

Interpretation

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When Heinrich Meier edited some of the more important correspondences of Leo Strauss (with Karl Löwith, Gershom Scholem, Jacob Klein, and Gerhard Krüger) in 2001 he refrained from adding any commentary, including annotations about matters of fact such as bio-bibliographical information. This was due to the constraints of time and resources, because otherwise the documents could have been published only many years later. The publication thus came at the price of insufficient background information, which had to be supplied by the readers themselves, many of whom could not be expected to know much about the various relevant contexts.

It is fair to say that when Strauss's correspondence with Gerhard Krüger was published, the latter was no longer a household name for most readers even in the field of philosophy. For while Krüger had published two substantial monographs on Kant and on Plato in the 1930s and a few important essays (especially *Die Herkunft des philosophischen Selbstbewußtseins*, translated into English only in 2007), his academic career was cut short soon after World War II for reasons of health. His most prominent students were Klaus Oehler (1928–) and Richard Schaeffler, a prominent Catholic philosopher of religion (1926–2019) who wrote his dissertation under Krüger on the question concerning faith in the works of Karl Jaspers.¹ It was Oehler, himself a formidable Aristotle and Peirce scholar who had once paid Strauss a visit,

¹ See Christoph Böhr and Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz, eds., *Gott denken: Zur Philosophie von Religion; Richard Schaeffler zu Ehren* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018).

who put together Krüger's most important essays in *Freiheit und Weltverwaltung* ("world administration," a concept used in earlier times in a theological context to describe the way God "manages" or "administrates" the world). Another book by Krüger, *Grundprobleme der Philosophie*, was based on lectures from the postwar period. This rather slender output (in comparison to other writers of his generation) should not obscure the fact that Strauss held Krüger in high regard, and even though the exchanges after World War II lack the philosophical intensity of the earlier years of their relationship, he never forgot Krüger's importance in his dialogues during those years in which he went on to transcend the philosophical outlook of his first book. For it was Krüger who had been the most incisive critic of Strauss's Spinoza book at the time.

Because of the political events of 1933, which changed the fate of all German philosophy, but especially of those who considered themselves Jews (such as Strauss) or who were forced to consider themselves such (the case of Löwith), the correspondence with Krüger was interrupted in 1935, only to be taken up again after the war.²

Krüger belongs to the intellectual climate of the Weimar Republic in which many diverging and conflicting philosophical and theological conceptions emerged and became the topic of intense discussions. The theological reorientations of the period also became inescapable for the philosophers. The Zionist Strauss became involved in studying Barth, Bultmann, and Gogarten, not to mention Rosenzweig, while the Protestant Krüger became a lifelong friend of Rudolf Bultmann, even though he turned towards Catholicism in the 1950s and always regarded Christianity as involving a philosophical progress from the ancients. Thus, we can be grateful for every source that sheds further light on the philosophical and theological issues with which Strauss was confronted and which he confronted in his own thinking.

Although the English edition of the letters is generally to be lauded, especially as annotations were added that provide necessary contextual information, a few critical remarks must be made before more is said about the topics involved. First, I fail to see the rationale for tampering with even the formal features of Strauss's and Krüger's letters, namely, exchanging the typical "Lieber Herr Strauss!" with its exclamation point for "Dear Mr Strauss," with a comma—this sort of editorial normalization subtly operates

² The war certainly prevented both from corresponding for many years, but it did not "cut that correspondence short" (1).

