

Introduction

I have sworn faithfulness to a flag, with an oath that recites: *moriatur anima mea mortem philosophorum.*

—Leo Strauss

It is never easy to classify a philosopher in an unambiguous way by using the labels—idealism/realism, right/left, laity/religion, theory/praxis—by means of which we commonly order complexity in the world. Philosophers, just like all human beings, have shades; they change ideas, shift perspectives, provoke, and are subject to events that reproduce the complexity of the world, even though inside the limits of their specific microcosm. Leo Strauss made no exception to this rule, although in recent decades some—friends and foes, disciples, and detractors—have attempted to build a compact and monolithic image of him. Strauss has been defined a skeptical philosopher, a reactionary in politics, a radical thinker, a nostalgic traditionalist, an ultramodern visionary, a fierce critic of modernity, a disciple of Machiavelli, a follower of Plato, an orthodox Jew, a Jewish philosopher, a right-wing atheist, and a left-wing atheist. Probably Strauss would have smiled in front of such classifying fury, which would have tickled his vanity and increased his irony. Nevertheless, he would not have been surprised. After all, he asserted that George Lichtheim was right when he defined him a hopeless reactionary and a victim of the indoctrination operated by his *Gymnasium* studies (“which I actually am,” Strauss wrote to his friend Gershom Scholem on 6 September 1972: Strauss and Scholem 2001, 770). He also claimed, in numerous public conferences delivered in Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s, to be a Jew who had Judaism at heart. Meanwhile, in many letters he defined himself as

a skeptical philosopher, who looked at religion from a rational point of view, as an object of study of political philosophy and as a useful, even necessary, foundation for the stability of social order (“I can not believe in God,” Strauss writes to Gerhard Krüger on 7 January 1930: Strauss and Krüger 2001, 380. Cf. also Strauss and Scholem 2001, 742ff., 770–71).

These examples do not only concern ironical affectation, reticence, or the vanity of a thinker who, having reached fame, meant to surprise his interlocutors through the studied presentation of different facets of the same prism. Rather they reflect the complexity of his actual intellectual biography, entirely developed on a *frontier line*, to the point that it could be described as a permanent *exile*, a continuous peregrination of a stranger in a land that he knows but that does not belong to him. Always straddling across philosophy and politics—and split between Athens and Jerusalem—Strauss’s exile did not consist so much in a concrete condition of life, but rather in a spiritual and existential category, in an interior space between expectation and experience, origin and destiny, possibility and necessity, desire and fulfillment. Indeed, we can speak about *exile* not in respect to a biological or cultural origin, but in respect to three different places of mind and heart—Berlin (modernity), Athens (philosophy), Jerusalem (Judaism)—the essence of which appears elusive and boundless. Politically and philosophically exiled from Berlin (due to his anti-historicism and anti-modernism) and interiorly exiled from Jerusalem (due to his skepticism), Strauss could not find a home in Athens either. Undoubtedly, for Strauss Athens represented both a *model of knowledge* and a *style of life*. However, besides being intrinsically impossible in modernity, the classical philosophical life still represented an existence on the brink of solitude and at the borders of the city. Indeed, due to his nature, the philosopher is a stranger at home; he belongs to the city without however completely identifying in the citizen, he is in exile when he is at home, in his own city.

Throughout his career—as a young researcher and as an established professor—Strauss never found a permanent home in any philosophical trend, political party, or academic context. He always sided with “criticism,” especially of modernity, faced with which he elaborated a strategy of “return.” In his youth, this took the form of a return to Judaism, in the 1930s a return to Maimonides, from the 1940s a return to Plato and classical philosophy. Strauss was against an eclectic or relativist perspective—two philosophical inclinations very far from his vision—but in favor of the awareness that there exists a difference between theory and

praxis, or between philosophy and politics. He believed that knowledge is provisional, that the foundations of human life are a mystery, that the complexity of the world is irreducible, that philosophy is *search* for, not control of, truth. Moreover, throughout his life, Strauss always stood on the verge between different worlds: both German humanism and Zionist movements simultaneously attracted him, philosophy and Judaism, Plato and Nietzsche, Maimonides and Hobbes, Machiavelli and Lessing, Xenophon and Al-Farabi. Alone and exiled, Strauss experienced the twentieth century and its tragedies testifying to the “a-topical” and “timeless” character of philosophy. The question “what is philosophy?” is always present without any surrendering to trends and academic conveniences: indeed, philosophy moves between Scylla and Charybdis, between the here and now of human condition and the eternal dimension of the quest for truth. In its desire of truth, philosophy is a *stranger wisdom* that, in respect to the city’s opinion, is always *atopos*. The philosopher is always a stranger interpreting the *thaumazein* as *search* of knowledge, even when this entails a critical eye towards shared opinions, consolidated by the social, political, and religious tradition to which one belongs. However, precisely for this reason, philosophy has an *intrinsically* edifying character, showing the primacy of contemplative life over practical life, of comprehension over engagement.

