

1941 at the New School for Social Research, and a review of Eric A. Havelock's *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics*, published in 1959.<sup>1</sup> Through a careful and extensively annotated exegesis, Burns reveals that Strauss agrees with much of Martin Heidegger's thinking about technology and its destructive effects. Strauss finds that technology dissolves prephilosophic moral horizons, so we have "lost all simply authoritative traditions in which we could trust" (32). Burns shows that Strauss would not, like Heidegger, cast liberal democracy aside or call for some New Thinking. Instead, Strauss directs our attention to the edifying powers of a certain kind of liberal education. He indicates how a liberal education rooted in the Great Books could help to form a sub-political, cultural aristocracy that could elevate liberal culture and moderate modern politics.

Burns explains that while Strauss looks to a liberal education rooted in the Great Books to lend liberal democracy new moral ballast and direction, he does not believe that classical philosophy, as such, can play a role in our politics. Because the philosophers recognize the "corruptibility of all human achievements" (96), they do not share in all the nonphilosophers' moral visions and aspirations. They cannot supply us with direct moral and political guidance. Philosophy can, however, give us inspiring examples of a higher way of life or of what Burns calls a "noble activity that is good in itself" (177). Thanks to Burns's most assiduous reading, we discover a Strauss who is not a political partisan of philosopher-kings, elite cadres, or vigorous re-founders of the regime but a supporter of a liberalism that is leavened by our spiritual heritage and by the moral tradition found in the Great Books.

## Commentary

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Burns has written an excellent book on the contemporary importance of Strauss. Speaking as someone who has read Strauss through different lenses, I found it both provocative and deeply instructive. To begin with

<sup>1</sup>The lecture was later published in *Interpretation* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 353–78; the other three pieces can be found in Strauss's *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), chaps. 1–3.

the latter aspects, Burns writes both as an expert in full command of his sources and as a concerned citizen. He seeks to show (as far as I understand him) that liberal democracy and modernity are more dangerous than is commonly acknowledged. American democracy, in particular, is not immune to the kind of moral critique that contributed to the demise of the Weimar Republic and the rise of fascism (84). Nor can one simply ignore those who despised modern civilization in the 1930s as blind fanatics. For at the root of the nihilistic hatred of all things “bourgeois” lies a love of morality that seems to be essential to the preservation of humanity (8). That is, the longing for a total revolution that characterized politics in the 1930s continues to resonate. And we cannot simply respond by invoking “the modern doctrine of inalienable rights” or a rationalism that claims to perceive “what is just by nature” (87–88). Neither Locke nor Aristotle is of much help in addressing the challenges posed by democracy, technology, and liberal education today. A broader vision is needed—one that draws on the most radical critics of modern civilization, especially on Heidegger, and on the wisdom and example of statesmen such as Winston Churchill. Above all, perhaps, the possibility of civilization and human nobility today seems to depend on a disposition that embodies the “fruitful tension between religious and liberal education” (66).

Drawing on most available sources, including seminars and unpublished lectures, this book probes the depths of Strauss’s engagement with Heidegger in an admirably concise and comprehensive manner. Heidegger’s “existentialism” grasps “the fact that reason has become radically problematic,” in sharp contrast to positivism—“the last” and most dogmatic expression of “modern rationalism.” Existentialism transcends modern rationalism by stressing the “fundamental dependence of reason on language,” and reason’s dependence, more generally, on “powers which [we] cannot comprehend.”<sup>2</sup> By alluding to such powers, existentialism represents an “elevation of the religious disposition” (118), which Strauss regarded as a pillar of civilization. Heidegger’s thought also coincided with Strauss’s in its diagnosis of modern rationalism as essentially technological—bent on conquering nature and on a blind augmentation of human power. Indeed, Strauss takes this diagnosis much further by suggesting that moral modernity’s defense of individual dignity is itself part of “the technological project of enlightenment” (cf. 66, 10). Finally, our unplanned encounter with mortality, which Heidegger saw as the key to a morally serious life, was also fundamental for Strauss, even though, of course, his conception of moral seriousness was radically different from Heidegger’s. Whereas Heidegger elevated *Dasein* to the status of “the mysterious ground of ‘History,’”<sup>3</sup> which is capable of revolutionizing moral-

<sup>2</sup>Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 26, 27.

<sup>3</sup>Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 176.

political life (as Heidegger attempted with disastrous results), Strauss found in our awareness of mortality a source of liberation from the delusion that we can change the world (96). Our awareness of mortality may further inspire in us “a yearning for the noble, for a dignified life” (100).

