Commentary

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doi:10.1017/S0034670522001000

In his dense and concise book, Burns explores Strauss's texts on liberal education in order to reflect on the relevance of such education for contemporary liberal democracies. The apparent narrowness of the subject matter and sources consulted in Burns's book is misleading. It presents in a clear and straightforward manner some of the most essential aspects of Strauss's thought. As the numerous and very rich footnotes attest, Burns has a deep and firsthand knowledge of Strauss's work. His short study can be compared favorably with the best studies published on Strauss in the last twenty years. He seeks to understand Strauss on his own terms by means of an internal analysis, but one can see that he has benefited from the advances in research on the genesis and development of Strauss's thought. He perceives very well how a deep understanding of Strauss requires one to resituate him in his debate with the tradition of German philosophy and, in particular, with Heidegger. Therefore, one of the most important contributions of this book is the attempt to clarify the terms of this debate.

My first question is about the complex relationship between Heidegger and Strauss. Burns shows very well the challenge that Heidegger's thought could represent for a philosopher wanting to defend a decent political regime. Strauss has perceived and analyzed the ambiguities and the political background of decisionism and radical historicism present in *Sein und Zeit*. Like his friend Karl Löwith, he understood that such decisionism prepared the German catastrophe and that Heidegger was an accomplice in the advent of National Socialism. "German Nihilism"[6] describes in depth the moral climate of the German Conservative Revolution and how the promoters of that revolution became allies in Hitler's takeover of power. In crucial passages, Burns takes up Strauss's criticisms of Heideggerian existentialism (13–15, 25n10, 47–51, 89n30, 112–13, 118, 130n19, 138–39, 162–63) and his presentation of these criticisms is profound and accurate.

[6]Leo Strauss, "German Nihilism," *Interpretation* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 354–78.

I would, however, like to introduce a complication that allows me to illustrate a central difficulty with Strauss's position on liberal education as it relates to liberal democracy. As is well known, there was a turning point in Heidegger's thought, the famous *Kehre*. Whether this was connected with his National Socialist commitment is an open question, but it is striking that the second Heidegger took a marked distance from the kind of decisionism that can be found in *Sein und Zeit*. One could say that the second Heidegger adopted a position of radical withdrawal from the world and from all political commitments. This position of philosophical withdrawal became more pronounced in the years following the Second World War. The salvation of the world from the threats of technology and a modernity that has forgotten the world can only come in his view from a new revelation of Being and not from human action. This is why the only task of the philosopher is to become the so-called shepherd of Being and the only possible ethics is that of listening to Being in its ontological difference with beings. Burns's view that one major difference between Strauss and Heidegger is that the latter has adopted the politicization of philosophy characteristic of the modern philosopher (148), or that Heidegger has attempted to "guide a political-moral transformation or revolution, by philosophic thought" (166–67), could surely be said of the Heidegger at the time of the infamous Rectoral Address, but not of the second Heidegger. The problem with the second Heidegger was not his political commitment, but his refusal to take responsibility for his political illusions and delusions.

I repeat these well-known themes to show the distance between the first and the second Heidegger concerning the possibility of political action. More interesting, I think, is a feature which Strauss and Heidegger have in common: I would call it their philosophical mania, entailing the view that the highest accomplishment of human existence is to lead a philosophical life. In this respect, both were Platonists and thought that the only necessary thing for the philosopher is the reflection on the most important questions and among them about the first things. Now, one can blame Heidegger for all sorts of things, but not for having devoted his life to the reflection on the first things or, in his idiom, the question of Being. For better or worse, Heidegger embodied the philosophical mania to the highest degree.

The agreement between Strauss and Heidegger can be shown to be even more substantial than their shared Platonic philosophical mania. I was struck by a passage in which Burns says that "as Strauss indicates in *Natural Right and History* (*NRH* 32 and 176), the finitude of man and hence this question of the being of the cosmos without man is central also to the thinking of Heidegger. Is Heidegger, then, correct to seek among the pre-Socratics a kind of thinking closer to his own?" (123). In several passages, Burns mentions that the fundamental teaching of the Greek philosophers according to Strauss is a meditation on mortality, on the insignificance of humans in the cosmos, and on the possibility of the end of our universe (47, 98, 100, 132, 148, 164). In this perspective, the philosopher's

contemplation is infused by a resignation in the face of "the crackings of the walls of the world, a resignation accompanied by the recognition of the relative insignificance of human action and production" (122). If this is the true and final teaching about the wisdom of the ancient philosophers, the second Heidegger with his idea of the elusive character of Being is not so far away from this wisdom.

