

very complex problem" may not always be a self-serving evasion. Perhaps because Powers considers them untypical or futile, there is no mention of recent moves at various levels to restore better standards.

The author recognizes that some of his views invite "opprobrium without limit"; and like the Thomas Hobbes he admires he invites and enjoys combat. His polemical vigor is designed to shock and arouse concern. Seeing no prospect of internal reform by educators or a reversal of democratic excesses in the political order, he turns to the family as the "last hope." Schools have usurped authority and abused it by fostering an educational culture contrary to common sense and traditional values. A sound education is still available, at least in the better colleges, but only if right choices are made. Parents who are concerned — and they will be a minority — must resume their natural authority of giving guidance, recognizing their "responsibility not only to their own children, but to civilization itself."

— Reviewed by Charles D. Murphy

---

## *The Straussian Universe*

**Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy**, by Leo Strauss; with an Introduction by Thomas L. Pangle, *The University of Chicago Press, 1983. 260 pp. \$25.00.*

HABENT SUA FATA LIBELLI, and a volume of essays, even when written by one scholar and collected by his loyal disciples according to his own instructions, is exposed to the risk of lacking unity and dispersing the reader's attention. Thus it is no surprise that the author of the long Introduction, Professor Thomas L. Pangle, has, and admits to have, serious difficulties in finding

the leading thread connecting the fifteen essays. On the first page, Pangle goes even farther, recalling "the deceptively unsystematic and even errant appearance of the path that Strauss's investigations traced over the years." In the next twenty-six pages Pangle retraces these steps, trying painstakingly to reconstruct Leo Strauss's thought until, in the conclusion, he manages to elaborate a credible "system."

What Pangle does is to circle around Strauss's work the way Strauss himself circled around Socrates; hence the tenuous justification of the volume's title that the subjects of the essays do not bear out since only two out of fifteen are devoted to Platonic dialogues; the topics of the others range from Maimonides to Nietzsche, from Thucydides to book reviews of modern works. The introducer's task to find the common preoccupation consequently requires an unenviable effort, at the end of which we may admire his performance, but may also remain unconvinced that he has reproduced Strauss's intentions and thinking.

In other words, the doubt remains concerning the nature of Strauss's own achievement. Granted, he has by now a very wide following in many American and Canadian university departments of political science. His disciples constitute a quasi-closed group, not to say a sect, which carefully filters the profane infiltrators and uses a language reserved for the cognoscenti. The epigones' attitude may or may not mirror that of the master. But the question is legitimately raised: what is the significance of the master's work, and how may one label it here below, in this disputatious and idol-shattering world?

On confrontation with Strauss's lifework there emerge two or three impressions, confirmed by this latest volume. Strauss examines texts with such extreme meticulousness that often the work of the commentator overwhelms the original. Every verse, every line, every word is subjected to such a close scrutiny, whether Genesis or Plato, that the *substantifique*

*moëlle* seems to be drawn out of what the original author had intended to put therein. The stuff of life is removed from the work analyzed, or to style it more appropriately here, the Platonic *eros* evaporates. No matter how sagacious the conclusion (often there is none), only an empty shell remains. This, at least, is the impression as one goes through the essays on *Anabasis*, *Euthydemus*, or "the gods in Thucydides's work."

Another impression may be called the atemporality of the approach. Is this necessarily the best style for the scholar — namely to treat the text as a mere document, isolated from history, personality, a datum to be placed under the microscope, then squeezed and compelled to yield up nothing but the strict "meaning"? On a level below that on which Strauss operates, the method of teaching the so-called Great Books may illustrate my objection. The otherwise ignorant student is overawed by endless pages of *ipse dixit*-s; he is intimidated by the huge boulders standing guard; he is told that here are Knowledge, Culture and Wisdom, the capitalized trinity. If he manages to work through the Great Wall that these hundred-plus volumes represent, he will be a Western Man, an Educated Man. (But delight and understanding will have been taken out of reading since the Great Ideas do not tolerate the contact of lesser ideas and observations, for such would disturb their dignity.) The Great Formula has been found, the pupil ingurgitates it. He is cultured.

This is how one also risks reacting to the present volume. The ultimate in wisdom is there, we are told, between the pages, and the anxious reader is worried that by skipping a sentence he may miss it. Why the impression, why the anxiety? Let me come to my third point, in an ascending order. The Straussian universe is surprisingly narrow, and one might also call it unfinished, truncated. The spectacular deepening of texts seems to be achieved at the expense of the real world in which the character of these texts as timeless documents can only represent one side of

the picture. Strauss obtains this one-sidedness by regarding the texts as the most significant fragments in the continuing conflict/dialogue between Jerusalem and Athens. A series of antagonisms can be set up by concentrating on this polarity: prophet and philosopher, reason and revelation, right thinking and right action, Socrates and Moses. In the area between polarities the tension will never be solved, and Pangle tells us, after many passages showing his own perplexity, that his mentor himself regarded philosophizing as an inconclusive exercise.

This verdict is already implied in the way the poles are set up, the antagonism between the Hellenic and the Hebrew. Would matters not appear differently if Rome were added to Athens and Jerusalem, not as an agent that liquidates the conflict, but as a third pole from which a new light is shed on it? A tri-dimensional picture, so to speak, where the divino-human element may offer a new opening to speculation. Unless Christianity, and not only the Delphic Oracle, is also invited to address the philosopher, Strauss's problematics and the Athens/Jerusalem tension appear unnecessarily truncated: a pyramid without its apex.

We take Pangle's word for the fact that Strauss saw the birth of philosophy, certainly his own philosophy, in the Spinozan dichotomy between theology and politics (see the *Tractatus*). The poet (Homer, Hesiod, Moses) brings to expression the world of the gods or of God, while the philosopher-scientist articulates the world of men, of cities, artifacts, laws, and conventions. This, apparently, was for Strauss, as for Spinoza, an irresolvable conflict: divine law claims man to the fullest extent, yet the laws of the city order his life according to another kind of experience, another kind of vocation. Thus philosophy, at best the child of both, must remain open-ended, not to say incurably torn.

Must it, really? In a way, yes, insofar as *any* knowledge by man remains far short of completion. Socrates, disciple of the Delphic Oracle, and Moses, descending

from Mount Sinai, were touched by divine hands: the highest moments indeed of Athens and Jerusalem. But why not point at the Incarnation as the third moment, marking both history and philosophy, the city and the poet? The wise man and the moral man trace their now combined destiny (the optimum case) from which the individual and the *polis* receive guarantee and guidance. Another, immeasurable, step is cleared when God seeks out both and assumes their destiny, thereby letting them peer into the transcendent. To refuse a place for Rome in the equation leaves the philosopher embarrassed, as Spinoza/Strauss/Pangle admit; by the

very function of his reason he must rule out revelation about the transcendent, and proceed with reflective action in the framework of the city. The highest form so achieved is *pietas*, as the case of Socrates demonstrates. Yet the prophets clearly tell us to aim higher.

The "solution," then, does not lie in the direction of expecting the philosopher to produce more than is in his vocation. It is to expect a higher direction from one who transcends philosophy and the philosophic condition: from the master of both the wise man and the good man.

— Reviewed by Thomas Molnar