

LEO STRAUSS AND BENEDICT XVI ON THE CRISIS OF THE WEST

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When time has stretched far enough away from the present to put the influence of historical events in their right perspective, Benedict XVI's Regensburg lecture may turn out to be one of the most important events of the twenty-first century. The lecture gained international attention for its candid but controversial treatment of Islam. But the core of the speech consists of a warning to the West against internal threats, in particular the danger of the West abandoning reason as a guide to moral and political life. That warning involves an argument about the nature of reason, especially as it relates to modern science on the one hand, and revelation on the other. Benedict concludes the lecture not with a directly evangelical exhortation, as one might expect from a pope—as one almost certainly would have expected from his immediate predecessor—but with a philosophical and political one. And for its support he quotes not Scripture but a Platonic dialogue. The object of his

exhortation can be put into one phrase: “The courage to engage the whole breadth of reason, and not the denial of its grandeur” (62).¹

In all these respects, the Regensburg lecture has similarities to the twentieth-century political philosopher Leo Strauss. And those similarities may not be fortuitous. Benedict has long been interested in moral and political philosophy and has been a member of the French Academy of Moral and Political Sciences since 1993. Moreover, as Fr. James Schall points out in his superb study of the lecture, Benedict seems to know Strauss's work. If in fact the influence is real, we have good reason to ask where, how, and especially why Benedict XVI departs from Strauss.

The first and most obvious parallel between Strauss and Benedict is their history: both are native Germans who experienced firsthand the evils of twentieth-century totalitarianism, especially Nazism. Both bring to that experience a religious tradition

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grounded in a transpolitical authority, which therefore is always in some tension with political power. The “Jewish Question,” in some sense, is also the “Catholic Question.”² This experience profoundly shapes their mutual interest in and care for politics as a necessary and good activity, though one that is limited and ordered by transpolitical realities.

Second, both Strauss and Benedict maintain that the West is in crisis, and they generally agree on the nature of that crisis. For Strauss, “the crisis of the West” is the result of a “rationalistic culture” (by which Strauss means “modern culture”) that has lost “its faith in reason’s ability to validate its highest aims.” This loss is exemplified in the two most influential modern intellectual movements of our time, positivism and historicism. Positivism (sometimes called “scientism”) is characterized by “the belief that scientific knowledge, that is, the kind of knowledge possessed or aspired to by modern science, is the highest form of human knowledge.” To positivism we owe the “fact-value distinction,” the contention that only empirical facts established by a rigorous scientific method constitute valid knowledge. Therefore, “scientific knowledge cannot validate value judgments.”³

Historicism is characterized by the belief that “principles of evaluation together with the categories of understanding are historically variable; they change from epoch to epoch; hence it is impossible to answer the question of right or wrong or of the best social order in a universally valid manner, in a manner valid for all historical epochs.”⁴ Both nihilism and existentialism are manifestations of radical historicism.

Like Strauss, Benedict writes of the crisis of the West in both philosophical and political terms. Consistent with Strauss, and with liberalism more generally, he holds that reason is the ground of political life: “Politics is

the realm of reason—not of a merely technological, calculating reason, but of moral reason, since the goal of the state, and hence the ultimate goal of all politics, has a moral nature, namely, peace and justice.”⁵

A crisis of reason will also therefore be a political crisis. In fact, Benedict identifies a “crisis of political reason, which is a crisis of politics as such.” Again, like Strauss, he attributes this crisis to “the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically falsifiable” (56), which therefore relegates moral and political knowledge to the realm of radical subjectivity. The result of this tendency in the Western world to believe that “only positivistic reason and the forms of philosophy based on it are universally valid” is that politics, “which is the realm of reason,” now cut adrift from reason, becomes subject to totalitarian myths like progressivism or scientism.⁶

Third, both Strauss and Benedict give an account of the modern crisis in terms of a historical narrative of modernity. Both trace the crisis of the West to a predictable, if unnecessary, degeneration from an original philosophical break with the premodern tradition, and both generally associate that break with the aspirations of the Enlightenment. In other words, both Strauss and Benedict argue that the fathers of the Enlightenment, wittingly or not, sowed the seeds of their own destruction. For Strauss, the radical break with premodern thought begins with Machiavelli and then proceeds through three stages, or “waves,” corresponding to early liberalism (Hobbes and Locke), progressivism/socialism/communism (Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx), and fascism/Nazism (Nietzsche, Heidegger).⁷

Without contradicting Strauss’s schema, Benedict instead emphasizes three stages in a “program of dehellenization” of Christianity (31), beginning with the Reformation, continuing into the liberal theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and finding

its culmination in the complete capitulation of Christianity to cultural relativism. This different perspective, this alternate schema, points to one of the critical differences between Strauss and Benedict, which I shall treat presently.

