

Interpretation

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- 3 Iraj Azarfaza Overcoming the Powerful Prejudice against Xenophon:
A Debate between Leo Strauss and Friedrich Schleiermacher
- 27 John F. Cornell *Sanza Mezzo: A Reading of Dante's Paradiso Cantos 5-7*
- 51 Thomas L. Pangle The Unfolding Plan of "Maxims and Arrows" in
Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*
- Book Reviews**
- 71 Francis J. Beckwith *Crisis of the Two Constitutions* by Charles R. Kesler
- 77 Shilo Brooks *Warspeak: Nietzsche's Victory over Nihilism* by Lise van Boxel
- 85 Steven H. Frankel *Founding God's Nation: Reading Exodus* by Leon R. Kass
- 97 Eli Friedland *De Anima (On Soul)* by Aristotle, Translated by David Bolotin
- 103 Christopher Kelly *Hypocrisy and the Philosophical Intentions of Rousseau*
by Matthew D. Mendham
- 109 Marco Menon *Una filosofia in esilio* by Carlo Altini
- 115 Miguel Morgado *A Political Philosophy of Conservatism* by Ferenc Hörcher
- 121 Travis Mulroy *The Music of Reason* by Michael Davis
- 127 April Dawn Olsen *Reason and Character* by Lorraine Smith Pangle
- 133 Joshua Parens *Nature, Law, and the Sacred* by Evanthia Speliotis
- 137 Oliver Precht *Theory and Practice* by Jacques Derrida
- 143 Charles T. Rubin *Learning One's Native Tongue* by Tracy B. Strong
- 151 David Lewis Schaefer *Montaigne and the Tolerance of Politics* by Douglas I. Thompson
- 159 Thomas E. Schneider *Property and the Pursuit of Happiness* by Edward J. Erler and
An Anti-Federalist Constitution by Michael J. Faber
- 165 Lee Ward *America's Revolutionary Mind* by C. Bradley Thompson
- 171 Jacob C. J. Wolf *Recovering the Liberal Spirit* by Steven F. Pittz

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Since the early 1990s, Carlo Altini has been determinedly and continuously contributing to the scholarship on Leo Strauss. With more than thirty articles published in Italian and international journals, five edited volumes, and three books, Altini is perhaps the most prolific Strauss scholar in the Western world today. His latest work, *Una filosofia in esilio: Vita e pensiero di Leo Strauss* (A philosophy in exile: Life and thought of Leo Strauss), published by Carocci (Rome), appears to be the apex of his career. This book, an intellectual biography, commands our undivided attention from the title alone.

The notion of “exile” and “emigration” are meant to capture both aspects of Leo Strauss’s life: his biography as well as his philosophical activity. On one hand, Altini tells us the story of Strauss’s many “emigrations,” retracing his steps through Europe and his arrival in the United States. The very structure of the book reflects those travels and stays, since the eight chapters are named after cities (Marburg and Freiburg; Berlin; Paris; London and Cambridge; New York; Chicago, which occupies two chapters; Claremont and Annapolis). On the other hand, the same notion is explored on a different level. As Altini tells us in the introduction, according to a metaphorical understanding of the term, exile “is a spiritual and existential category” that describes Strauss’s condition as a philosopher. Thus, Altini reads Berlin, Athens, and Jerusalem as metaphorical places that stand for modernity, philosophy, and Judaism, respectively. But he immediately observes that “Strauss cannot find a home even in Athens.... The classical philosophic life, besides being intrinsically impossible in modernity, represents in itself a kind of existence on the

border of solitude, on the threshold of the city. According to his nature, the philosopher is a stranger at home” (12).

Altini is particularly capable in his narration of the life of the German thinker, and his prose is vivid and elegant, balancing nicely the fullness of the details and the pace of the narrative. He makes much of the published correspondence with individuals such as Jacob Klein, Karl Löwith, Gershom Scholem, Gerhard Krüger, Eric Voegelin, Willmoore Kendall, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and concentrates particularly on Strauss’s temper. Far from being the calculating mastermind of a neoconservative cabal, the human dimension of the German philosopher here appears in all its frailty. Altini often lingers on Strauss’s “difficult temperament: reserved and convoluted, shy and touchy, suspicious and clumsy, fussy and obsessive, often rough and aggressive in debates, haughty in criticism and academic relations” (15). He is also quite insistent in stressing Strauss’s feeling of painful existential isolation in almost all the contexts where he happened to work, and his perpetual uneasiness with the American way of life and spiritual climate (cf. 157ff., 169–170, 217ff.). (One wonders whether the unpublished correspondence between Strauss and his student and later close friend Seth Benardete might have helped to balance this assessment.)

In the first chapter, the author brilliantly shows the rather clumsy character of the young Strauss’s Zionist engagement and the utterly impolitic and unpolitical mold of those “militant” musings (cf. 34–47). In this context, a major turn in Strauss’s intellectual development emerges very clearly, namely, the early movement from a perspective that combines philosophical conservatism and political radicalism to one which combines philosophical radicalism and political conservatism, a position that from 1923 onward would characterize Strauss’s whole career (cf. 38). The dichotomy between action and thought is perhaps the most important dichotomy in Strauss’s biography and thought as a whole, an idiosyncratic feature that Altini tends to detect everywhere. The general picture offered by his reconstruction gives us insight into this strange mixture of political and theological interests without actual practical engagement, and a peculiar discontinuity between biographical misfortune and philosophical joy. For example, it is very striking (and almost moving) to note that during the first half of the 1940s, one of the most productive and exciting periods of his intellectual career (one need only recall two of his most radical essays, “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*” and “Farabi’s *Plato*”), Strauss endured perhaps the most painful losses in his

life: the deaths of his sister Bettina and of his father (1942) and the death of his brother-in-law Paul Kraus (1944) (cf. 161–62).