Burns’s approach provides important clues as to why Strauss could think along with Heidegger for such long stretches, while arriving at largely opposite conclusions. Heideggerian existentialism grew out of the religious impulses evident in thinkers from Pascal to Feuerbach to Kierkegaard. Their awareness of incomprehensible powers, such as the “intelligence of the heart” and the “call of conscience,” which addresses us in our mysterious singularity, brought them close to the “classical” rationalism that recognized the central role of elusive chance in shaping our destinies. In that respect, Heidegger’s path leads back to Strauss’s “classics.” Yet, rather than retrieving “classical” rationalism, Heidegger ultimately opted for its modern, “idealistic” counterpart, thus partaking in the “anti-theological ire” that has narrowed our horizons since the time of Machiavelli (7). The reason behind this (perhaps unconscious?) choice leads to the core divergence between Heidegger and Strauss, namely, Heidegger’s neglect—and indeed ignorance—of political philosophy as well as his renunciation of theology. Thus, Strauss’s call for a “fruitful tension between religious and liberal education” (66) can be read as precisely an antidote to Heideggerian thought.

So far, so insightful. Yet I wonder whether the high-altitude genealogies of “modern rationalism” Burns relies on can truly shed light on the problems of democracy and liberal education today. In his account, modern science—political and physical—is “constructivist” and “technological” at core (66–67, 97). This includes foundational tenets of our moral and legal self-understanding, such as human rights and dignity: they, too, seem to be part of “the technological project of enlightenment” (66).

Now, one may well be convinced that Strauss’s history of (scientific, political, moral) modernity gets to the core of what “actually happened.” Still, it is obviously not the whole story. The rise of “dignity” and the concomitant abolition of institutions such as torture was perhaps, first and foremost, the result of social practices of recognition, notably within republics where citizens were considered inviolable since the late Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> “Dignity” also draws its force from secularized Protestant doctrines. Strauss was certainly aware of this, but chose to follow a single path in the complex genealogy that leads to moral modernity.

Let us concede that that path leads to “the fundamental problems,” such as what counts as a right and whether social rights presuppose modern technology with all its dehumanizing potential (64). Still, it is not clear what a

<sup>4</sup>Jay M. Bernstein, *Torture and Dignity: An Essay on Moral Injury* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 259.

“civilized” response to this situation would be. One may try to deactivate such rights as the “equal . . . protection against the risk of dying prematurely” (64) for all kinds of good and bad reasons, but whether those rights exist or not, I would argue, is ultimately up to us as citizens. More precisely, natural right doctrines—and their critique—have certainly been fundamental as pillars of our collective moral lives, but their concrete meaning and institutional form depend on social and political struggles, not on great thinkers debating across the ages. Crudely put, if it were up to Locke, (poor) children would still be forced to work beginning at age three. And if Americans had simply followed the Founding Fathers they would not live in a society that guarantees equal protection by the law irrespective of race or gender. These institutions and protections were invented by ordinary men and women (abolitionists, suffragists, etc.), rather than by political philosophers.

Political philosophy, as Burns seems to understand it, is radically insufficient if what we want—as educators and citizens—is to understand “things as they are” (23). The modern “constructivist” alternative, from Kant through Hegel to Marx, cannot simply be brushed aside. In Burns’s account this alternative appears to be morally irrelevant and/or “ideology” (175, 182). Thus, if I understand him correctly, there is virtually nothing to be learned morally and politically from engaging with the “moderns,” say from Baruch Spinoza to Hannah Arendt to Simone de Beauvoir. We should focus instead on the exemplary lives of (for instance) Cyrus the Great and Churchill, much as earlier generations were educated reading Plutarch and Cicero. Thus conceived, a liberal education would instill an appreciation of honorable ambition as well as a sense of duty and sacrifice for the public good.<sup>5</sup> Further, we should shelter the heart (notably of the young) with religious traditions and a “classical” attunement to the ultimate futility of attempts to change the world.

Based on my (limited) exposure to such an education, I share some of its aspirations. Yet I fear that living only in that world must ultimately lead to a sectarian alienation from our lifeworld. Then again, I may be misreading Burns’s intentions in a book that must count among the finest attempts to respond to our contemporary crises through a close reading of Strauss’s work.

<sup>5</sup>Whether the “glory” of (Churchillian) empire is compatible with the ideals of humanity, the public good, and civilization, which Strauss defended, remains of course a question that would have to be addressed.