Fourth, it does not follow from their critique of the Enlightenment that Strauss and Benedict reject the Enlightenment and its politics *tout court*. Indeed both seem partial to that distinctively modern regime, liberal democracy. “Wisdom requires unhesitating loyalty to a decent constitution and even to the cause of constitutionalism,” Strauss declares, and this evidently means liberal democracy. Indeed, he provocatively suggests at the conclusion of his essay on the three waves of modernity, and somewhat in tension with his previous argument in that essay, that “liberal democracy, in contradistinction to communism and fascism, derives powerful support from a way of thinking which cannot be called modern at all: the premodern thought of our western tradition.” And he seems to have had in mind here American liberalism in particular. He forthrightly declares in the introduction to his later work *Thoughts on Machiavelli* that the “United States may be said to be the only country in the world which was founded in explicit opposition to Machiavellian principles.”⁸

Similarly, in the Regensburg lecture Benedict makes clear that his critique of the Enlightenment has nothing to do with “putting the clock back to the time before the Enlightenment and rejecting the insights of the modern age.” He forthrightly states that the “positive aspects of modernity are to be acknowledged unreservedly” (54). And, like his predecessor Pope John Paul II, Benedict speaks fondly of the American Founding, drawing attention to its moral, rational, and religious elements.

Fifth, both Strauss and Benedict hold that the key to surviving the crisis of the West is a recovery of the right understanding of reason, found principally in the premodern philosophical and scientific tradition of the West.⁹ Both therefore reject and criticize the hegemony of modern science, which unjustifiably arrogates all claims of rationality exclusively to itself, when in fact it constitutes a narrowing of reason. That narrowing involves four related elements: (1) a new *subject* for science (nature as homogeneous matter in motion subject to deterministic mechanical laws, rather than nature as intelligible and teleological); (2) a new *object* of science (“objective knowledge,” that which stands alone, outside of and apart from the knower, rather than “knowledge” as a true universal and impartial relation between the knower and reality); (3) a new *approach* to science (a new critical empirico-mathematical method that screens out human perception and evaluation); and (4) a new *purpose* of science (to conquer nature “for the relief of man’s estate”).

The “objectivism” of modern science achieves its greater certainty not from any better insight into reality but from a methodological reduction of reality to categories deliberately made by human beings for the purpose of further human control. The end of this road is, to quote Francis Bacon, “the triumph of art over nature” (*victoria cursus artis super naturam*); human knowing becomes indistinguishable from human making. This new conception of reason therefore has the radical capacity to turn on itself, undermining its own foundations as well as those things that rest on these foundations, most especially politics. As Strauss writes, “The more we cultivate reason, the more we cultivate nihilism: the less we are able to be loyal members of society. The inescapable practical consequence of nihilism is fanatical obscurantism.”¹⁰

In response, Strauss seeks to bring out the ways in which modern reason, in the form of modern science, rests upon premises that it refuses to examine and that it cannot justify. This is most evident in the modern social sciences, which by assuming—without demonstrating—the distinction between rationally knowable “facts” and subjective “values” are not only incapable of making the most basic distinction between just and unjust regimes but cannot even justify their own value.¹¹ At the same time, Strauss shows how a truly rational philosophy emerges from the value judgments that are inescapably if implicitly involved in the most practical questions of political life. In short, a social science modeled on the physical sciences simply cannot give an adequate account of the phenomenon it seeks to understand. Strauss found the point most compellingly illustrated in classical political philosophy, especially in the dialogues of Plato, and therefore he called for a return to the study of classical political philosophy and for a recovery of “classical political rationalism” as opposed to modern political rationalism.¹²