But there is more to Strauss's "oddity." Paradoxically as it may seem for a political philosopher, for his whole life Strauss was unable to evaluate real-life politics wisely. Altini recalls, and underwrites, Hannah Arendt's well-known criticism raised against the young Strauss, "who did not realize the danger represented by Hitler" (236). Even though this might be filed as a mistake due to Strauss's youthful and idealized conception of political conservatism, according to Altini such a limited understanding of politics appears to be one of the typical traits of the German thinker. When in the early 1940s Strauss discussed the nature of German nihilism, a similar problem emerged, this time not on the political level, but on the philosophical. Strauss seemed, in fact, to sympathize with the theoretical criticism advanced by radical thinkers such as Heidegger, Schmitt, Spengler, and Jünger, even though he could not accept their practical projects. According to Altini, it is clear that, not unlike those reactionary authors, Strauss rejected modern philosophy root and branch. The problem is: How could he possibly reject the modern *philosophical* principles without rejecting, at the same time, the modern democratic and liberal *political* institutions? The problem is not a minor one at all, and by noting this we move to the more speculative side of Altini's account.

Indeed, "unless the recovery of premodern rationalism also implies the recovery of premodern society—something impossible, as much as undesirable—, then the solution to the political problem of modernity must be found precisely on the philosophical-political level, and not exclusively on a theoretical level" (177). Altini is well aware that Strauss's project aims, in the first place, to recover a Platonic framework of thought, and not any sort of premodern institutions. The practical solution to contemporary problems is up to us; the ancients cannot offer any ready-made political recipe because our world is almost completely different. But this situation appears nonetheless unsatisfactory, at least according to Altini. He lists, already at the outset of his work, what appear to be some major issues in Strauss's thinking. Apart from the already mentioned "inability to read concrete political frameworks," Altini notes the excessive vagueness of "the category of 'historicism,' too indefinite and imprecise to be really effective." But even more important for our purposes is the absence of any "reference to political economy," a gap that, in fact, makes utterly abstract any attempt at an effective elaboration of a political proposal that is not merely "limited to a moderate conservatism" (18; cf. 36ff.).

When it comes to Strauss's main teaching, the recovery of classic political philosophy, or classic natural right, Altini seems again to be a little discontented. He laments that the "appeal to classical Greek philosophy, which is actually an appeal to the Socratic-Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, is often indefinite, while we know that Epicurean, Stoic and Skeptical traditions also had great importance in ancient philosophy" (18). This might be due to the fact that, as Altini himself observes, some of Strauss's most iconic efforts (namely, *Natural Right and History* and *What Is Political Philosophy?*) have a rather doctrinal character, aiming more to contribute to the North American philosophic-political debate than to pursue an original theoretical investigation, as is the case with the publications from the 1940s and the 1960s (cf. 245). In particular, Altini shows a relatively great appreciation for Strauss's works on Plato, while he appears to be less fascinated by other major books such as *Thoughts on Machiavelli* and *Socrates and Aristophanes*, to which he dedicates fewer pages than one would expect, at least considering the scope of those volumes.

But the lamented "vagueness" of Strauss's political proposal can be better understood if seen against his existential stance before the modern world. Altini's Strauss is, essentially, a German thinker deeply rooted in Weimar's soil. That early experience would shape his whole career; to the very end, Altini maintains, Strauss struggles to overcome the crisis of modernity made manifest by the German catastrophe, but one wonders if the proposed "return" to or "recovery" of Platonic political philosophy is truly effective at any level. As one can gather from Altini's remarks, such a return can be no more than an experimental, individual attempt to transcend the present situation: politics, after all, is not the dimension in which the philosophic truth can be actualized, so no true relief should be expected from it (cf. 20).

So, in truth, Altini's Strauss is too unpolitical to be a proper *political* thinker. Referring to a fascinating and puzzling passage in a very hermetic writing, "An Epilogue" (1962), Altini rightly contrasts Strauss's existential attitude and contemporary mass culture, and maintains that

faced with the perspective of this prevailing conformism...the opposition to such a mass society is represented only by some marginal groups, divided and mutually opposed, which neither identify with the two great American parties, nor with the dominant political opinions in the universities: A non-institutional political opposition (traditionalist and religious movements on one hand, radical and anarchists on the other) and an "unpolitical" opposition, consisting of philosophers. Faced with the alternative between consent and opposition to the mass

consumer society, Strauss does not take the side of larger organizations but, on the contrary, chooses the “unpolitical” secession effected by the philosopher. (228)

Such “unpolitical opposition or secession” can thus be seen as Strauss’s most original “political” proposal, namely, the choice for the philosophical way of life.

According to Altini, this existential possibility is all that remains to Strauss. At this point a crucial issue, although abundantly recounted by Altini, still remains open. While admitting Strauss’s unbelief, Altini does not conclude that philosophy can ultimately refute the claim of revelation: he seems to adopt what has been dubbed the “zetetic” position (cf. 296ff.). But this position, in turn, seems to remain open to some fatal counter-criticism by revealed religion. If the individual choice for the attachment to detachment is based on a kind of unjustified belief, philosophy as a rational pursuit would be affected by severe inconsistency. Only if a justification is successful can Strauss’s perpetual spiritual “exile,” however stern it may look from a common perspective, be seen as a genuine philosophical achievement. For “the philosophical *eros* is ‘completely at home’ nowhere but ‘in his homelessness.’”¹

¹ Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 100.