as a dehistoricization which is unnecessary and therefore uncalled for in the first place: if it ain't broke, don't fix it. It should be editorial standard operating procedure to preserve such features of the original texts that do not present any obstacles to present-day readers but rather add to their perception as objects of history. Second, there are a few places in the translation where mistakes have crept in. Thus, "you say that do not" has to read "you say that you do not" (60); less relevant are mere typesetting errors such as "Leibnizand" instead of "Leibniz and" (59). Sometimes, however, the commentary is not as comprehensive and correct as could be wished for. Confusion may then arise for those who lack the necessary knowledge about what Strauss is referring to. On p. 34, before note 37, the translated text reads "Curtius" (and in the annotations actually adds information on someone called Abraham Kurtz, a Jesuit astronomer), whereas Meier's edition has "Crusius." The latter name clearly makes more sense in the context, since Christian August Crusius was one of the most important German philosophers in the middle of the eighteenth century, a period with which Strauss was concerned at the time in connection with his Mendelssohn studies. As the editors offer no reason why they changed the name from the original edition, nor why they think Strauss should have referred to Kurtz instead of Crusius, I must assume an erroneous attribution due to carelessness instead of a better manuscript reading. (The very same sentence also has "anything" instead of the correct "something.") The annotations often do not provide the kind of bibliographical information that is only alluded to in the letters but should have been made explicit for the reader's convenience. For example, Strauss asks Krüger whether he knows Brochard's essays on Epicurus (66), but the annotation merely suggests that Strauss may have referred to his *Les Sceptiques Grecs*, even though this book does not deal with Epicurus (who was not a skeptic anyway). The correct information could easily have been provided, for Strauss actually refers to Brochard's essay "La théorie du plaisir d'après Epicure," printed in his *Études de philosophie ancienne et de philosophie moderne* (Paris, 1926) (a volume that also includes another essay on Epicurus) in *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft* (ed. Meier, pp. 154–55)! In letter 42, Strauss thanks Krüger for sending him his book, which the annotation claims to be *Freiheit und Weltverwaltung*. This is not correct, however, for Strauss clearly refers to Krüger's *Grundfragen der Philosophie*, published in the same year (!), as not only his reference to the critique of Heidegger but also his remarks on the "difference between ancients and moderns" (79) in this book make perfectly clear. (Except for a brief footnote in Tanguay's paper, Velkley is the only contributor who pays proper attention to this book, of which Strauss explicitly says that he had read

it twice [79].) Unfortunately, the incorrect commentary also spills over into the papers, such as when Pangle also misidentifies the book (101).

In the appendix to the volume, the reader finds a translation of the only text Krüger wrote on Strauss, his important review of the Spinoza book, as well as those portions of Strauss's later preface to his Hobbes book that were printed in the 1965 German edition. However, whereas Shell (and others) correctly quotes from this preface the phrase that the theological-political problem has remained "*the* theme" of his investigations (8), the printing on page 228 regrettably fails to italicize the important definite article.

The key feature of the present volume consists of seven essays in the second half of the book by Thomas Pangle, David Janssens, Daniel Tanguay, Luc Langlois, Susan Shell, Alberto Ghibellini, and Richard Velkley. These address different aspects of the epistolary dialogue between Strauss and Krüger, sometimes focusing more on providing the necessary background and context, sometimes sticking closer to the text of the letters and drawing out connections to Strauss's later works or his philosophical concerns. Even though one can assume that the two thinkers agreed on a number of things (about which shortly), it is also obvious that there is a clear parting of the ways in their mature thought. This has to do, first, with a different understanding of the question concerning ancients and moderns; and second, with the much more fundamental question concerning the relation of philosophical reason to religion or rather theology. This theme therefore pops up at various points of the discussions.³ As the contributors are mostly Strauss scholars, the discussion is understandably tilted towards Strauss.

The themes addressed by the contributors of the volume include the following. Pangle reads the correspondence as a source that sheds light on Strauss's development during a crucial period of his life, suggesting convincingly that already at this early stage Strauss was reaching towards a position that went beyond Heidegger in its investigation of the basis of atheism (94–95). But Strauss also was engaging Krüger in a way that at least in retrospect makes clear the more fundamental disagreement in what the "direct confrontation with Plato" (53) entails.

³ None of the contributors takes note of the only detailed study on this issue, Frank Lilie's dissertation *Das Verhältnis von Philosophie und Theologie bei Gerhard Krüger* (Marburg, 1992). Lilie's study contains discussions of the notion of creation in relation to philosophy and of faith and thinking in comparison with Bultmann and Jaspers.