The concrete events of Strauss’s life display his disconnection from the contexts he experienced, effectively showing his constant “exile” in respect to any given situation. In the 1920s, he studied philosophy in German universities while taking part in Zionist congresses. In Germany, he taught to grown-up Jews in small peripheral towns while—at the *Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin—he engaged in specialized research on Spinoza, Hobbes, Mendelssohn, and medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy. A Jew devoted to the Jewish cause, in Weimar Germany he gravitated towards reactionary modernism, due to his juvenile inclination for the connection between *political radicalism* and *philosophical conservatism*, which, from the late 1920s, became the connection between *philosophical radicalism* and *political conservatism* that accompanied him henceforth. He lived as an *émigré* in Paris and England—in miserable hotel rooms or small rented flats, poor and hassled by a constant uncertainty on his own and his family’s future—without being able to have any real contact with local academic institutions, notwithstanding the praise he received for his works on Spinoza, Maimonides, and Hobbes. In England, he lived in total isolation, but he worked in solitude in

New York too, having few personal contacts as well as the obstacle of pertaining—he, a conservative opposed to any model of philosophy of history—to an institution such as the New School that waved cultural and political progressivism as its flag. In Chicago, he—a philosopher of classical inspiration—taught in the Department of Political Science, because the Departments of Philosophy and Classics did not want him among their faculty. A fierce critic of social positivism, he found himself teaching political science in the US, where a scientific inclination with an empirical and behaviorist perspective dominated social sciences. At the end of his career, he preferred leaving Chicago, where his colleagues ostracized him, to find refuge among friends in small academic venues such as Claremont and Annapolis. The list of such personal, professional, and intellectual situations lived by Strauss as a *stranger* could go on, but we may stop here. His internal solitude and his disconnection from the world were partly due to his hard character: discrete and introverted, timid and irritable, suspicious and clumsy, pedantic and obsessive, often coarse and aggressive in debates, haughty in criticism and academic relations. However, for the most part, they were due to the originality and independence of his philosophical position.

This intellectual biography has no apologetic intentions. The historian of philosophy has the duty to recover past thought, highlighting the historical aspect, concerning the concrete context of its origin, as well as the philosophical one, regarding its theoretical dimension. Indeed, the historian of philosophy has to consider the philosophical value of past doctrines, but, in the meantime, he cannot attribute to any of these doctrines an absolute degree of truth; otherwise, he abdicates his duty as a historian. It is a contradictory and infinite task—just like contradictory and infinite is the relationship between philosophy and history of philosophy—but not a useless one, despite it is today forgotten or believed obsolete among philosophical disciplines, the identity of which, in Western universities, is increasingly uncertain, indefinite, and hardly comprehensible. Well aware of the complexity of this theoretical issue, the present intellectual biography aims at offering a contribution to the knowledge on one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century. It is not about proving Strauss's arguments right, nor about defending his *oeuvre* from critics, nor about building a linear, coherent or polished image of his intellectual work. It is about trying to understand the questions that have guided his research and the contexts that he crossed, analyzing the most noteworthy points of his life as well as the main philosophical contents of his writings.

The purpose of this book is therefore twofold. On the one hand, it is to provide a contribution to historical knowledge on Strauss's intellectual biography; on the other hand, it is to understand the nature of philosophical and political questions by presenting his theoretical position. After all, the importance of Strauss's figure does not lie in his writing alone, but also in his being a witness to a plurality of issues and events that have accompanied philosophy and politics throughout the twentieth century and that surface in his work also when it treats Xenophon, Maimonides, Plato, or Al-Farabi. He lived and experienced German Judaism, Weimar and Nazi Germany, the crisis of philosophical and political modernity, the heritage of Enlightenment, the battle on scientific rationalism, the two World Wars, the Shoah, the establishment of liberal democracy, the diffusion of social positivism.

