The Closing Of The Early Modern Mind: Leo Strauss And Early Modern Political Thought

Neil G. Robertson
ngrobert@is.dal.ca

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,
The Element of fire is quite put out;
The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no mans wit
Can well direct him where to looke for it.
And freely men confesse that this world's spent,
When in the Planets, and the Firmament
They seeke so many new; then see that this
Is crumbled out againe to his Atomies.
'Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone;
All just supply, and all Relation:
Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne, are things forgot,
For every man alone thinkes he hath got
To be a Phoenix, and that then can bee
None of that kinde, of which he is, but hee.
-- John Donne
An Anatomie of the World The First Anniversary.

Perhaps the simplest way to describe Leo Strauss's position is as a defence of the structures necessary to the moral and political imagination against the levelling tendencies at work in modernity. Like Nietzsche and Heidegger, Strauss sees that the West is in the grip of a profound spiritual crisis. And following Nietzsche and Heidegger, Strauss sees that this crisis itself opens up the possibility of a release from modernity. This release both brings to light a principle that is beyond, but forgotten by, modernity,[1] and points to a return to origins, free from and prior to the sources of modernity.[2] At the same time, it is important to distinguish Strauss's analysis of modernity from that of either Nietzsche or Heidegger. Unlike these two thinkers, Strauss does not trace modernity to the metaphysical turn which began with Socrates and Plato, nor to the slave revolt of morality that received its most decisive impetus from Judaism. Rather, Strauss sees the roots of contemporary nihilism in the deliberate reformulation of political philosophy achieved by the great early modern thinkers, above all Machiavelli and

[1] This principle is the Will to Power, Being, and Nature for Nietzsche, Heidegger and Strauss respectively.
[2] This return to the origins takes the form of the pre-Socratics for Nietzsche and Heidegger, Socrates and Plato for Strauss. See Catherine Zuckert, *Post-Modern Platos* (Chicago, 1996) 310 for a useful distinction between Strauss's return to antiquity and that of Heidegger.

Hobbes.[3] The source of modernity, according to Strauss, lies not in a metaphysical, religious, or even scientific transformation, but rather in an alteration of how political and moral things were understood.[4] Strauss sees the history of modernity as above all a history of the further development of this initial alteration in political philosophy. The "three waves of modernity" are the stages by which the fundamental nihilism that was implicit in the origins of modernity came to appearance.[5] Strauss describes the change in political philosophy that produced modernity in various ways: as a lowering of horizons; as a new conception of nature; and as a replacement of human will for nature as the source of standards. In all of these characterizations it is clear that, for Strauss, modernity is founded upon the internalizing of the sources of morality within human subjectivity, and, as the necessary consequence of this, the oblivion of nature and the total historicization of all moral and political standards., For Strauss, in this sense, Heidegger and Nietzsche, far from signalling the end of modernity, are the most complete realization of it.

Indeed, Strauss will equate the third wave of modernity--that initiated by Nietzsche and Heidegger--as the "crisis of our time." It is for him the crisis of our time because it brings into question the moving principle of the first two waves of modernity: this crisis is "the fact that the West has become uncertain of its purpose."[6] This purpose Strauss terms "the Modern Project."[7] Strauss argues that the crisis of modernity, while corrosive of the social and political life in Western nations, could be for reflective souls an opportunity to be liberated from the project of modernity and its underlying assumptions. The crisis of our time, for Strauss, exposes the inherently dubious nature of modernity, and points not only to a return to the ancients, but also to a need to re-examine what is at the origins of modernity.[8] Since for Strauss modernity had at its beginning a fundamental reformulation of political philosophy, in order to grasp the nature of modernity, and thereby better to understand our contemporary crisis, we are required to return to the early modern political thinkers--those who initiated the project of modern political philosophy.[9]

---

[3] Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (1959) pp. 40f. See also p. 172 for an example of Strauss's explicit departure from Nietzsche's account of modernity.
The following abbreviations will be used for Strauss's various texts: *The City and Man* (1964), *CM; The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (1989), *CR; Natural Right and History* (1953), *NRH; On Tyranny* (1991), *OT; Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952), *PAW; Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (1983), *SPPP; What is Political Philosophy* (1959), *WIPP; The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (1952), *PPH; Philosophy and Law* (1995), *PL; Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958), *TM; Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1965), *SCR; Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (1968), *LAM.*
[4] *PPH* 129
[5] See "The Three Waves of Modernity" in Hilael Gildin, ed. *Political Philosophy: Six Essays by Leo Strauss* (Indianapolis, 1975).
[6] Leo Strauss, "The Crisis of our Time" in Harold J. Spaeth, *The Predicament of Modern Politics* (University of Detroit Press, 1964), 42.
[7] Strauss, "The Crisis of our Time," 41.
[8] *PPH* xv.
[9] "Three Waves" 82. The centrality of the political in Strauss's description of modernity as opposed to other descriptions of the modern (such as Heidegger's) rests partially on his view that the question of the best life is the central question for humanity, but more precisely on his understanding of modernity as a specifically

Strauss describes the purpose or project of modernity as "the universal society, a society consisting of equal nations, each consisting of free and equal men and women, with all these nations to be fully developed as regards their power of production, thanks to science."[10] Strauss equates the project of modernity with the realization of a revolutionary humanism, a humanism released from the constraints of an older institutional order.[11] It was the revolutionary politics of the nineteenth century that was animated by just such a vision, whether in a liberal or socialist form. The revolutionaries presumed that the substance of the nineteenth-century nation state would pass into the hands of an emancipated humanity. Hegel's distinction between civil society and the state would be overcome.[12]

