

LEO STRAUSS

ON A FORGOTTEN KIND OF WRITING

Recently, a student at the University of Chicago told me that a suggestion which I have made both in the classroom and in print has proved to be of interest to some of his friends but that it is not sufficiently clear to them. This student mentioned that it would be helpful if I were to write a note on the matter for the *Chicago Review*. In order not merely to repeat what I have written elsewhere, I believe it will be best if I discuss here those objections to my suggestion which have been made publicly. I suspect that these objections arose out of difficulties similar to those that various students have felt.

I should begin by briefly summarizing my suggestion. In studying certain earlier thinkers, I became aware of this way of conceiving the relation between the quest for truth (philosophy or science) and society: Philosophy or science, the highest activity of man, is the attempt to replace opinion about "all things" by knowledge of "all things"; but opinion is the element of society; philosophy or science is therefore the attempt to dissolve the element in which society breathes, and thus it endangers society. Hence philosophy or science must remain the preserve of a small minority, and philosophers or scientists must respect the opinions on which society rests. To respect opinions is something entirely different from accepting them as true. Philosophers or scientists who hold this view about the relation of philosophy or science and society are driven to employ a peculiar manner of writing which would enable them to reveal what they regard as the truth to the few, without endangering the unqualified commitment of the many to the opinions on which society rests. They will distinguish between the true teaching as the esoteric teaching and the socially useful teaching as the exoteric teaching; whereas the exoteric teaching is meant

to be easily accessible to every reader, the esoteric teaching discloses itself only to very careful and well-trained readers after long and concentrated study.

The crucial premise of this argument is the proposition that opinion is the element of society. This premise is accepted by many contemporary social scientists. They teach that every society rests, in the last analysis, on specific values or on specific myths, i.e., on assumptions which are not evidently superior or preferable to any alternative assumptions. They imply, therefore, that social science reveals and stresses the arbitrary character of the basic assumptions underlying any given society; social science desires to be "objective" and "undogmatic." They fail to see, however, that this state of things creates a tension between the requirements of social science (knowledge of the truth and teaching of the truth) and the requirements of society (whole-hearted acceptance of the principles of society): if I know that the principles of liberal democracy are not intrinsically superior to the principles of communism or fascism, I am incapable of whole-hearted commitment to liberal democracy.

My suggestion consists, then, fundamentally of two questions: the historical question as to whether there ever were any great thinkers who held the view about the relation of philosophy and society which I have just sketched and who acted on it; and the philosophic question whether that view is simply false or simply true, or true if qualified (e.g., "opinion is the element of all nonliberal societies"). The two questions are obviously of importance; and they are not trivial in the sense that they are discussed in every textbook. One might go further and say that it is a considerable time since they have been discussed at all. My young friends expected, therefore, that the suggestion mentioned would arouse some interest in scholarly circles. But young people are bad judges in matters of this kind. Only four or five scholars of my generation did become interested. One of them is a man of high reputation in his field who understands the contemporary dangers to intellectual freedom well enough

to realize that these dangers are caused, not only by men like Senator McCarthy but by the absurd dogmatism of certain academic “liberals” or “scientific” social scientists as well. He expressed the lesson which I had tried to convey by the words, “there is hope.”