Aiming at historical and philosophical knowledge, this monograph does not give up on providing a key—as objective as possible—to interpret Strauss's work, which has undergone often unbearable forcing. Indeed, an unexperienced reader confronted with academic writing on Strauss would immediately ask who Leo Strauss really was. Was he possibly Felix Davarr, Abe Ravelstein's teacher, the *dandy* professor well connected inside the US administration described in *Ravelstein* by Saul Bellow, who concealed the figures of Strauss and Allan Bloom behind these pseudonyms? Was he perhaps the enemy of liberal democracy and modernity, against whom a number of American constitutionalists and social scientists have written some spiteful pages? Was he maybe a nostalgic lover of traditionalism, even a reactionary, who longed for Zion or for the return of an anti-egalitarian society like in Athens? Was he maybe the esoteric teacher accused by the *New York Times*? Or was he the teacher of American neo-conservatives? It is not necessary to be Strauss's loyal disciple to see how all the accusations fall apart and how they lift a fog that makes it almost impossible to distinguish the true outline of the issue. Some basic assertions can help us understand the fundamental outline of Strauss's figure. His hermeneutical equipment—far from being elitist or aristocratic, mystic or hermetic—relied on a *rational* conception of philosophical activity. Reticence in philosophical writing is a direct consequence of two distinct and converging phenomena in the history of political societies: persecution and education. This also confirms how his appeal to Greek classics did not have a traditionalist character, but rather sent back to an *anti-traditionalist* and *anti-conformist* conception of philosophy. Moreover, reticent writing favors the scholar's relationship with the great thinkers,

represented as a path in the sand, covering which one leaves traces that others will follow, moving in his footsteps. This summarizes one of the great merits of Strauss's philosophical work: the ability to bring texts of the past back to life, giving them a new and in the meantime ancient voice, using history of philosophy as a means to recover forgotten philosophical questions. Thus, it becomes clear how Strauss's anti-modernism—grown out of his contempt for mass culture and bourgeois consumerism—did not imply any nostalgic shortcuts towards the past (and not even any theory on history's necessary decadence) because it concerned the recovery of classical philosophical categories (virtue, good, liberality, etc.), not of pre-modern illiberal and anti-egalitarian styles of life.

Of course, this does not mean that it is impossible to come across aporia, contradictions, and incoherence in Strauss's thought, nor that his philosophical and political positions stand above criticism. All the opposite. In this sense, for instance, we might consider the numerological theories that feature inside his reading of Machiavelli's *Prince* or the *Discourses* contained in the volume *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958), as they also feature in his introduction to the American edition (1963) of Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*. We might also consider his inability to interpret concrete political pictures—not a minor problem for a political philosopher!—that we can trace throughout his life and especially in the Weimar years (during which he underestimated the danger represented by Hitler). Another issue that would deserve discussion is his category of "historicism," too indefinite. However, in this book, dedicated to Strauss's intellectual biography, it is fundamental to show in an organic and reasoned way, as objective as possible, whence his thought, his education, his research, his contacts, his discussions, his questions, his solutions, and his outcomes originated. This perspective, which may appear minimal, is not such. Instead, it implies the reading of a trajectory as articulated as Strauss's life through a precise interpretative key, by means of which it is possible to comprehend the complex theoretical, philosophical, and political kaleidoscope produced by his thought: *philosophy as stranger wisdom*. Of course, other interpretative keys would be relevant, interesting, and legitimate, but others, as well as the present book's author, have already undertaken them.

Strauss was a political philosopher, a historian of philosophy, and a theoretical philosopher with a Platonic orientation, but he was not a moral philosopher. In his vision of philosophy, moral virtue—self-discipline or self-control—was a relevant element to philosophize, but it was neither

