" dimension of men's equal

freedom, surpassing necessity and grounded not so much in logic as in aesthetic perception (pp. 96, 111, 122, 135 n. 2). By contrast, he maintains that the classical discrimination of necessity and chance in relation to politics conduces to fatalism, implying the will's subjugation to forces or principles whose control it abjures. But Ferry's peremptory judgment, on the primacy of will over necessity, nature and chance, again fails to confront the significance of Strauss' classical argument on this question. At issue is the status of philosophy and *phronesis*. Refusing the attempt to conquer chance derives from the idea that the will is not primary, because it is not wise. While wondering at the questions, the recognition of lack of understanding, when accompanied by the desire to overcome it, is the condition not only for the possibility of philosophy but eventually of prudence, or practical reason, and thus of ethics and politics.

The classical subordination of the will to a measured or deliberate prudence, and thereby to philosophy, bears comparison with Ferry's argument that the principles of *praxis* be grounded in a "horizon of expectation," promoting asymptotic progress towards a community of intersubjective communication (p. 123; cf. 116, 122). If belief in such progress is rational, as Ferry at first seems to affirm (pp 1–4 in comparison with pp. 123–24), then it presupposes overcoming problems in communication, for example, between a penetrating and a superficial mind, as denoted not only by Strauss or by Nietzsche but also by Kant's mentor, Rousseau's *Emile*. Attention to such problems would indeed be a precondition for a reasoned consideration of Ferry's conclusion on politics and philosophy.

Accompanying the defects of analysis and scholarship in Ferry's book are unfortunate mishaps of editing or translating, appearing on nearly every page and suggesting a degree of hasty preparation unusual for the publisher. Words, sometimes clauses, from the French original are missing in the translation; terms used consistently in the French are translated variously from one line to the next; homonyms such as *actuel* and *réaliser* are treated as having identical meanings in the two languages. To master the text the reader should be prepared to think in a mode of *franglais* that simultaneously "reflects" a background of German. In the original French, Ferry displays a refined style, wielding with graceful prose Fichte's weighty thought, but the reader in English must be prepared for 128 pages abounding with single sentences such as follows: "The notion of externality thus leads back to that of passivity, and that of passivity to a limiting case of the self's activity (by reference to the principle of continuity): by modifying Kant's concept of infinite understanding, the finite (passive) understanding is conceived of as a limiting case of the activity of the infinite understanding which, by making itself finite, produces the given as passivity, as the differential of two activities: . . ." (p. 89).

No doubt, with dogged persistence presumably born of a desire to understand, the uninitiated reader will eventually discover the meaning of Ferry's communication. But just as Ferry denies that his thought is abstract or idealist

(p. 124; cf. pp. 25, 73–74, 91, 93–94, 100), he also seems to deny there is such a thing as a desire to understand that is not either interested or aesthetic (cf. pp. 123–24). Perhaps this is partly why Ferry must conceive of his community of “intersubjective communication” as founded not on intellectual but on “immediate” aesthetic perception (pp. 96, 116, 123–24). Ferry thus claims that, unlike Strauss’ alleged failure to link the “ideal” and the “real,” his own “deconstruction” of metaphysics in favor of aesthetics can accomplish just that (pp. 122–24; cf. p. 50). He ignores the fact that Strauss’ critique of the primacy of science or aesthetics in favor of philosophy and prudence in political judgment is based on his defense of starting from common sense, a mode of thought (differing from the *gemeinschaftlicher Sinn*) that Ferry, like Kant, abjures.

Instead, Ferry’s model for the political relation is based on that of student and teacher, mediated by an aesthetic education in the idea of man as “beautiful” (p. 124; cf. 116, 121, 123). Through this image Ferry’s horizon of “expectative anticipation” seems to evoke a community composed, or governed, by beings like Shakespeare’s Ariel. Beyond the purview of this horizon are not only those guided by “human wisdom” but also the Calibans of this world, and the art or craft of dealing with them. Such an aesthetic ideal of equality thus abstracts from the statesman’s problem, outlined notably in Strauss’ *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, of the complex mediation of different types, and particularly of the noble, the base and the urgent.

Despising mere prudence in favor of principle, Ferry above all fails to confront, in a book on the ancients and moderns, the classical principle for prudence, namely the love of wisdom. Such a confrontation might have allowed him to discern the difference between his aesthetics and that of the classics, wherein indeed the love of the noble is subordinated to the love of what is true. This in turn might have allowed him to reexamine his defense of modernity against the charge that it culminates in nihilism. Instead, Ferry concludes, “we may say the beautiful is the ‘distinguishing property of man’ if . . . man’s essence is that he, unlike animals, is initially *nothing*” (p. 124, emphasis in the original).

Despite his own hierarchical distinction between beauty and its contraries, when Ferry judges Strauss’ return to the classics as dangerous because hierarchical and thus proto-Nazi (pp. 20–24), he indiscriminately presumes that all hierarchy is unjust, promoting the foulest tyranny. He blithely forgets in this instance not only the distinction between tyranny and ancient constitutionalism, but also that some of the very foulest tyrannies of this century, including those of Stalin, Pol Pot and Mao, were promoted by the idea of equality. He also overlooks that the natural hierarchy to which Strauss and the classics refer concerns, inter alia, the superiority of the quest for wisdom to dogmatism, of intellectual honesty to calumny, and of measured good sense to foolishness.

In light of the thoughtlessness and imprudence by which other intellectuals

in France and elsewhere have belittled the ideas of philosophy and of justice, Ferry's book has been greeted as a salutary reversal of course. Yet, given the contrast between Ferry's carelessness and his intelligence combined with attachment to justice, one might be induced to wonder if the injustices of his own criticisms derive from the defects of his philosophy, or if the defects in his philosophy result from subordinating it to his principles of right.