It was of course Karl Marx who argued most forcefully that the European nation state, with its capacity to order citizens to higher moral and political ends, had the roots of its dissolution in early modern Europe.[13] It is perhaps ironic that Strauss follows Marx in locating the source of revolutionary humanism in the early modern period. Strauss and Marx agree that the origin of this revolutionary 'result' must be found in the beginnings of modernity. For both, there is a revolutionary innovation at the origins of modernity, which cannot be contained within the traditional structures of European social and political life, but is necessarily antithetical to them.[14] However, Strauss finds the source of this revolutionary modernity in the political philosophy of the period, where Marx sees that philosophy as only the "epiphenomenon" of more fundamental material causes--the new modes of production.[15] The revolutionary result is for Strauss not the outcome of the unconscious working of history; it is, rather, the self-conscious project of certain fundamental political philosophers whose thinking crucially reoriented political life.

Strauss's claim about the origins of modernity has two elements: a causal element, and a hermeneutical element. The causal element--that modernity could be caused by the thoughts and writings of certain political philosophers--will not be considered in this paper.[16] The more fundamental element of Strauss's position is his hermeneutical claim that thinkers such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke held the revolutionary or radical standpoint he attributes to them. It is not immediately obvious, as Strauss himself recognized, that these thinkers advocated a fully radical, atheistical humanism. That this is in fact their position Strauss establishes through his famous recovery of the esoteric-

---

moral and political project. For the clearest expression of this see *PPH* 6-29. Also *SPPP* 144. For Strauss, while Descartes reduction of the nature to objectivity for a thinking ego is a crucial component of the modern it is not as central as Machiavelli's or Hobbes's conception of nature as terror in explaining the dynamic of modernity; *SPPP* 223 and *TM* 297-9.

[10] "Crisis of our Time" 421.

[11] See Strauss's characterization of modern natural law in *SPPP* 143-44.

[12] See in particular Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'* ed. Joseph O'Malley, trans. A. Jolin and J. O'Malley (1970; Cambridge UP, 1982).

[13] Most famously, see Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto.*

[14] That Strauss's reading of modernity is 'Marxian' appears most evidently in his view that Kojève provides the most complete defence of modernity *OT* 236. As early as *PPH* Strauss writes in relation to Hobbes of "the peculiarly modern task of delineating for the first time the programme of the essentially future perfect State." (*PPH* 106).

[15] See Strauss on C.B. MacPherson in *NRH* 234 n. 106, and *SPPP* 229-31.

[16] Strauss points to this causal aspect in "Three Waves" 82-3. See also *OT* 206-207.

exoteric distinction.[17] The exoteric face of these early modern texts hides an esoteric radicality: early modern texts seem to exhibit both a departure from the tradition and a conformity to it. Strauss's critique of much of the scholarly literature on these texts is that complacent commentators have failed to recognize the consistent radicality behind the apparently contradictory face of these writings.

The interest of my paper is not so much to determine the merits of any of Strauss's readings of early modern texts, as it is to make sense of, from the standpoint of Strauss's position as a whole, why he came to read early modern writers as he did. To put it bluntly: the claim of this paper is that Strauss reads into the writings of early modern political philosophers the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries' revolutionary result. In this sense, Strauss's reading is, ironically, deeply historicist: he reads texts relative to their apparent historical outcome.[18] What has been lost sight of in Strauss's account is a genuinely early modern standpoint.

For Strauss, the history of political thought in the West is broken in two: the thought of the ancients, and that of the moderns.[19] As an anti-historicist, Strauss does not characterize this break as a result of historical causes; but rather he see it as a result of a re-conception of moral and political thought, a fundamental restructuring of how we conceive moral and political life.[20] At the centre of our moral and political self-understanding, for Strauss, is the notion of "nature", i.e., what is given prior to human willing. From his earliest writings, the division between modern and ancient was characterized by a distinction concerning what is meant by "nature." In "Comments on *Der Begriff des Politischen*" Strauss points to two fundamental concepts of nature: "whether as an order seen as a model or whether as disorder which is to be removed."[21] In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss writes:

> Traditional natural law is primarily and mainly an objective "rule and measure," a binding order prior to, and independent of, the human will, while modern natural law is, or tends to be, primarily and mainly a series of "rights," of subjective claims, originating in the human will.[22]

[17] See *PAW* 22-37 and *WIPP* 221-232
[18] See *WIPP* 66-7.
[19] See Lin Jackson "The Revolutionary Origins of Contemporary Philosophy" in *Dionysius* IX (1985) 163-4.
[20] Strauss's conception of historical causality is not without subtlety. The source of modernity is the *thought* of Machiavelli and other political philosophers and not larger historical events. However, that thought can be crucially conditioned, not only in its influence upon history, but in its very conception. For example, Machiavelli's thought was not caused by the surrounding Christian culture, but it was conditioned by it in both motivation (anti-theological ire) and content (the central place of propaganda); see *WIPP* 44-5. However, Strauss sees these conditions as not touching upon the fundamental possibility of and character of political philosophy which rests rather on the permanent problems and not historical conditions; see *WIPP* 63-77 and *OT* 212.
[21] *SCR* 336.
[22] *PPH* vii-viii.