Like Strauss, Benedict in the Regensburg lecture criticizes “the modern self-limitation of reason” (40), which holds that “only the kind of certainty resulting from the interplay of mathematical and empirical elements can be considered scientific.” This is particularly fateful for “the human sciences,” which “attempt to conform themselves to this canon of scientificity” (45), for by doing so they exclude “the specifically human questions about our origin and destiny, the questions raised by religion and ethics” (48). As a result, “man himself . . . ends up being reduced” (48), and “disturbing pathologies of religion and reason” (49) appear and are fostered. Again, like Strauss, Benedict attempts to show how modern science itself presupposes without being able to demonstrate by its own

methodological criteria “the rational structure of matter and the correspondence between our spirit and the prevailing rational structure of nature” (59). In this way modern science “bears within itself a question which points beyond itself and beyond the possibilities of its own methodology” (59). These are questions that call for rational examination and justification as much as any other scientific inquiry, and thus a larger notion of reason is required. Benedict writes that the “West has long been endangered by this aversion to the questions which underlie its rationality, and can only suffer great harm thereby” (62).

According to Benedict, “the modern concept of reason is based, to put it briefly, on a synthesis between Platonism (Cartesianism) and empiricism, a synthesis confirmed by the success of technology” (40). By “Platonism (Cartesianism),” Benedict means the scientific confidence in the mathematical structure of matter (41). Against this “Platonism,” Benedict appeals to Plato himself, in particular Plato’s *Phaedo*, in a way Strauss might admire.

The *Phaedo* relates the last day of Socrates’s life, and its subject is death. In the quoted passage, Socrates is warning Phaedo against the misology—the hatred of arguments—that can result from seeing arguments constantly refuted. Such a person “would be deprived of the truth of existence and would suffer a great loss” (61). Benedict’s reference indirectly but unmistakably points to a further claim at the same place in the dialogue: “Hatred of arguments and hatred of human beings come about in the same way.”¹³ Misology leads to misanthropy. In this way Benedict draws the careful reader’s attention to the principal subject of his remarks, the relationship between hatred of reason and violence against human beings, while at the same time deepening the argument immeasurably by connecting it to the fear of death.

Sixth and finally, both Strauss and Benedict agree that this larger notion of reason necessarily involves an engagement with revelation. They both argue that biblical morality and Greek philosophy “agree in regard to what we may call, and we do call in fact, morality.”¹⁴ Moreover, both view the engagement of reason and revelation, Jerusalem and Athens, as the key source of the vitality of the West. Nevertheless, despite this similarity, they conceive the relationship between reason and revelation in terms that are fundamentally different. This, as one might expect, is the crucial difference between them.

The core difference between Strauss and Benedict can be stated simply: whereas Strauss argues that reason and revelation are necessarily opposed to one another, Benedict regards them as complementary and integral, though not identical. While simply stated, this difference contains many deep and profound ideas that have direct political consequences.

Although Strauss consistently drives a wedge between reason and revelation, he is not, as in modern rationalism, outright hostile to the claims of revelation. Indeed, he positively affirms that it is allied with classical philosophy against modern science. What reason and revelation, as opposed to modern science, share is the conviction that there is a transhuman order and therefore a limit to, and a guide for, human freedom. And as we have already seen, Strauss also affirms a basic agreement between biblical morality and Greek philosophy.

At the same, however, Strauss continually draws the reader’s attention to what he calls a “radical conflict” between biblical morality and Greek philosophy. “Greek philosophy” for Strauss means “a way of life based on free insight, on human wisdom, alone.” Revelation, on the other hand, is

“righteousness in obedience to the divinely established order.” Here in a nutshell is the decisive difference between reason and revelation: “Greek philosophy is the life of autonomous understanding,” whereas revelation “is the life of obedient love.”¹⁵

Strauss consistently contrasts the way of understanding and the way of obedience. In his interpretation of the Fall, he declares that “the desire for, the striving for, knowledge is forbidden. Man is not meant to be a theoretical, a knowing, a contemplating being; man is meant to live in a childlike obedience.”¹⁶ The priority of obedience to understanding in the way of revelation is the necessary consequence of a personal, omnipotent Creator God. “Divine omnipotence is absolutely incompatible with Greek philosophy in any form.”¹⁷ The principal reason for this is what we might call the “Euthyphro problem,” after the Platonic dialogue by this name, which Strauss characterized as the contradiction between the sovereignty of a personal god (or gods), who as such must be the *maker* of ideas like justice and right, and the sovereignty of the ideas, which, insofar as they bind such a god, must be above him.¹⁸

