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LEO STRAUSS: A BIBLIOGRAPHY AND
MEMORIAL, 1899-1973*

JOSEPH CROPSEY

Leo Strauss, Robert M. Hutchins Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Chicago, died in Annapolis, Maryland, on October 18, 1973. Professor Strauss was born in Kirchhain, Hesse, Germany, on September 20, 1899, and was educated in German schools and universities. He received the Ph.D. from Hamburg in 1921 for a dissertation on the epistemology of F. H. Jacobi. He left Germany in the 1930s and settled in the United States in 1938, where he took up a teaching post at the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science, The New School for Social Research. There he remained until 1949, when he joined the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago. He retired from Chicago in 1967, taught next at Claremont Men's College, and was Scott Buchanan Distinguished Scholar-in-Residence at St. John's College, Annapolis, at the time of his death.

Mr. Strauss' scholarly corpus consists at present of some eighty contributions to journals and fourteen books, of which three are collections of articles and two are elaborations of material delivered during the course of lectureships. Some of his books are available in translation in six European languages. Between 1930 (*Die Religionskritik Spinozas*) and 1958 (*Thoughts on Machiavelli*), most of his books were on the moderns; from 1964 to his death, his books were on the classic ancients. Known as he is for having inclined toward antiquity, it is worth noting that his studies of Spinoza, Hobbes, and Machiavelli, as well as *Natural Right and History*, appeared in roughly the first half of the period during which his books were being published. It was characteristic of his scholarship that he did not criticize, and most certainly did not dismiss, where he had not first given his careful attention. It appears also that he did not merely prefer antiquity but rather rediscovered it through an arduous process that evidently impressed him as an ascent.

Social science, and especially political science, knew Mr. Strauss as a severe and sometimes sharp critic. He came close to suggesting that the social sciences, through the abstraction from moral concern that accompanied the quest for scientific validity, were in danger of becoming irrelevant. In a famous remark in "An Epilogue" to *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics* (ed. Herbert J. Storing), Mr. Strauss asserted that the new political science was in the position of fiddling

* Published, in a slightly different form, in *The University of Chicago Record*, VIII, No. 2 (1974).

while Rome burned. He seems to have provided a forecast that social science has been blaming itself for not producing; he did not foresee how far his criticism would become the confession of the discipline.

Mr. Strauss has long been described as controversial, and in view of his thought could hardly have been described otherwise. To modernity he taught the claims of antiquity. In an era profoundly affected by the successes of science he kept alive deep reservations against the unreflective enlargement of that vast human enterprise. In an age overrun by the belief in history, he reminded of eternity. Where convention or culture was regarded as everything, he spoke of nature. Those who twisted nature into a license heard from him about propriety and convention. Ideologists harboring behind science were rebuked in the name of philosophy. The presumptuous who appropriated the dignity of philosophy were admonished to look within and learn modesty. Above all, those who apotheosized the here and now were called to elevate the mind's eye and practice that form of forbearance or moderation which gazes without prejudice on every place and time.

Pursuing the last remark, it should be said that Mr. Strauss was regarded as controversial also because of his manner of reading and interpreting the texts that he studied. He declined to assume, from the outset, that in all ages and circumstances men wrote with the same freedom that is used now as a matter of course. It is worth noting that a dedication to historicism, to a belief in the radical difference between ages and places, has not always restrained scholars from denouncing as fanciful an approach to alien writings that insisted on the need to study them as having been fashioned in, if not by, circumstances unlike our own.

Emphasis on his achievements in the interpretation of texts is not misleading, for much of his scholarship consisted of clarification of the history or tradition of political philosophy through what has come to be called "careful reading." The question arises reasonably enough whether the history of political philosophy is itself philosophic; and it arises with especial force when the interpretation of that history leads away from philosophy of history altogether, thus depriving the history as such of a peculiar philosophic gravity. The question deserves to be faced.

Mr. Strauss' work has shown effectively what interpretation aims at. It aspires to resemble the immersion of a dry root in water rather than the grafting of a scion onto alien stock: the text acquires at best the fullness that belonged to it implicitly and that it must achieve in the reader's thought before it can be said to have reached its own completion. Always the possibility exists that the author of the text has expressed his thought not only explicitly but through a reticence, and the interpreter must therefore be alert both to what is present simply and to what is present in the mode of a void, without tenuous, arbitrary, or tendentious selections out of the infinite field of the absent.

In brief, the mind of the interpreter must be at the same time passive to the initiative of the author and active in bringing to the text a richly furnished scholarly and human experience.

Interpretation that intrudes nothing extraneous into the economy of the text but that supplies the text with an amplitude drawn from the same material as that of which the text is fashioned might be rare, but surely is philosophic. And so far as the philosophic activity itself consists of the collaboration of passivity and activity in relation to a world, interpretation is not the instrument but the emulative copartner in the theoretical activity proper.

It is easy to recognize Mr. Strauss' stature and impossible to foretell his influence. He left an unknowable number of followers on several continents, but the sense in which he left a school is problematic. The term "Straussians" is at present much more common than "Straussism." Certainly he did not open up the thought of classical antiquity without projecting the content of that thought, nor did he contrast antiquity and modernity with an indecisive mind on the great issues of nature, the whole, and the ground of the human good. He proclaimed a conception that the world considers obsolete but that yet exhibits, partly because of him, some of the signs of immortality through the veil of presumed moribundity.

The world that Mr. Strauss taught, provoked, and sometimes offended is poorer now that he is gone. The ones who knew him and his care take leave of him with a sorrow I cannot express.

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