The ancients in one way or another conceived of nature as a restraining order within which human beings lived out lives of lesser or greater virtue; the moderns saw nature as an alien other to be overcome through human activity. The distinction between the ancients and the moderns lies in determining which is the central grounding principle for moral and political life--nature's order, or humanity's will.[23] The simplicity of this opposition is what gives such force to Strauss's account of the history of political thought. Implicit in it is the assumption that any position that argues for a synthesis of these two sides is inherently contradictory. [24] The originators of modernity, the early modern thinkers, appear to argue for such a synthesis, and so for Strauss, either they were contradictory or their apparent contradictions hid a deeply consistent radical humanism. The argument of this paper is that Strauss's conception of the nature of moral and political thought in general renders impossible an appreciation of early modern political thought in its own terms: Strauss allows modernity to be understood only in its revolutionary form. In this sense, he has closed the early modern mind.

Before trying to substantiate this criticism of Strauss, it is best to try to understand his interpretation of early modern political philosophy. But according to Strauss modern political philosophy (and in particular early modern political philosophy) can only be understood in contrast to, and as a modification of, classical political philosophy.[25] So we will come to understand Strauss's readings of the early moderns only once we have come to terms with his conception of classical political philosophy.

As we have noted, for Strauss, the defining term in political philosophy is "nature." For classical political philosophy, nature has two distinctive but connected aspects: 1) nature appears as the standards and types available to natural or pre-philosophic understanding; 2) nature is the eternal, articulated order, the whole knowable properly only through philosophy. For Strauss, these two aspects of nature are connected above all in the movement of philosophy as a movement from pre-philosophic opinion to philosophic knowledge.

Strauss argues that the kinds or types, above all moral kinds or types, cannot be understood as being the result of a construct or a convention. Natural right, in particular, comes into appearance through the structures inherent in the living together that belongs to the very humanity of human beings. In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss brings out how human being, in contrast with non-human being, arises out of sociality, and in particular political sociality.[26] Strauss's argument has interesting parallels with the analyses of communitarian writers such as Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre.[27] Like them, Strauss grounds morality within the requirements of man as a being who finds his

[23] See "Three Waves" 85-6.
[24] For Strauss on syntheses, see *OT* 191-192 and "Jerusalem and Athens" in *Commentary* (June 1967) 45-57. In *OT* Strauss speaks of Hegel as a synthesis of Socratic and Machiavellian or Hobbsian politics, but makes it clear that the Hobbsian element dominates--hence there is no true synthesis.
[25] *WIPP* 75 and *NRH* 78-81.
[26] *NRH* 120-46.
[27] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Harvard, 1989) Section I; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Second Edition (Notre Dame, 1984) chapters 14-18.

Good, or Telos, through his being-with others.[28] Strauss then shares with the communitarians a non-metaphysical structuring of human sociality which is fundamentally teleological. However, against the infinite openness of communitarian historicism, Strauss brings out the fixed requirements of political life on the one side, and the ineliminable differences of individuals relative to these fixed requirements.[29] Where Taylor and MacIntyre emphasize hermeneutical openness in the application and articulation of the teleological structures of human moral life, Strauss argues that, in order to preserve and fulfill the teleology attendant upon human nature as social, society must be closed. This brings out a political dimension in Strauss that remains less developed in the communitarians.[30] Strauss argues that the practices that establish the virtuous life arise, not out of the spontaneity of human communality, but out of the work of legislators who have the wisdom or foresight to establish those practices that most fully bring forth human sociality.[31] In this, Strauss takes up the Nietzschean principle that there is a fundamental difference in the ranks of human beings.[32] For Strauss, therefore, because of the crucial role that the political has in the development of human sociality, the central category for the analysis of human things is the "regime."[33] So while both Strauss and the communitarians will speak of the best life for man, for the communitarians, that best life, and the society and polity proper to it, is knowable only in a historically relative or provisional sense;[34] for Strauss, through the life of the philosopher, the best life by nature and the best regime by nature become available for a knowing that is free from historical contingency. Thus the figure which, according to Strauss, both secures his analysis against historicizing relativism, and at the same time brings out most emphatically the limits of the city, is the philosopher.[35]

The philosopher is concerned with nature in its fuller sense, and not just as it appears to the pre-philosophic understanding. The philosopher seeks wisdom--that is, knowledge

[28] The parallels between Strauss and the communitarians are manifold. The whole discussion of human sociality as the distinguishing feature of humanity in contrast to the non-human parallels a similar theme in much of Charles Taylor's writing. Strauss's derivation of the virtues from out of the requirements of human nature understood as social and political is analogous to MacIntyre's discussion of practices. Again, Strauss's discussion of "specific human types" parallels MacIntyre's discussion of "characters" in *After Virtue*. As well, compare Strauss's definition of the life of the philosopher and MacIntyre's definition of the "good life" (*After Virtue* 196). See also Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York, 1962) Part I, section IV, 149-68.

[29] The difference between Strauss and Taylor or MacIntyre exemplifies the more pervasive distinction in contemporary thought described by Peter Levine in *Nietzsche and the Modern Crisis of the Humanities* (Albany, 1995) as the distinction between Nietzscheans and (Wittgensteinian) humanists. One side points to a rise above history to a principle hidden from view by human (and particularly Western) culture; the other side sees such a rise as the culmination of Western metaphysical absolutism, staying rather with finite historically contingent inter-subjective structures of understanding. Both sides, in their difference, remain within a shared phenomenological standpoint. What distinguishes them is the source and nature of meaning.

[30] See MacIntyre's highly skeptical relation to institutions as opposed to practices in *After Virtue*, 187ff.