This somewhat tentative metaphysical point brings me to the fundamental tension in Strauss's thinking on liberal education. This has not escaped Burns's attention. According to Strauss, the goal of liberal education seems to be twofold: to form an "aristocracy in democracy" and to attract and prepare a few individuals for the philosophic life.[7] These two goals are not on the same level and are not always compatible. The political and moral elite necessary for democracy, let us call it the Churchillian elite, must somehow be faithful to the principles of liberal democracy and ready to advocate them. This elite must be trained as far as possible in the exercise of the political virtues. That is why, as Burns rightly says, classical liberal education was an education by poets (37–38). This humanist liberal education was above all rhetorical and literary, closer to the education of Isocrates than that proposed by Plato. This is the type of education that was offered to English gentlemen in the nineteenth century and that Churchill experienced.

Philosophy played a role in this education, but not a leading one, and we can see why in Strauss's conception of liberal education. Philosophical mania leads quite naturally to a turning away from the city and civic virtues (42–44). The philosophical interrogation radically carried out leads to the questioning of the opinions proper to one's society and also of the principles which organize the political order. The philosophical *eros* once awakened can be destructive for the traditions proper to the community and it nourishes the ideal of a life detached from the constraints of the political and civic life. We are then faced with a difficult paradox: either liberal education intended for the training of a political elite preserves it from philosophical mania and thus fails in its highest goal, or liberal education prepares the advent of the philosopher at the risk of ruining the possibility of forming a decent political elite.

The classic Straussian response to such a paradox is a call for moderation and caution, but it is not entirely satisfactory, and I am not sure that Burns is entirely convinced by it. More importantly, this call can be only a partial response to the crisis of liberal education today. This crisis has its roots in the general lack of confidence, to say the least, in what Strauss has called "all simply authoritative traditions."[8] Strauss was well aware of this crisis (our "awesome situation"),[9] and it is striking that his teaching and writing

[7]Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 5, 10, 13–14.

[8]Ibid., 8.

[9]Ibid., 26–27.

testified to the need for a contemporary defense of the tradition to fully and dialectically integrate the most radical critiques of this tradition. Since the traditions of classical liberal education have lost their obviousness, such an education cannot do without an examination of its most radical critics: Friedrich Nietzsche, Heidegger, even Jacques Derrida. As Burns's book shows, reading Strauss always leads one to consider these criticisms seriously and to try to respond to them, but it is not clear that the philosophers of the future will be entirely satisfied with the answers and the political moderation preached by Strauss. Contemporary liberal education must integrate the tradition of the critique of that education, but it is not clear that it will be able to control the effects of that integration. Strauss himself, in his noble effort to provide a vaccine against "German Nihilism," has in some ways contributed to spreading the virus.

Commentary

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doi:10.1017/S0034670522001024

Burns's book offers the most lucid and accessible account I know of a thinker who continues, fifty years after his death, to provoke intense intellectual and political controversy. It forms a most welcome and eloquent addition to a number of recent defenses of liberal education in the classic sense. At the same time it offers a learned and unusually searching analysis of Strauss's claim to be a friend but not a flatterer of liberalism.

Burns's point of entry is both political and striking, as he claims that "the modest political recommendation that Strauss offers for our time, a time dominated by the technology of modern science, is faithful adherence to a liberal democratic constitutionalism whose tone and direction may be provided by a sub-political 'aristocracy within democracy,' one whose thinking is informed by both serious religious education in one's ancestral traditions and a study of the Great Books" (15). One might wonder in what sense such a goal, which seems, at least at first, to challenge the basic principle of our regime—namely, the natural equality and liberty of all—can rightly be called modest. The answer would seem partly to lie in the term "subpolitical." The aristocratic corrective that Burns's Strauss has in mind takes advantage of modern liberalism's own distinction between the public and the private and will be conducted privately. My first question is how, and to what extent, an education that means to set "the tone and direction" of a