In this critical respect, therefore, all revelation for Strauss, whether biblical monotheism or pagan polytheism, necessarily involves a voluntaristic God who commands obedience, making philosophy not only impious but impossible. Consistent with this argument, Strauss often points out that the notion of “nature,” understood as the necessary and intelligible order of the whole, is foreign to the Bible, and he provocatively renders the divine name of Exodus 3:14 as the voluntaristic “I shall be what I shall be,” rather than the essentialist “I am who I am.”¹⁹

What is the motive for obedience to such a whimsical or arbitrary god or gods? Strauss suggests that, “humanly speaking, the unity of fear and pity, combined with

the phenomenon of guilt, might seem to be the root of religion. God, the king or judge, is the object of fear; and God, the father of all men, makes all men brothers and thus hallows pity." In contrast, "the philosopher lives above fear and trembling as well as above hope, and the beginning of his wisdom is not, as in the Bible, the fear of God, but rather the sense of wonder." Strauss develops his thesis by pointing out that "a slight bias in favor of laughing and against weeping seems to be essential to philosophy."²⁰ That is, whereas revelation operates in a tragic mode, philosophy is essentially comic, and he does not conceal which form of drama he regards as the highest, if not the sweetest to behold.²¹

It should now be clearer why Strauss claimed that the antagonism between reason and revelation is "the core, the nerve, of Western intellectual history." For according to Strauss, while philosophy cannot accept the claims of revelation without destroying itself, neither can it refute the possibility of revelation without a complete knowledge of the whole. This it does not, and perhaps cannot, achieve. It follows that "philosophy itself is possibly not the right way of life. It is not necessarily the right way of life, not evidently the right way of life, because this possibility of revelation exists. But what then does the choice of philosophy mean under these conditions? In this case, the choice of philosophy is based on faith."²² Nor for similar reasons can revelation refute philosophy.

Once one understands Strauss's account of revelation, one is struck by the fact that *it is precisely this account of revelation that Benedict is opposing in the Regensburg Lecture*. His rationale can be seen in the controversial illustration he uses to emphasize his point. At issue between the Byzantine emperor and the educated Persian is whether "not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature" (13). According to Muslim teaching, the answer

is no: "God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any categories of rationality" (14). Citing both Theodore Khoury and "the noted French Islamist R. Arnaldez," Benedict writes that "Ibn Hazm went so far as to state that God is not bound even by his own word, and that nothing would oblige him to reveal the truth to us. Were it God's will, we would even have to practice idolatry" (15). What about suicide bombings, totalitarian dictatorships, death camps, and war?

Although Benedict begins his lecture with Islam, it becomes clear in his subsequent remarks that his principal object is the Christian West, and especially the dangerous nominalist and voluntarist elements in modern Christianity driving it in the direction of Islam. The practical consequence of rejecting *logos*-centered Christianity, he suggests, is the substitution of violent willfulness for reason as the correct guide to moral and political life. If Western civilization goes the way of Islam, this would indeed be its end.

It should now be clear why Benedict emphasizes three stages of the dehellenization of Christianity. For Benedict, this process of dehellenization is equally if not more fateful to the future of the West than the corrosive influence of Machiavelli and his successors. That process, though anticipated in some places in the late Middle Ages, really begins with "the postulates of the Reformation," in particular the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, which severed Christianity from its historical identity and abandoned metaphysics as alien to authentic Christianity:

This gives rise to positions which clearly approach those of Ibn Hazm and might even lead to the image of a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness. God's transcendence and otherness are so exalted that our reason,

our sense of the true and the good, are no longer an authentic mirror of God, whose deepest possibilities remain eternally unattainable and hidden behind his actual decisions. (26)

One cannot help noticing here the strong affinities between the postulates of the Reformation and Strauss's account of revelation: the voluntarist deity, the depreciation of philosophy and of nature, the elevation of text over live tradition, the virtue of blind obedience, and the emphases on fear and guilt. Thus Reformation theology tends to reinforce Strauss's account of reason and revelation and to undermine the real openness of revelation to the claims of reason.