[31] *NRH* 133.

[32] See "Three Waves", 97.

[33] *NRH* 136f. Strauss would undoubtedly find Taylor's and MacIntyre's positions as falling within the view that makes "civilization" primary as opposed to "regime" (*NRH* 138).

[34] See MacIntyre, chapter 18, and Taylor, chapter 3.

[35] *CM* 138. Contrast with Strauss's depiction of the Nietzschean philosopher: *SPPP* 187-91.

of the whole and parts of the whole. What stands above and beyond all cities in their historical particularity, their rise and decline, is nature. Strauss speaks of nature in terms of "the whole" or "the eternal order." In his rise from opinion to knowledge, the philosopher seeks to understand "the eternal cause or causes of the whole" or, in Platonic language, the "ideas."[36] However, Strauss will undercut the metaphysical implications of this language in two related ways. First, he denies that the whole is, or can be, fully knowable. Philosophy is the love or pursuit of wisdom, not its accomplishment; it is fundamentally zetetic. As Strauss writes, "philosophy in the original meaning of the term is nothing but knowledge of one's ignorance."[37] Second, Strauss interprets what appears to be a language of metaphysical causes that ground the realities revealed in pre-philosophic awareness in terms that undercut these metaphysical implications: "we may also view man in the light of the unchangeable ideas, i.e., the fundamental and permanent problems."[38] As Stanley Rosen notes, Strauss develops Platonism in a non-foundational way.[39] The objects of the zetetic life are the problems whose resolution is understood not to be knowledge but to be a lapse into dogmatism.[40]

Nature involves these two aspects: the pre-philosophic awareness of the citizen, and the philosophic detachment of the philosopher. Central to Strauss's concern is the relation of these two sides: how is the philosopher connected to the city? It can sometimes appear that Strauss places on one side the city as given to the fulfillment of the needs of "one's own," and, on the other side, the philosopher, free and independent of the city in his self-sufficient knowledge. However, it is precisely in contrast to such a "pre-Socratic" or Epicurean understanding that Strauss presents what he calls Classic Natural Right.[41] The relation of philosophy to the city is transformative of both sides. Strauss sees that philosophy arises from the city through the questioning of the ancestral. The closed world of opinion necessary to the life of the city is brought into question through the recognition that there is a plurality of ways of life. The philosopher can, therefore, apparently serve the city: *a)* through assuring the city of the foundation of its ways in nature; and *b)* by making the city aware of the standards of nature so that it may improve

[36] *OT* 198, 212.
[37] *OT* 196. See *WIPP* 39; *NRH* 75; *OT* 279.
[38] *WIPP* 39; see *OT* 196. See also *NRH* 30-1 where Strauss recounts Heidegger's critique of metaphysics and points to an original philosophy that escapes this critique
[39] Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (Oxford, 1987)121-2.
[40] *OT* 196. The status of the permanent problems in Strauss's defence of classical political philosophy is a most vexed issue; see Rosen 107-40 and Victor Gourevitch "Philosophy and Politics II" in *Review of Metaphysics* 22 (1968): 281-325. What philosophy results in is knowledge of the permanent problems, not of the order or whole those problems presuppose. The problems are not causes or objects of knowledge. They function not at the level of ontology, but phenomenology. They are problems grounded in meaning and, in particular, in questions of the good life. In spite of his use of language of the whole, of permanent causes and so on, Strauss does not seek to revive classical political philosophy by re-establishing classical physics and metaphysics, but he recognizes the ambivalence of his use of permanent problems as a substitute; see *NRH* 7-8 and 35, also "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy" in *Social Research* 13 #3 (1946) 326-67, 338-9.
[41] NRH chapters 3 and 4. See *Drury The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, 62-71, for an argument that the two accounts are in fact identical. According to Strauss, what separates Heidegger and Nietzsche, for whom there is a similar indifference to the political, from the pre-Socratics, is the presence of a religiously-inspired transformative will in their philosophical positions. See *SPPP* 174-91 and *CR* 27-46.

itself. Equally, there is a turn towards the city from the side of philosophy, as philosophy grows self-aware: the city is the condition for the philosophic life. The philosopher is a citizen as well as a philosopher. Indeed, Strauss argues, that it is in this double movement that the philosopher is led to an awareness of the full heterogeneity within nature, and above all of the difference between the human and the non-human.[42] More than this, this double movement produces the possibility of philosophy's moving beyond the impotence of merely recognizing the fundamental problems, to a knowledge of the actual standards at work in natural right.

So there appears to be a natural symbiosis of philosophy and civic life; but while philosophy, according to Strauss, may wish to give this impression to the city, it is in fact at best only a noble lie. The way of the philosopher is utterly in contrast to, and destructive of, the way of the citizen. The philosopher leads a life open to the whole; the citizen's virtue and nobility depend upon his attachment to the closed world of his city. The citizen requires of the philosopher that he confirm as natural the virtues by which he, the citizen, lives. The philosopher knows those virtues to be groundless in the sense intended by the citizen.[43] That is to say that what applies to the closed horizons of the city cannot be grounded in the open or natural horizon of the philosopher. The citizen must believe certain things about the world which, while false, are necessary to the very being of the citizen. Strauss sees that deception is necessary, but not as simple manipulation by the philosopher for any nefarious or extra-civic purpose; rather, the philosopher "lies" in order to preserve and enhance the life of the citizen, while at the same time safeguarding the place of philosophy. That the structures or virtues necessary to a properly human life within the city are not grounded in metaphysical "ideas" that stand outside the city is not to say that these structures are "not susceptible of rational legitimization."[44] Rather, the very necessity of these virtues for civic life--a necessity exposed in the interaction between the philosopher and the city--provides the rational legitimization of these virtues. The political virtues are thus grounded in the nature of man as a political animal. However, for exactly the same reason, they are applicable to the philosopher only insofar as he *is* a political animal.

