

Interpretation

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Marek Pająk, *Kryzys nauki o polityce z perspektywy filozofii politycznych Leo Straussa i Erica Voegelina* [The crisis of political science from the perspective of the political philosophies of Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin]. Wrocław: Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe Atla 2, 2017, 308 pp., \$14.50 (paperback).

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“Even more pleasing to me is the agreement in our intentions expressed by you, that so long as we have to combat the presently reigning idiocy, it is of greater significance than the differences, which I also would not wish to deny.”¹ Leo Strauss’s well-known utterance from his letter to Eric Voegelin would serve as the most appropriate motto for Marek Pająk’s book. Substantial disagreement between Strauss and Voegelin, strongly emphasized by experts in the field,² in this case has been put aside for the sake of political science and its fate. Starting from the assumption that political science nowadays finds itself in a state of profound crisis, the author looks for ways to restore it, to “make it matter” again (7, 281). Since Strauss and Voegelin are considered radical critics of predominant tendencies in twentieth-century political science, their “political philosophies” are thought to be “useful tools in the critical analysis of political science’s contemporary predicament” (11, 281).

¹ Leo Strauss to Eric Voegelin, March 17, 1949, in *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934–1964*, trans. and ed. Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 59.

² See Thomas L. Pangle, “On the Epistolary Dialogue between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin,” in *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, ed. Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Nicgorski (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 231–56; Peter J. Opitz, “Seelenverwandtschaften: Zum Briefwechsel von Eric Voegelin und Leo Strauss,” in *Glaube und Wissen: Der Briefwechsel zwischen Eric Voegelin und Leo Strauss von 1934 bis 1964*, ed. Peter J. Opitz (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2010), 157–208.

Pajał's enumeration of political science's drawbacks and sins (243–50, 283–84) is hard to fault, even though it comes close to a commonplace: mimicry of the natural sciences, extensive emphasis on methodology, disregard of common knowledge as unscientific, incessant attempts to determine laws of social life that predict the future, naive faith in the scholar's neutrality and his outside-the-subject-matter perspective, privileging of institutions and procedures over virtues and values, overestimation of economy and instrumental rationality, and the abundance of highly specialized yet meaningless research. Political science appears here as a discipline that defines itself as value free, and thus as dominated by positivism. Since the Walgreen Lectures that Strauss and Voegelin delivered in 1949 and 1951 respectively, they have been both regarded as the earliest and most serious adversaries of positivism as expressed above. That is why their "political philosophies" are expected to deliver an accurate diagnosis as well as a cure for the present crisis. In his reverence for political philosophy Pajał goes so far as to grant it the status of "political science's most important subdiscipline," responsible for its "philosophical (normative) component" (280). It goes almost without saying that this effort could succeed only at the expense of distorting Strauss's carefully elaborated concept of political philosophy. Given its distance from the standard scholarly meaning of the term, political philosophy as understood by Strauss is very unlikely to become political science's subdiscipline, and if it is meant to be of service to anything, its task would be to subtly introduce and to secure a philosophical life, a life devoted to contemplation.³ Moreover, the notion of political philosophy does not have the importance in Voegelin's thought that it has in Strauss's. Therefore, the whole concept of the book as expressed in its title, including putting "political philosophy" in the plural, is far more problematic than the author is willing to admit or perhaps is even aware of.

Pajał's implicit intention explains and to some extent justifies his endeavor. For he is driven not only by scientific curiosity, but by moral or political passion as well. Hence, he directly indicates "the problem of finding a response to the crisis of [Western] civilization" (274) and points to the alliance and coherence between value-free political science and liberalism in its current shape (265–66). His list of contemporary liberalism's deficiencies (223–33), all of them rooted in its rejection of man's political nature, includes liberalism's abandonment of universal claims and its replacement of them with a mere description of the political culture of Western societies;

³ Cf. Leo Strauss, "On Classical Political Philosophy," in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 91, 93–94.

liberalism's vulnerability to the threat of radical political violence (e.g., on the part of Islamic fundamentalism); liberalism's surrender to market rationality, which results in growing individualization and a crisis of citizenship; and finally, liberalism's adoption of a certain philosophy of history represented by Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis.⁴ The unique circumstances of East-Central Europe are what clarifies somewhat the tendency to look critically at contemporary liberalism. In the single reference to the experience of Pająk's homeland, he claims that systemic transformation of the former Soviet satellite states has eventually proved the priority of moral motivations over institutions in the process of political change (125). Indeed, the dogmas of the open society, maintaining that the political relies on procedures rather than on the definition of common good, were crucial for the establishment of liberal democracies in East-Central Europe at the twilight of the Cold War. These ideas have replaced Marxism, after decades of its domination in the region, as a new unquestionable blueprint for thought and political action, and until recently have overshadowed public life as well as political science. The present-day crisis of liberalism, since it affects the Western world as a whole, shakes the views prevailing until now in the so-called new Europe and urges a search for interpretations in previously overlooked sources. Pająk's disappointment with liberalism is accompanied by his hesitation to embrace the agonistic irrationality represented by Carl Schmitt and his followers on the postmodern left (221–23, 250–56). He clearly turns to Strauss and Voegelin hoping to find in them advocates and restorers of the classical Western republicanism.