necessary nor sufficient by itself. The definition of philosophy as a style of life does not concern the philosopher's moral conduct, but the way he considers the hierarchy of goods, at the peak of which is knowledge. Indeed, the perfection of the human being consists in the *knowledge of the essences of all beings*, which is in the degree of theoretical knowledge represented by philosophy. It does not consist in the *knowledge of the styles of life*, imaginative knowledge, of lower degree, represented by politics. Thus intended, philosophy requires a conversion of the soul and consists in the search of the truth on being, animated by the conviction that only such search makes life worth being lived. Therefore, only philosophy is necessary and sufficient to lead to *perfection* and *happiness*. However, this is not the conviction that stands at the foundation of cities and political societies, which live in the reign of *belief* and *opinion* and have, at the peak of their hierarchy of goods, richness and honor, recognition and piety, luxury and pleasure, certainly not knowledge. The specific nature of philosophy lies in this *difference*, in its being *stranger wisdom* due to its *critical* character in respect to any established authority, any normative habit, any political myth, any social custom, and any religious tradition. The philosopher is and, at the same time, is not part of the city, because—to the opposite of the ruler—his *eros* is not directed towards the *demos*, but towards the search for knowledge, which is a disruptive factor for the shared opinions on which the city is based. Politics is characterized by principles of *prudence* in relation to tradition, myths, city's gods, social consent, and public and private interests. Facing these factors, philosophy remains, and must remain, indifferent: all this equates to recognizing and justifying the radicalism of philosophical thought in opposition to the moderate character of what we can ask of political life. From this point of view, in Strauss's thought, political conservatism is the other face of the coin of philosophical radicalism. Political philosophy cannot be conservative, given the fact that its ground is the awareness of the superiority of good and noble over traditional and ancient. After all, philosophy is aware that any political society is a peculiar society founded on a myth, which is belief, not knowledge. The *eros* for *sophia* guides the philosopher, but he is well aware of the necessities of material life, which he cannot simply disregard as low opinions. Instead, he must consider these necessities, since they constitute the "first" (in a chronological, not logical, sense) and necessary foundation of a political society. The "first" good, however, is not "supreme" good. Indeed, "logical" and "chronological" primacy do not coincide: philosophy, not politics, is the supreme good;

but politics, not philosophy, is the “first” good, because human beings can only live in society. Strauss asserted the primacy of theoretical life, but what has “logical” primacy (philosophy) does not have “chronological” primacy (which pertains to political life). Or even better: the assertion of the “chronological” primacy of political life does not erase the assertion of the “logical” superiority of theoretical life, precisely because theoretical life, in its being *virtue* and *happiness*, is the supreme good, although it is not the “first” good. In as much as he is a Platonic philosopher, Strauss is able to keep together, without contradiction, wisdom and moderation, utopia and conservatism, precisely because politics is not the realm in which it is possible to unconditionally achieve the truths of philosophy. Moderation is not a virtue of thought, since thought has to be radical. However, its public expression has to be moderate, due to the problems posed by persecution, social responsibility, and the necessities of material life. Therefore, there is an unavoidable difference between philosophy and politics, between philosophers and non-philosophers, as it appears clearly from the story of the pious ascetic narrated by Al-Farabi, which represents the way in which the Platonic philosopher presents the truths of philosophy to the rulers and citizens:

Once upon a time there was a pious ascetic—a man who withdraws and abstains for the sake of mortification and abasement, or who habitually and knowingly prefers the painful to the pleasant. He was known as a man of probity, propriety, abstinence, and devotion to divine worship. In spite of this, or because of this, he aroused the hostility of the oppressive ruler of his city. Seized with fear of the ruler, he desired to flee. The ruler ordered his arrest and, lest he escape, caused all the gates of the city to be carefully watched. The pious ascetic obtained clothes which would be suitable for his purpose and put them on . . . Then taking a cymbal in his hand, pretending to be drunk, and singing to the tune of the cymbal, he approached one of the gates of the city at the beginning of the night. When the guard asked him “who are you?” he replied in a mocking vein, “I am that pious ascetic you are looking for.” The guard thought that he was making fun of him and let him go. Thus the pious ascetic escaped safely without having lied in his speech. (Strauss 1957a, 320)

For these reasons, it is still worth reading Strauss's writings. Perhaps, precisely today—in the age of technoscience and globalization, of international commerce and artificial intelligence, of computer science and social networks—it is even more urgent to regain contact with an author who invites us to look at the most human aspects of our existence and of our history. Naturally, demonic and divine, selfish and altruistic elements coexist in this “human” character of our existence, because—and here Machiavelli and Shakespeare were right—our individual and social life always unfolds between the opposite extremities of good and bad, love and hate, nobility and misery, often without finding a solution. But human experience is not void of traits of greatness and care, responsibility, and beauty. The current planetary tyranny, governed by technology, anesthetizes and trivializes these traits, but it does not depoliticize them. Recovering this dimension of greatness and nobility, of responsibility and care is what is most urgent today, in order for what is human to survive, in an age in which humanism and philosophy at this point appear to have come to an end. An infinite endeavor, so it seems, even if we should not underestimate the fact that, despite the blinding brightness of technological innovation, there will always be groups of humanistic resistance, unsatisfied with the colorful beads passed off by global society as opportunities for happiness.