In Strauss's account of classical political philosophy the virtues of the city are necessarily conditional or dependent virtues. Precisely because the city is the necessary premise for civic morality, the city itself is established in a situation lacking civic morality.[45] The founding and preserving of the city as the condition for morality cannot itself be subject to civic morality.[46] For Strauss this appears particularly in the need to defend the regime against destruction from enemies both external and internal.[47] Strauss

[42] *WIPP* 39.
[43] *NRH* 146-64.
[44] *WIPP* 54.
[45] *LAM* 62. Strauss frequently points out that Cain and Romulus were fratricides
[46] *TM* 295; *SPPP* 238.
[47] *WIPP* 84-5. Strauss sees a characteristic of the break with classical thought in the reduction of politics to external relations and to the ensuring of the survival of the polity, as opposed to the fulfillment of its purpose; see *WIPP* 44.

does not presuppose a beneficent nature that ensures that good will prevail.[48] But this does not for Strauss undermine the inherent worth of civic morality for citizens; however, it does point to a necessary tension built into civic life between the conditions of civic life and the purpose of civic life.[49] Alongside the inherent contradictions of political life, are the contradictions between philosophy and civic morality. The philosopher affirms civic morality as necessary to the city in so far as the city is a necessary condition for philosophy, but at the same time he would limit civic morality not only as problematic for the city in its worldly existence, but as destructive of the freedom of thought necessary to philosophy. In this sense Strauss's philosopher is beyond good and evil; his "morality" is strictly provisional to the requirements of philosophy--a non- or post- civic activity.[50] The philosopher lives beyond the moral and political imagination through a rise to intellectual enquiry into the permanent problems that both structure and render questionable that imagination.[51] This rise beyond civic morality on the part of the philosopher is not for Strauss the appearance of nihilism; philosophic activity is not simply self-willed, rather it is an activity given to the philosopher from out of the relation of humanity to nature as adumbrated by the permanent problems.[52] Philosophy is the best human activity not only because it is most pleasurable, but also because it is highest.[53] The rise beyond civic morality is not then a rise beyond teleology: the classical philosopher remains within the phenomenology of the Good even as he questions it.

What Strauss discovers in the texts of ancient political philosophy is a non-metaphysical, a-historical, moral and political phenomenology.[54] Classical moral and political philosophy understood once and for all the primary structures necessary to the moral and political imagination. For Strauss, as for Taylor and MacIntyre, humans require for their very being-in-the-world as moral agents a structure of goods that allows a moral world to appear at all. For Taylor and MacIntyre, as for Strauss, such a moral phenomenology makes present notions of the noble or good, irreducible to utility, calculation or procedure. What distinguishes Strauss from these communitarians is that he sees that beyond all historically relative horizons is a natural horizon provided by the requirements and problems inherent in the very being of moral and political life. This

[48] Compare *NRH* 7-8 and 123. For Strauss there is a partially intelligible, stable, articulated whole available to a moral and political phenomenology, but whether that whole will cause justice to occur in the relation of its parts remains unknown.
[49] *LAM* 230, 271.
[50] Leo Strauss *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity* (SUNY, 1997) 465.
[51] *WIPP* 91; *OT* 198.
[52] *OT* 197-8; *LAM* 31-2.
[53] *OT* 204, 209-10; *NRH* 151-2; *WIPP* 38-40; *LAM* 8.
[54] *NRH* 122-5. One aspect of Strauss that seems to speak against this characterization is Strauss's language. Strauss does not use and indeed ridicules the situational language of many phenomenologists; just as he ridicules the technical language of social scientists; *WIPP* 28-9 and *LAM* 203-23. Strauss is able to use "ordinary" language with its implied relation to a stable shared reality because his phenomenology is moral and political and results in a stable nature, known through the permanent problems. Strauss does not see the human situation as falsified by ordinary language. Rather, it is falsified by ordinary opinion. The fundamental problem is not Being but the Good. To make meaning problematic at the level of the good life and not at existence presupposes a stability to language in order to destabilize opinion . It is therefore a question whether Strauss discovers the stability of nature or presupposes it in his acceptance of ordinary language. See *WIPP* 78-94.

natural horizon arises, as we have seen, out of the interplay between the philosopher and the city.[55] For Strauss, modernity is premised upon a radical reworking of the relation of the philosopher to the city through a new conception of nature: the result is a reconstitution of our moral and political consciousness.[56] Once we are able to characterize Strauss's conception of classical political philosophy as a form of moral and political phenomenology, his interpretation of modern political philosophy can become comprehensible from within that framework.