David Janssen in a sense takes up this issue by analyzing the early Strauss's effort to gain a proper understanding of what the Socratic approach should look like. The quest for the good or just life is in the modern world connected to "the possibility of natural right in a world without providence" (29; cf. 107). In trying to recover the Socratic question, Strauss leaves Hobbes behind and turns to Plato. And here the difficulties become even greater, since Socratic questioning about the just life leads to the paradoxical insight that the just life consists in questioning about it (109). Whether this really implies that political philosophy becomes *first* philosophy, as Janssen suggests, remains doubtful, since the concept of a *prima philosophia* relates to the first (highest) principles, not to that which is first for us. But what becomes clear is that the presence of the Socratic question in Strauss's studies of Hobbes at the time is very significant. Not only did he explicitly tell Krüger that he did not write about Hobbes as a Hobbesian, but he also maintained many decades later, in 1965, how much he was still in agreement with the last sentence of Krüger's Kant book to the effect that "the decisive question remains true, even if it finds no answer, that he who questions can learn from the example of Socrates" (119; 228–29).

In the course of their discussion of the issue of Socrates the question arises of how the modern situation can be analyzed. At this point Strauss introduces the strange concept of the second cave, a cave that was constructed below the first cave in Plato's *Republic*. Strauss took over this image from Julius Ebbinghaus but modified it to suit his own purposes, as Daniel Tanguay elucidates in his article. The philosophical image also serves as a useful point of disagreement between Strauss and Krüger, because it makes a world of difference whether this second cave represents only historicism or revealed religion as well. For Strauss, a return to Plato was directly impossible, even though he believed that Christianity did not represent progress in better understanding human nature, whereas Krüger thought that the perfect union of ancient or Platonic philosophy and revelation had been achieved in Augustine.

Strauss denied this, but that was due to his tendency to insist on distinguishing and separating where thinkers like Krüger sought to create a synthesis. Therefore, Tanguay regards Krüger as a theologizing philosopher (or vice versa) in whom some form of accommodation would have been achieved. Tanguay's convincing analysis concentrates on the actual dialogue in the correspondence, which means that the core of his discussion relates to Strauss and Krüger up to 1935. This, however, means that, except for brief remarks in Pangle's paper, there is no extended engagement in the volume

with Krüger's 1938 Plato book *Einsicht und Leidenschaft*, which Strauss read after the war. The most thorough engagement with Krüger as a philosopher comes in Luc Langlois's essay, which deals with Krüger's interpretation of Kant. Krüger presents a metaphysical Kant, in contrast to the way the Neo-Kantians read his works. The contrast to Strauss is remarkable, inasmuch as "one of the persistent puzzles of Strauss scholarship is the absence in any of his published works of a thematic treatment of Immanuel Kant," as Susan Shell observes (165). In the light of this fact, it will perhaps not come as a surprise that Krüger's Kant does not directly discuss issues of political philosophy as opposed to morality. Krüger read Kant from a position that implied criticism of the Enlightenment; he thought that Kant's real ontology was unmodern and on the basis of this attempted to reconstitute an ontology of creation. Langlois points out a kind of impasse reached by Krüger's interpretation: trying to understand Kant historically, but rejecting neo-Kantian suggestions that one could understand Kant better than he understood himself, Krüger did not—and probably could not—produce the kind of metaphysical knowledge required by Kant's transcendental method (cf. 159–60). Unfortunately, Krüger's book on Kant was never translated into English: Langlois's essay therefore does a great service to English-speaking readers in at least sketching what he regards as the deepest among the metaphysical interpretations of Kant from the 1920s onward. (Krüger's book was the abridged print version of his *Habilitationsschrift*; the presentation of Kant's anthropology especially was cut considerably; whether the full manuscript survives is unknown to this reviewer.)