In fact, Strauss never explains why revelation listens to reason at all. His own account of the dynamic vitality of Western civilization therefore seems untenable. Philosophy will always listen to the arguments of revelation, for that is what philosophy does, but why would revelation, understood as blind obedience to a voluntarist deity, ever listen to the arguments of philosophy? Again, while philosophy may be incapable of refuting revelation, revelation can always refute philosophy with force and violence. There simply cannot be a stable equilibrium between reason and revelation, so understood.

The dynamic tension Strauss describes can *only* occur between a philosophy open to the claims of revelation *and* a revelation open to the claims of philosophy. Such a revelation is most clearly found in the *logos*-centered Christianity of the patristic and medieval periods, yet this alternative seems to be excluded or absorbed by Strauss's reason/revelation and ancient/modern dichotomies. Given the necessity of such a *tertium quid* for a workable dynamic between reason and revelation, Strauss's reluctance to treat medieval Christian philosophy, as opposed

to Jewish and Islamic philosophy, is striking. This is especially true given that fact that Strauss clearly acknowledges the considerable differences between them. "Revelation as understood by Jews and Muslims has the character of Law (*torah, shari'a*) rather than faith," Strauss writes. For this reason, he argues, Christianity "has more in common with philosophy."²³

Certainly the integration of philosophy into Christianity presented its own problems, such as the subjection of philosophy to "ecclesiastical supervision."²⁴ And again, on the side of Strauss and of philosophy more generally, there remains "the Euthyphro problem," as treated above. On the side of Christianity, there is the danger that the Transcendent God will be reduced to human rational concepts and systems, as one finds in the philosophy of Hegel, in the historical-critical method, and in liberal Christianity more generally.

The way out of these dilemmas, as Benedict makes clear in the Regensburg lecture, is the concept of "the analogy of being," a formula that "only began to be an explicit part of Christian reflection after the rediscovery and translation of Aristotle's texts in the 11th and 12th century" but that is implicit in the very heart of the Christian self-understanding. When we recall that Karl Barth, the most influential Protestant theologian of the twentieth century and himself a leading de-Hellenizer of Christianity, called the analogy of being "the invention of the Antichrist," we can begin to understand the weighty issues involved.²⁵

Benedict's articulation of the analogy of being is the critical passage of the Regensburg lecture:

The faith of the Church has always insisted that between God and us, between his eternal Creator Spirit and our

created reason there exists a real analogy, in which—as the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 stated—unlikeness remains infinitely greater than likeness, yet not to the point of abolishing analogy and its language. God does not become more divine when we push him away from us in a sheer, impenetrable voluntarism; rather, the truly divine God is the God who has revealed himself as *logos* and, as *logos*, has acted and continues to act lovingly on our behalf. Certainly, love, as Saint Paul says, “transcends” knowledge and is thereby capable of perceiving more than thought alone (cf. *Eph* 3:19); nonetheless it continues to be love of the God who is *Logos*. Consequently, Christian worship is, again to quote Paul . . . worship in harmony with the eternal Word and with our reason (cf. *Rom* 12:1). (27)

It is difficult to overstate what this little concept, derived from a creationist metaphysics, achieves in both theory and practice. By distinguishing and relating two fundamental orders of existence and knowledge, the analogy of being avoids a monism that either resolves the plurality of being and knowing exclusively in God (theopanism), or God into the created order (pantheism).²⁶ Creation, radically dependent on God and yet not substantially God, has its own integrity and is governed by laws of secondary causality, which express and reflect the Divine *Logos*. By avoiding a strict monism, it also preserves and even certifies a *relative* autonomy and space for the exercise of other human activities, such as art, science, philosophy, and politics, without falling into a strict dualism that would hermetically seal off these activities from their larger metaphysical context. Within the analogy of being, philosophy and mysticism, science and piety, patriotism and religious devotion,

universal and particular duties, can coexist in an intelligible, ordered harmony, rather than mutually exclusive “worldviews.”

Benedict insists, therefore, that “the encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance” but was “an intrinsic necessity” (19). The groundwork for understanding this encounter is laid in the Old Testament, when God reveals Himself as “I AM.” Contrary to Strauss, Benedict argues that this passage “already presents a challenge to the notion of myth, to which Socrates’s attempt to vanquish and transcend myth stands in close analogy” (20).