Strauss divides modernity into three stages or "waves." The first wave began with Machiavelli and was crucially modified by Hobbes and Locke to produce the modern doctrine of natural right. Its contemporary correlate is capitalist liberalism, the acquisitive consumer society dedicated to fulfilling human needs.[57] The second wave, initiated by Rousseau, absorbed nature as a standard by taking it into human history which now served as the source of moral and political guidance.[58] Freed from notions of a natural necessity, this wave produced a more radically utopian--and hence more deeply alienated--form of humanism. Its contemporary correlate is communism.[59] The third wave, which Strauss sees as our contemporary crisis, began with Nietzsche's questioning of the rationality or "humanity" of both history and nature: humanity finds itself in the midst of a terrifying existence, free to create the values by which to live. The contemporary correlate of this wave is fascism.[60]

The three waves by which Strauss defines the historical stages of modernity are at the same time all contemporary political standpoints. But while Strauss sees these positions as distinct, they also belong together as a common development. The waves of modernity expose with increasing explicitness the nihilism at the heart of modernity.[61] The assumption that the human will has a positive content is thereby shown to be simply the residue left by the tradition, due to an inadequate liberation from it in the preceding waves. The second wave dissolves the assumption of a human nature adumbrated by a fundamental guiding passion which could form the basis of natural right. The third wave dissolves the assumption of a human right or rational right that came to replace natural right. The third wave brings to light that the sole basis of the will's guidance is its own free activity--beyond both nature and reason.[62]

For Strauss there is even in the Nietzschean will a deception that a return to the origins of modernity can free us from.[(63)][63] If classical political philosophy is defined through nature as the context or structure belonging to humanity's moral-being-in-the-world,

[55] *WIPP* 85.
[56] *PPH* 153-4.
[57] *NRH* 246; *PPH* 121.
[58] *NRH* 274. Strauss sees that this role for history is absent in Rousseau himself, who is not so easily reconciled to the "actual."
[59] *WIPP* 54.
[60] "Three Waves" 98.
[61] In this sense, Strauss's argument parallels Nietzsche's critique of the ascetic ideal in *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay III.
[62] Strauss nonetheless argues that Nietzsche does not fully escape from a relation to nature. See *SPPP* 183.
[63] *SCR* 336.

modernity can be understood through its redefinition of nature and therefore of the very structure of humanity's moral phenomenology. For the early moderns, nature is no longer an order within which humanity's moral and political life is structured, but rather an otherness or lack whose conquest provides the most profound impetus to moral and political life. Nature has become that which is to be negated for the sake of a properly human culture. The very establishment of the modern requires the positing of a nature the negation of which forms the basis of human culture and freedom. Thus, even as the three waves of modernity deepen this new negativity, the whole project is premised on an initial affirmation or acknowledgement of nature--an affirmation lost sight of as modernity develops.[64]

From within Strauss's moral and political phenomenology, the emergence of modernity must begin with a new conception of nature so that it will no longer be understood as "the hierarchic order of man's natural ends," but rather as a source of "terror and fear."[65] What Strauss wanted to clarify in his first writings on Hobbes was that the nature relative to which modernity takes its point of departure is not simply the mechanical necessity of modern natural science, but is rather the source of this terror.[66] Strauss later came to see that this same notion of nature had its first articulation in Machiavelli.[67] For Strauss, nature as terror, as a moral phenomenon, is more primal to the definition of modernity than nature as mechanical.[68] It is this shift in the structure of the moral and political consciousness that is, for Strauss, most fundamental to the great transformation into the modern.

With this shift in the conception of nature, a whole realignment in the structure of the moral and political imagination has occurred--or, rather, as the unfolding of modernity displays to Strauss, the destruction of that imagination.[69] Nature is no longer a whole which structures the moral and political, providing a schema by which to give content to good and evil, a connection between "is" and "ought." Nature is no longer a system of ends or perfections which is realized and gives meaning to notions of virtue.[70] As Strauss notes in a number of places, nature acts in modernity not as an end to be realized, but rather as a beginning from which one must escape.[71] Nature is to be conquered or mastered, and this conquest or mastery is at the same time the realization of human culture.[72] Strauss points out that in Hobbes the passion which moves humans from the state of nature into civil society is itself the apprehension of the negation of nature: the

---

[64] *SCR* 336; *NRH* 251.
[65] *SPPP* 144, 223.
[66] *PPH* 169-70. This notion of nature may have more in common with Schopenhauer's view of the will than with the early modern understanding of nature.
[67] *SPPP*, 223; *TM* 279-80.
[68] *WIPP* 47.
[69] *PPH* 152: "the new political science from the outset renounces all discussion of the fundamental, the most urgent question."
[70] *WIPP* 90. Compare with the discussion of virtue in MacIntyre. As suggested above, nature is an ambivalent term for Strauss. The "nature" of moral and political imagination is not identical to the "nature" of philosophic intellect. See *PAW* 38-42, 80, 91-4, 136-41.
[71] *NRH* 180; 249-50.
[72] *WIPP* 46-7; *NRH* 201; "Three Waves" 85.

fear of death.[73] The step into modernity is therefore a step out of, or an alienation from, nature as a whole within which ends are discovered. Nature now stands over and against humanity:

> Man can be sovereign only because there is no cosmic support for his humanity. He can be sovereign only because he is forced to be sovereign. Since the universe is unintelligible and since control of nature does not require understanding of nature, there are no knowable limits to his conquest of nature. He has nothing to lose but his chains, and, for all he knows, he may have everything to gain. Still, what is certain is that man's natural state is misery; the vision of the City of Man to be erected on the ruins of the City of God is an unsupported hope.[74]