Shell supplies useful links of Strauss to Kant via not only Krüger but also Hermann Cohen, Ernst Cassirer, and Julius Ebbinghaus. The latter is particularly important, since he not only suggested the image of the second cave, but also represented "an intellectually rigorous perspective on Kant" with an emphasis on the Hobbes connection (169). Shell captures the complexity of the early Strauss's attitude towards Kant, going so far as to suggest that Kant actually "provided Strauss with a motif that led him to undertake serious study of both Spinoza and Hobbes" in his attempt to get at the roots of modern liberalism (173). Even later, Strauss repeatedly referred to Kant in his own radical rethinking of the relation or tension between reason and revelation, rejecting what he regarded as a Kantian reconciliation of the two (174). The volume features the transcription of a 1941 note by Strauss on, or rather against, Krüger's interpretation of Descartes in relation to the biblical tradition (177n15), but a more detailed reading of Krüger's Descartes in

connection with Strauss (but perhaps also with other contemporaries such as Karl Jaspers)⁴ would be well worth the effort.

The two last essays focus on two key themes in the correspondence connected to natural right and historical consciousness (Ghibellini) on one hand, and history and modernity, on the other (Velkley). Of course, there are various points at which these essays intersect. Ghibellini notes the pervasiveness in the correspondence of the quest for a (natural) standard, a quest that would be of almost continual concern for Strauss: this quest revolved around the notion of natural right (to be distinguished from natural law linked to the tradition of revelation) which had to be recovered against the powerfully effective, though not logically convincing, refutation of natural right by positivism and historicism. By intransigently searching for the possibility of such a recovery, Strauss also decisively turned toward political philosophy. This, it appears, also marks a crucial difference between Strauss and Krüger: although the latter remained highly critical of the Enlightenment and the relativism inherent in modernity, he did not return to Socrates as a political philosopher, a theme that would hold Strauss's sustained attention to the very last.

According to Richard Velkley, both Krüger and Strauss “received from Heidegger’s *Destruktion* of the philosophic tradition decisive impulses to reconsider the history of philosophy and to question the dominant premises of modern thought,” though diverging from Heidegger in focusing on “the possibility of the enduring authority of biblical revelation and the provocative example of Socratic inquiry” (200). Velkley explores some implications of Strauss’s agreement with Krüger (as well as some later reservations) concerning the latter’s view that the example of Socrates teaches those who engage in unconditioned questioning “that the decisive question remains *true*, even if it finds *no answer*” (201). Velkley takes issue with Gadamer’s claim that “both Krüger and Strauss are children of modernity who find rational arguments in favor of antiquity” (202). This view may overestimate the agreement between the two thinkers; their dialogue nevertheless provides an intriguing starting-point for any discussion of the viability of the Enlightenment (203). Velkley is to be commended for his effort to facilitate further discussions of this issue by drawing English-speaking readers’ attention to key aspects of Krüger’s lectures on *Grundfragen der Philosophie*.

⁴ As the recently published correspondence between Krüger and Jaspers shows, the latter rejected Krüger’s radical distinction between paganism and Christianity. Jaspers objected to Krüger’s attempt to newly introduce mere reason into theology and he regarded this attempt as dangerously theological. See Karl Jaspers, *Korrespondenzen: Philosophie*, ed. Dominic Kaegi and Reiner Wiehl (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016), 415–17.

One may say that this book provides an important contribution to the contextualization of Leo Strauss in a way that does not *reduce* his thought to these contexts. Rather, paying attention to his exchanges with Krüger and the philosophical as well as theological issues they both engage in different ways, is crucial for any better understanding of the questions one must ask in search of the right kind of life. As a prime exhibit of the philosophical life at its most intense moments, the correspondence of Strauss and Krüger repays multiple readings—and to follow up the many suggestions that these readings will yield (only some of which could be mentioned here) may well take up a few years of one's life. And if, as one might hope, the book also manages to draw some readers' attention to Krüger, this would be an added bonus.