But this encounter is consummated in the New Testament. According to Benedict, “John thus spoke the final word on the Biblical concept of God, and in this word all the often toilsome and tortuous threads of Biblical faith find their culmination and synthesis. In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* is God, says the Evangelist” (18). It is precisely for this reason that “not to act ‘with *logos*’ is contrary to God’s nature” (24). As Being Itself, God does not possess, rather God *is* all the perfections of being—unity, truth, goodness, and beauty—that human beings can truly know only by analogy through the created order, but never exhaustively, as they are in God. This is the way out of the Euthyphro problem: once one understands the metaphysics of creation and the analogy of being, one can also see the necessity for the substantial unity of intellect and will in God, of the gratuity of creation, and of divine omnipotence understood as infinite only within the order of metaphysical and logical possibility.

Thus, according to Benedict, there is a “necessary correlation between reason and faith, reason and religion, which are called to purify and heal one another. They need each other, and they must acknowledge one another’s validity.”²⁷ It is *this* dynamic relation

between reason and revelation, preserved by the analogy of being, and not the “radical conflict” between them, that is the true vital center of the West and the key to its survival.

As one might expect, the theoretical differences between Strauss and Benedict on the relationship between reason and revelation have important consequences for how they think about politics and morality. Both Strauss and Benedict are interested in protecting and preserving a decent political order that is grounded in reason and open to the claims of revelation. Strauss’s proposed remedy to modern relativism is “classic natural right,” the standard of right provided by nature and discoverable by reason. At a first glance this appears to be a promising path, for it proposes that politics can be ordered by something higher than itself that human beings can know and agree upon. But Strauss’s description of natural right shares some of the same problems as his description of revelation.

According to Strauss, classic natural right is closely related to classical political philosophy. In brief, politics originates in ordinary disputes about justice; classical political philosophy is the sustained attempt to ascend dialectically from the many conflicting political opinions about justice to knowledge of what is right by nature. In so doing, it discovers three things.

First, “There is a universally valid hierarchy of ends, but there are no universally valid rules of action.” In support of this claim, Strauss places emphasis on Aristotle’s laconic remark in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that “among us there is something that is by nature even though everything is changeable.” From this, Strauss concludes that “sometimes (in extreme emergency situations) it is just to deviate even from the most general principles of natural right.”²⁸

There is not space here to treat in depth

the problems involved in this conception of natural right, except to point out that it entails a form of consequentialism that is in direct conflict with natural law reasoning. Although Strauss sometimes classifies natural law reasoning in the category of classic natural right doctrine, he is also quite critical of it. That criticism is bound up once again with his understanding of revelation. Put most simply, the natural law, unlike natural right, implies a law giver (i.e. God) and therefore also involves “a life of obedience” enforced by external sanctions, rather than a life of virtue ordered by natural inclinations for intelligible goods.²⁹

As in his treatment of revelation, so here again Strauss seems reticent to engage natural law teaching in its most compelling or challenging light. Instead, by incorporating the obedience/reason dichotomy into his treatment of the natural law, he seems to separate God from *logos*, Divine Providence from intelligible goods, and the *font* of the natural law (God) from its *expression* in the intelligent inclination in human beings toward the good, all of which are unified principles in the natural law theory of St. Thomas Aquinas.

The second thing classic natural right teaches, according to Strauss, is that the hierarchy of ends is ultimately determined by the life of philosophy, or “the life of autonomous understanding.” On the most basic level, this means “seeing with one’s own eyes, as distinguished from hearsay; it means observing for oneself.”³⁰ The philosopher “refuses assent to anything which is not evident to him.”³¹ But, according to Strauss, what kind of evidence is required, and how much evidence, for valid philosophic assent? And how is a non-self-referential judgment of the requisite evidence philosophically justified without avoiding an infinite regress?

As one might guess from what has been said above, Strauss argues against the critical move

in philosophy as exemplified by Descartes, Hume, and Kant by showing the dependence of science and philosophy on prescientific opinions about the whole. But what does philosophy discover in its dialectical examination of political opinion? And what prevents philosophy, even as he conceives of it, from sliding into a skepticism equivalent to that found in Descartes and Hume? Strauss in fact seems to anticipate such a slide: "Because it is essentially a quest, because it is not able ever to become wisdom (as distinguished from philosophy), philosophy finds that the problems are always more evident than the solutions. All solutions are questionable."³²

The conviction that "all solutions are questionable" is obviously a rather precarious ground for supporting the commitments required for political life, and so, as we might expect, Strauss holds that just as there is an insoluble antagonism between philosophy and revelation, so "there is a fundamental disproportion between philosophy and the city." Reason and politics are incommensurable, for politics necessarily is a "closed society" that depends for its existence upon a "noble delusion." Furthermore, these two ways of life involve "two entirely different roots" of the moral life, such that Strauss wonders whether the philosophical conception of morality (as opposed to "citizen morality") "does not transcend the dimension of morality in the politically relevant sense of this term."³³ Somewhat paradoxically, what begins as an inside-out approach to understanding politics (classical political philosophy) ends up as something like the outside-in understanding of politics that Strauss so roundly condemns in the social sciences.