Here Strauss is presenting modernity in a manner not unlike Heidegger, except with an emphasis on the moral and political: the ready-at-hand world of ordinary, daily existence has been replaced in modernity by a present-to-hand standpoint which looks upon objects in their sheer externality.[75] Like Heidegger, Strauss does not see this turn to a self external to the world as a step towards greater objectivity, free of illusions, but rather as a construct unable to find an integrated relation to the "other" it is necessarily opposed to. Indeed, the "other," the object, is objective precisely in order that it might be available for conquest or mastery and thus for culture. As Strauss said in his commentary on Carl Schmitt, "'Culture' is to such an extent cultivation of nature that it can be understood as a sovereign creation of the mind only if the nature being cultivated is taken to be the *opposite* of mind and has been *forgotten*."[76] From the standpoint of classical political philosophy, both modern nature, with its indifference to humanity, and the culture that becomes the necessary response to it, are constructs.[77] They are constructed upon and over the natural world as envisioned by the classics. Strauss contrasts the immediacy or concreteness of classical political thought, which takes its orientation from the orientation of the city and the structures of "natural" moral and political imagination, with the abstractness of modern political philosophy.[78] For Strauss, modern political philosophy nevertheless always retains an implicit relation to that natural structure.[79] As the development of modernity more and more completely undermines this connection, humanity comes to find itself lost in a directionless void--this is the crisis of our time.

Of course, this movement beyond the horizon of the city, the pre-philosophic awareness of moral and political things, belongs to the philosopher in the classical period. The skeptical dissolution of the city's horizon did not lead the classical philosopher to

---

[73] *NRH* 180-1. Strauss sees in Machiavelli the nature is simply to be conquered and stands opposed to the city, but in Hobbes, nature is restored as a standard. However, it is a standard only as providing an absolute given passion which must be radicalized so as to be infinite, without a stable end or perfection belonging to it. See also *PPH* 16, 150-1.
[74] *NRH* 175.
[75] *WIPP 28.* See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 122-134.
[76] *SCR* 336.
[77] *OT* 192.
[78] *WIPP* 28.
[79] *WIPP* 181. See also *LAM* 203-23

nihilism insofar as he discovered nature lay beyond the city, and the philosopher did not step beyond nature.[80] However, for the moderns, nature is beyond the city only insofar as it is below the city. As Strauss states in his discussion of Hobbes,

> Hobbes's view of man, as far as it is essential to his political teaching, expresses how the new view of the whole affects "the whole man"--man as he is understood in daily life or by the historians and poets, as distinguished from man as he is to be understood within the context of Hobbes's natural science. "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens" man: the mood generated by the truth, the true mood, is fear, the fear experienced by a being exposed to a universe which does not care for it by properly equipping it or by guiding it.[81]

According to Strauss the realization of modernity requires that not just philosophers but citizens in general must step outside pre-philosophic awareness: they must become enlightened, atheistical individuals.[82] What distinguishes these modern citizens from philosophers is that their detachment is the result of a dogmatic skepticism, not a zetetic skepticism motivated by love of wisdom.[83] Or, rather, philosophy itself becomes changed; its end is no longer wisdom for its own sake, but rather "to relieve man's estate, or to increase man's power."[84] When nature "lacks intelligence," philosophy becomes effective.[85]

If nature no longer provides guidance to moral and political life, except (in the first wave) as that from which humanity must escape in order to establish itself, what is the source of the principles that structure the modern moral and political imagination?[86] Strauss's third wave of modernity brings to light the answer: it is the contentless human will.[87] However, modernity does not begin with this contentlessness--or at least this lack of content remains implicit in the beginning. Machiavelli and Hobbes assume a certain notion of the good, namely, the fulfillment of human need.[88] So while Strauss describes this first wave negatively, as a lowering of horizons, a removal of restraint, a turning to pleasure as the highest good those philosophers who were moved to initiate modernity were not simply motivated by these negations, but more principally by an affirmation: the

[80] For Strauss this stepping outside of or beyond nature is deceptive. Moderns presuppose as given a moral sphere; they do not question the possibility of political philosophy. In this sense moderns can take up a detached standpoint while assuming the very being of the moral and political. Moderns, for Strauss fail to ask the fundamental question: "What is virtue?". See *PPH* 152; *WIPP* 92-4.
[81] *WIPP* 181.
[82] *WIPP* 46.
[83] *NRH* 171-2.
[84] *TM* 296.
[85] *WIPP* 181 and *PPH* 163-4.
[86] It is vital for Strauss's whole argument that the shift to modern political philosophy is not the direct negation of moral phenomenology, but is rather a shift within moral phenomenology. Nihilism is a "moral" phenomenon. See *PPH* 28-9
[87] *PPH* 165
[88] *TM* 294.

desire to effect the fulfillment of human needs, and above all those most fundamental and pervasive needs, the passions. Strauss tells us that Machiavelli

> achieves the decisive turn toward the notion of philosophy according to which its purpose is to relieve man's estate or to increase man's power or to guide man toward the rational society, the bond and the end of which is enlightened self-interest or the comfortable self-preservation of each of its members.[89]

In Strauss's eyes, what is crucial about needs or passions, for the early modern philosophers, is that they are immediately and fully actual and do not require the recognition of a teleological nature to give them structure and significance. These needs exist in the state of nature outside of the city and outside the moral and political imagination of the ancients. In this turn to the body, the early moderns do not simply reduce humanity to animality. The idealism or "political" nature of the hedonism of the early moderns is that it is premised upon a need less easily satisfied than food or protection.[90] That need is the requirement that the fulfillment of these ends be guaranteed:

> There is a guarantee for the solution of the political problem because a) the goal is lower, i.e., in harmony with what most men actually desire and b) chance can be conquered.[91]

By removing all ends inherent to political life, the early moderns make the end simply the fulfillment of human need. The whole, nature, must serve humanity in its givenness.[92] The truth of the early modern is a revolutionary humanism:

> Man is effectively emancipated from the bonds of nature, and therewith the individual is emancipated from those social bonds which antedate all consent or compact, by the emancipation of his productive acquisitiveness, which is necessarily, if accidentally, beneficent and hence susceptible of

[89] *TM* 296.