Within the book's interpretive framework both the crisis of political science and the crisis of liberalism are regarded as manifestations of the decline of the West, originating in the threshold of modernity and culminating in the twentieth-century totalitarian organizations. Against this background, Strauss and Voegelin emerge as conservative critics of modern culture seeking to rediscover the ancient model of *episteme politike* (88) that would pave the way to the "absolute truth and objective knowledge of the political" (258). A just political order as well as right political goals and choices are supposed to be "reflections of the transcendent order existing in the manner of Platonic ideas" and investigated through contemplation (258–59). By constant appeals

⁴ It is in the discussion of Fukuyama's thesis that the most embarrassing mistake of the book occurs. Pająk is surprised that "Fukuyama never cites Alexandre Kojève" and even wonders about the reasons for this "concealment" (231). In fact however, Fukuyama refers to Kojève directly both in his famous essay and in the subsequent book, where Kojève's name appears over a hundred times throughout the text and his words serve as the epigraph to one of the chapters. In any case, the influence of Kojève's interpretation of Hegel on Fukuyama is nowadays almost a matter of common knowledge.

to “transcendent value hierarchy” (103), “transcendent and eternal values” (283), “transcendent common good” (270), and “axiological rationality” (102, 256), Pająk locates Strauss’s and Voegelin’s “political philosophies,” along with his own reflection, within the context of normative political theory (21). Both his protagonists are entrusted with the task of defending morality against modern relativism and nihilism.

What falls victim to this way of thinking is the accurate understanding of Strauss’s ideas, which become subordinated to the author’s central argument and are occasionally forced to suit Voegelin’s worldview. Pająk asserts, for example, that according to Strauss the core of the modern project manifests itself in its opposition to classical political philosophy rather than in its confrontation with revealed religion and political theology (61), for the equally justified claims of Jerusalem and Athens stand together against “modern utopianism” (130). To defend this interpretation one has to overlook Strauss’s own statements on the deeper ground of the ancients-moderns distinction along with his view of the modern project as embracing the radical modification of classical assumptions in response to the challenge of religious revelation. This confrontation, which as a conflict between philosophy and revealed religion is more fundamental than disagreements between philosophers, defines the modern project’s main features and its evolution, including the phenomenon of secularization.⁵ Indeed, Pająk recognizes Strauss’s efforts to trace symptoms of religious fervor in modern thought, but he abandons this line of inquiry immediately by saying that Strauss never really investigated the matter but focused instead on the ancients-moderns opposition (87). A mere glance at the recent scholarship, which is very much engaged in

⁵ The early evidence of Strauss’s understanding of the opposition between philosophy and revelation as more fundamental than the ancients-moderns distinction may be found in the draft of his letter to Gerhard Krüger: “The second cave”—our difference is grounded in the fact that I cannot believe, that I must therefore look for a possibility of *living* without faith. There are two possibilities of this sort: the ancient, i.e. Socratic-Platonic, and the modern one, i.e. the Enlightenment (implying the possibilities offered by Hobbes and Kant, above all others). One must therefore ask: who is right, the ancients or the newer ones? The *querelle des anciens et des modernes* must be repeated” (Leo Strauss to Gerhard Krüger, December 12, 1932, in *The Strauss-Krüger Correspondence: Returning to Plato through Kant*, ed. Susan Meld Shell [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018], 47). This intention is confirmed and clarified by the later and widely cited passage from the “Reason and Revelation” lecture: “A philosophy which believes that it can refute the possibility of revelation—and a philosophy that does not believe that: *this* is the real meaning of la querelle des anciens et des modernes” (Leo Strauss, “Reason and Revelation,” in *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, by Heinrich Meier, trans. M. Brainard [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 177). On the premises of modernity as stemming from the polemic against revealed religion, see Leo Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz: Beiträge zum Verständnis Maimunis und seiner Vorläufer*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. H. Meier (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2008), 2:88–89; Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 172–73; Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 42–43.

discussing Strauss's examination of modern "atheism from intellectual pro-bity" (*Atheismus aus Redlichkeit*), would be enough to refute Pająk's claim, for it ignores the central point of Strauss's diagnosis of modernity.