Strauss's third principle of natural right is prudence. Despite their radical differences, philosophical life and political life are in some sense dependent on one another. Philosophers obviously need the city not

only for the leisure it provides but also for the occasions political life offers for philosophical inquiry. The political order requires a kind of wisdom if it is to be just. The precarious reconciliation of philosophy and politics therefore requires prudence. But given Strauss's open-ended account of philosophy in which "all solutions are questionable," and his suggestion that the philosophical conception of morality transcends "the dimension of morality in the politically relevant sense," it is very difficult to see exactly what it is in philosophy that can provide real guidance to political life. Philosophy so conceived might even be regarded as the very enemy of political life. Strauss himself declares that "civil life requires the dilution of natural right by merely conventional right. Natural right would act as dynamite for civil society."³⁴ From this view of reason, the natural goodness of politics, as opposed to the necessity of politics, is questionable.

Like Strauss, Benedict argues that it is in the nature of political life to be grounded in a reality outside itself, known by reason. He too approaches that reality from within the experience of political life, but unlike Strauss he argues for a political reason that stays within political experience, steadily working from the inside out. Accordingly, there is a distinction but not necessarily a radical separation between philosophy and politics, and between citizen and philosophical morality. Plato's "lie" is noble because it expresses and is at the service of a deeper truth: reason provides a real ground, beyond biological necessity or noble illusions, for the particular attachments human beings have to one another, to the associations they form to further those attachments, and to the costs they will pay to protect them.

Benedict is not unaware of the theoretical possibility of an "outside-in" view of politics, but he maintains that the "evidential

quality” of such a view will always remain insufficient, especially for political life.³⁵ As he puts it, “Metaphysical and moral reason comes into action only in historical context. At one and the same time, it depends on this context and transcends it.”³⁶

Benedict’s concern is not merely speculative. Modern liberalism begins in the confidence that pure reason—reason detached from history, tradition, and revelation—can provide a sufficient ground for morality and politics, but in truth it is parasitical upon the Christian culture it seeks to replace and eventually consumes. Sounding much like Alasdair MacIntyre, Benedict describes this process in the following way:

But what seemed a compelling, God-given insight of reason retained its evidential character only for as long as the entire culture, the entire existential context, bore the imprint of the Christian consensus. The moral dimension lost its evidential quality with the crumbling of the fundamental Christian consensus. All that remained was a naked reason that refused to learn from any historical reality but was willing to listen only to its own self.³⁷

One should notice Benedict’s careful use of terms like “pure insight of reason” and “naked reason,” rather than reason simply. His strategy is to recover and make credible other forms of valid reasoning that have been unreasonably excluded from modern discourse and that also seem to be excluded from Strauss’s own account of philosophy.

According to Strauss, philosophy is the quest for “autonomous understanding.” But understanding requires a basic humility before the object of understanding, a desire to apprehend it on its own terms rather than

one’s own. This seems to be the very opposite of autonomy. Reason as conformity to reality requires a kind of detachment from the autonomous self. As Strauss argues, and as his writings ably show, philosophy is fundamentally Erotic.³⁸ Eros opens the soul to the whole and is therefore characterized by an acknowledgment of one’s neediness and dependency, one’s capacity to be wounded by wonder. But this seems to conflict with a desire for autonomy, which is protective and will take in reality only on its own terms. It is not clear how Strauss reconciles these two conflicting desires in his portrait of philosophy, yet his treatment of revelation suggests that in the end Eros gives way to autonomy.