[90] The turn to the fulfilling of human need is not for Strauss the application of detached scientific rationality to a set of finite given problems. The call for guaranteed effectiveness points to an irrational endless (Schopenhaurian) will at the heart of modernity. Strauss brings this out in his discussion of "vanity" in *PPH* 10-1. The finite ends early modernity would satisfy always remain an inadequate content for the human: *NRH* 251.

[91] "Three Waves" 87. See also *PPH* 92, 160: the collapse of classical rationalism begins with the perception that reason while able to discern standards is ineffectual in realizing them. At that point reason has become an external observing reason and has lost sight of its phenomenological task. Strauss sees it easily dissolves into a purely technological rationality.

[92] *TM* 207-8. For Strauss Christianity has a crucial intermediary role. Modernity for Strauss is not secularized Christianity, rather it is the rejection of Christianity - but is therefore conditioned by that rejection. Machiavelli replaces humanity for Christian humility, but humility had replaced magnanimity. Humanism with its emphasis on effectivity and populism appeared possible or desirable and magnanimity impossible or undesirable because of Christianity.

> becoming the strongest social bond: restraint of the appetites is replaced by a mechanism whose effect is humane.[93]

According to Strauss, in the early modern period, this revolutionary humanism appears especially though the relationship between natural right and natural law.[94] What distinguishes modern natural right from classical natural right is that it is a subjective claim, namely, the claim to the fulfillment of one's most pressing passion: self-preservation. According to Strauss, for both Hobbes and Locke natural law does not act as a limit to this right, but rather as a set of calculated principles by which that right might most readily be realized:

> Through the shift of emphasis from natural duties or obligations to natural rights, the individual, the ego, had become the center and origin of the moral world, since man--as distinguished from man's end--had become that center or origin.[95]

Strauss makes use of his hermeneutical method, (the exoteric-esoteric distinction) to eliminate all apparent constraints upon natural right which appear in the texts of Hobbes and Locke. In particular, in the case of Locke, where the text seems to give priority to natural law over natural rights, Strauss engages in complex arguments to demonstrate that Locke means the opposite of this.[96] And not only is it inherent to this "early modern" revolutionary humanism that there are no natural constraints upon it; equally for Strauss, there must be no supernatural constraint. Atheism is necessary to modern natural right: God's existence would limit, give significance to, and provide consolation from, the expansive, technological society. As Strauss says, "if we do not permit ourselves to be deceived by ephemeral phenomena, we realize that political atheism and political hedonism belong together. They arose together in the same moment and in the same mind."[97] Again, Strauss expends considerable effort in eradicating every apparent aspect of theism from the texts of the early modern political philosophers.[98]

Certainly it is an important question whether Strauss is actually right in his interpretations of the various texts he considers. But what is more fundamental to the force and clarity of Strauss's position is that for him early moderns *have* to be proponents of an atheistical, rights-centred, nature-conquering, society that assumes as a premise belonging to its very starting-point that there can be no pre-existing limits to human self-assertion. For Strauss, as soon as the human stands outside nature, thereby seeing it as simply a barren given, immediately the whole teleological framework necessary to the older moral and political imagination collapses. The relationship between the lowering of horizons and the conquest of nature which Strauss identifies as the two central

---

[93] *NRH* 248.
[94] *PPH* 156-7
[95] *NRH* 248. See also *PPH* viii.
[96] *NRH* 202-20; *WIPP* 197-220.
[97] *NRH* 169.
[98] See, for example, *WIPP* 183-96 and *SPPP* 220-23.

components in Machiavelli's position (and thus in the very origins of modernity) has its necessity in this movement beyond nature:

> The discovery of the Archimedean point outside of everything given, or the discovery of a radical freedom, promises the conquest of everything given and thus destroys the natural basis of the radical distinction between philosophers and non-philosophers. Yet in looking forward to the extreme consequences of Machiavelli's action, we must not forget the fact that for Machiavelli himself the domination of necessity remains the indispensable condition of every great achievement and in particular of his own: the transition or the jump from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom will be the inglorious death of the very possibility of human excellence.[99]

It is the necessity of the opposition between the ancients and the moderns, between natural law and natural right, between natural order and human freedom, that closes down the possibility of understanding early modernity from a Straussian standpoint. Or, to put it less polemically: it is at least worth considering that the history of political thought need not be defined through the requirements of a certain moral and political phenomenology. To think beyond the apparent necessities of this phenomenology might allow us to see the early modern period as characterized by a uniting, in their very difference, of natural law and natural right, of natural order and human freedom. It may be the case that the "contradictions" of Machiavelli, Hobbes and Locke, are only our contradictions. Modernity need not be defined solely in terms of a revolutionary humanism. The recovery of early modernity in its own terms would be not only the recovery of a past that belongs to us: it may also provide us with suggestions as to how to think beyond the apparent necessity of opposing existential phenomenology to revolutionary humanism, an opposition that seems to benight our own thinking.

University of King's College

[99] *TM* 297-8.