Pająk's failure to grasp a distinction between Jerusalem and Athens lies at the bottom of his underestimation of the Strauss-Voegelin disagreement, both its significance and its scope. He entirely misses the point, claiming that the difference between belief (Voegelin) and disbelief (Strauss) is irrelevant when it comes to studying and reforming present-day political science (143). For it is in no way a coincidence that Strauss's dispute with Max Weber concludes in identifying "the real issue: the issue of religion versus irreligion, i.e., of genuine religion versus noble irreligion."⁶ His polemic against the "new political science" reaches its peak in condemning "dogmatic atheism" and in reminding that "intellectual honesty is not love of truth."⁷ Perhaps, these important details would not have gone unnoticed, if Pająk had paid more attention to the Strauss-Voegelin correspondence as evidence of their controversy. He also never mentions Strauss's notes on *The New Science of Politics* by Voegelin, unpublished during their lifetimes, preserved in Strauss's private archive and since 2010 available in print. Pająk's opinion, for instance, that Voegelin's emphasis on the meaning of history does not make him a "historicist" in Strauss's sense (97–98) is at odds with Strauss's own judgment articulated explicitly in the notes.⁸ Furthermore, Strauss criticizes Voegelin's theory of symbolization for giving up political science's direct attachment to political life, which had been essential for Aristotle's classical approach.⁹ He also rejects Voegelin's concept of gnosis as an interpretive tool to grasp the sense of modernity, for it results in a "web of fantastic assertions" and "is apt to *discredit* political theory rather than to establish it."¹⁰ Labeling Voegelin's understanding of political society "the mixture of theologism... with historicism," Strauss exposes its dependence on divine revelation in the specific Christian form, which equals, according to him, the "abandonment of the very idea of political science." In the light of Voegelin's theory

⁶ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 62.

⁷ Leo Strauss, "An Epilogue," in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 218–19. In this case Strauss repeats almost word for word the warning from one of his most crucial texts on the confrontation between philosophy and revelation. Cf. Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz*, 25.

⁸ Leo Strauss, "Anmerkungen zu Eric Voegelins *The New Science of Politics*," ed. E. Patard, in Opitz, *Glaube und Wissen*, 135–36, 145–47.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 133–35, 141–43, 144.

of representation, a healthy political society rests ultimately on religious experience and as such is “a representation of transcendent truth.” What Strauss opposes to Voegelin’s “*absorption* of political things by religions” is the intention to perceive political things as “attempts of human beings to order their affairs in regard to the happiness = the end of man as *knowable to man*.” This effort is guided by the key concept of regime (*politeia*), which “constitutes a political society and gives it its character.” Unlike symbols or representations, regime does not stand for something else, let alone for the “transcendent truth” that reveals itself in personal experiences throughout history.¹¹ Despite all the more or less superficial similarities and tactical alliances, Strauss’s and Voegelin’s views on political science’s way out of its crisis not only differ from but contradict each other.

The identification of the philosophical with the normative—the assumption sitting at the center of Pająk’s book—is irreconcilable with Strauss’s guiding intention to distinguish between philosophy and law, or to perceive philosophical life as constantly challenged by the law, the highest order of which is the Law revealed by the omnipotent God. The title of Strauss’s early book, *Philosophie und Gesetz*, elucidates this idea as concisely as possible. Hence, Strauss cannot be counted among thinkers who recognize transcendent morality to prescribe unconditionally valid commandments and put forward universal rules for political order. The quest for the best regime and for the best way of life is a process of thinking through all the commonly acknowledged rules of conduct, which the ancients called “justice” and the moderns name “morality,”¹² and then leaving them behind to attain the quest’s ultimate goal: the contemplation of the philosophical life itself. Therefore, the political philosophy of Strauss escapes all attempts to explain it in terms of normative political theory.

That the book’s central argument is questionable does not exclude some interesting and thought-provoking observations the author makes along the way—for instance, observations about the most recent debates on the present-day crisis of political science and potential ways to reinvigorate it. Pająk discusses the main statements of the “phronetic” social science, of the Perestroika movement and of Ian Shapiro, among others. They are far from being inspired by Strauss’s and Voegelin’s struggles against positivism, but they at least recognize that the restoration of political science has to begin

¹¹ Ibid., 131–32, 139, 144–45.

¹² See, for example, Leo Strauss, “The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy,” *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 3 (1979): 111.

with a careful study of the political as it appears to regular citizens in their everyday lives. Examination of what they regard as good and bad or just and unjust—contrary to abstract scientific categories on one hand and to “transcendent values” on the other—forms a necessary starting point, but nothing more than that, for a serious reflection on the political and beyond. Pająk’s considerations on these matters constitute the last chapter of his book and are probably its best contribution, one that deserves to be recommended.

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Words from languages not rooted in Latin should be transliterated to English. Foreign expressions that have not become part of English should be accompanied by translation into English.

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