Benedict, on the other hand, seems to give Eros the upper hand when in the Regensburg lecture he calls for “the courage to engage the whole breadth of reason.” Love is the subject of his first encyclical, and he spends the first portion of it defending a *Logos*-directed Eros. An Erotic conception of philosophy, as opposed to an autonomous one, finds in the mysterious experiences of love, beauty, injustice, suffering, wonder, and death invitations to knowledge of a whole that is plausibly commensurate with these experiences. Without denying the value of exacting care, precision, honesty, valid evidence, and argument in the pursuit of wisdom and truth, Erotic philosophy refuses to allow these to obstruct the kind of wisdom that can be gained only by suffering, trust, faith, and obedience. Erotic philosophy thus places intimacy with reality (*intellectus / noesis*) above demonstrative knowledge (*ratio / dianoia*). With Aristotle and Aquinas it holds that “the slenderest knowledge that may be obtained of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge obtained of lesser things.”³⁹ It presents reason as credible because it is responsive to the whole range of human experience and human longing.

It is worth recalling that Plato's greatest dialogue on the subject of reason and politics, *The Republic*, begins with a severe treatment of Greek mythology but ends with a myth, albeit one that has been purged of the "mythical" (i.e. fantastical) elements found in Greek religious myth. Plato thus points to the possibility of a rational myth. Christianity, too, while claiming to be grounded in the *Logos*, continues to be both history *and* myth. The mere fact that revelation involves a story, or an authority, does not preclude the possibility of its being true, a point Strauss and most of

his students seem to deny.⁴⁰ Seeing how this possibility might be so is a task worthy of the most courageous, and Erotic, philosophy.

The purpose of this essay has not been to exhaust, much less resolve, these difficult questions, but merely to open an inquiry into them. Of this goal, both Pope Benedict and Leo Strauss, despite their differences, would approve. As both might agree, keeping these questions alive, pursuing them with humility and rigor, is a necessary path to resolving the crisis of the West.

- 1 References for the Regensburg Lecture are to the paragraph numbers in the text printed in James V. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2007).
- 2 See Leo Strauss, preface to the English translation of Spinoza's *Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 1–31.
- 3 Leo Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, ed. Hilail Gilden (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 82; Leo Strauss, "What Is Political Philosophy," in *What Is Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 23; Strauss, *Introduction*, 82.
- 4 Strauss, *Introduction*, 82.
- 5 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 2006), 24.
- 6 *Values*, 27; *Ibid.*, 24–26.
- 7 See Strauss, *Introduction*, 81–98, and *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), especially chap. 5.
- 8 Strauss, *Introduction*, 98, 345; and Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984 [1958]), 13.
- 9 See Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 215–16.
- 10 Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (1620), 1.17, quoted in Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, sec. 16; Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 6.
- 11 Strauss, *Rebirth*, 19. See also Strauss, *Introduction*, 14.
- 12 See Strauss, *Rebirth*. See also Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).
- 13 Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, Eric Salem (Newburyport, MA: Focus Classical Library, 1998), 89D.
- 14 Strauss, *Rebirth*, 246
- 15 *Ibid.*, 214, 246.
- 16 Strauss, *Rebirth*, 257.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 252, 257 (see also 266).
- 18 *Ibid.*, 202, 252, 257 (see also 266).
- 19 *Ibid.*, 246.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 206, 250; 251.
- 21 Does Strauss confuse the comic form with laughter? As Dante makes clear, Christianity is ultimately closer to comedy than tragedy.
- 22 Strauss, *Rebirth*, 269–70.
- 23 Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 9, 19.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 25 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, bk. 1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1975), xiii. For an insightful treatment of the analogy of being in Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar, see Edward T. Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption* (Lexington, NY: Continuum Publishing, 1994).
- 26 See Oakes, *Pattern*, 59.
- 27 Ratzinger, *Values*, 43.
- 28 Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 162; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1134b20–30; Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 140.
- 29 Strauss, *Studies*, 141.
- 30 Strauss, *Rebirth*, 255.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 255, 259.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 260.
- 33 Strauss, *Introduction*, 329; Strauss, *Rebirth*, 159 (see also 256); Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 149–152.
- 34 Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 153.
- 35 See Ratzinger, *Values*, 68.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 38 Strauss, *Rebirth*, 150–68.
- 39 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, a. 1, q. 5, ad 1, citing Aristotle, *De Animalibus*, ix.
- 40 See especially Thomas L. Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), and Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. Marcus Brannard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). The latter book includes in its appendices two especially important lectures of Strauss. One exception is Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).