Professor George H. Sabine has reviewed my book, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, in the April, 1953, issue of *Ethics*. He begins by wondering whether the canon for reading certain great books which I suggested “provides a workable rule for historical interpretation or an invitation to perverse ingenuity.” This doubt is perfectly justified, especially prior to any investigation: there is no method which cannot be misunderstood or misused. Did the principle that one ought to understand the teachings of the great thinkers in terms of their social backgrounds not also become, in more than one case, “an invitation to perverse ingenuity”? Sabine says that I make “the argument somewhat too easy when [I put] the case of a ‘master of the art of writing’ who ‘commits such blunders as would shame an intelligent high-school boy,’ because that kind of writing would not deceive even a careless reader.” I shall not complain about Sabine’s manner of quoting. I merely note that the quotation is a part of one sentence out of seven sentences which are meant to indicate some rules of reading. The complete sentence runs as follows: “If a master of the art of writing commits such blunders as would shame an intelligent high-school boy, it is reasonable to assume that they are intentional, especially if the author discusses, however incidentally, the possibility of intentional blunders in writing.” As regards Sabine’s remark on the passage which he quoted, I regret to say that I know of more than one case where commentators who are not exceptionally careless did not even notice blunders of this kind. Readers who do not notice blunders of this kind are not the only ones deceived. Also deceived are those who notice them but take them simply as blunders of the sort that everyone commits from time to time. Contradictions are one species of the blunders I had mentioned. “The limits of permissible or probable contradiction in an author

are really very difficult to determine.” Those limits are impossible to determine because the meaning of “an author” is so vague. Things which are true of the highest intellects are wholly inapplicable to others. The case of authors who explicitly say that they intentionally contradict themselves in order to indicate a secret teaching to an elite among their readers, is entirely different from that of authors who neither say nor indicate anything of the kind. Sabine cannot but admit that it is sometimes necessary to read between the lines, but he trivializes this admission by refusing to consider its implications. In particular, he evades the question of the criteria which would allow us to distinguish between guessing at and knowing what an author indicates between the lines. He raises the question, “Is reading between the lines characteristically the unraveling of an elaborate system of contrived deceptions?” This objection suffers again from lack of definiteness. I would rejoin: characteristic of whom? If a present-day American economist, of average intelligence and average power of expression, would indicate between the lines of an article a preference for planned economy while in the lines evading the issue “planned economy vs. the free enterprise system,” I would hesitate to assume that he is using “an elaborate system of contrived deceptions”; but writers of another caliber might well use such a “system.” Still, even the most casual writing between the lines makes unconscious or half-conscious use of those very principles of expression the fully conscious use of which presupposes “an elaborate system of contrived deceptions.” Sabine is doubtful whether I mean to say that “at least in political philosophy, a distinction between an esoteric and an exoteric meaning is the typical form of interpretation.” I never committed this absurdity. He asserts that “a society can hardly be imagined that does not put restrictions on what an author may say, or on the circumstances under which he may say it, or on the choice of persons to whom he may suitably say it.” I assert that societies in which men can attack in writings accessible to all both the established social or political order and the beliefs on which it is based can not only be imagined but have existed, e.g., the Third Repub-

lic in France and post-Bismarckian Wilhelminian Germany. I do not know what Sabine thinks of the wisdom of such extreme liberalism. Be this as it may, I admit of course that there were and are societies which were and are not extremely liberal. The issue concerns the conclusions which the historian must draw from the fact that not all literate societies were and are liberal. If a society prevents writers from freely discussing its principles, one is entitled to raise the question as to whether a writer who belongs to such a society and who makes himself the mouthpiece of its principles expresses these principles because he is convinced of their soundness or because he cedes to superior force. The question takes on some urgency if the writer in question is a great mind who expressly says that it is not wrong to teach doctrines which one regards as erroneous. It becomes still more urgent if his writings abound in enigmatic features which one easily overlooks if one is not attentive.

After stating his general criticism, Sabine turns to my chapter on Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*. He grants that that work "is well adapted to the use of Strauss's method" and that I am not entirely wrong in what I say about Spinoza's attitude toward revealed religion. If I understand him correctly, he means to say that while the rejection of revealed religion is a necessary consequence of Spinoza's *Ethics*, Spinoza was perhaps not fully aware of this consequence, whereas I had maintained that he was fully aware of it. I cannot discuss this criticism, which is not more than an unsupported assertion that my detailed argument, based almost entirely on the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, is perhaps faulty. Sabine does not leave it at expressing the opinion that my conclusions are perhaps uncertain. He tries to show that they are "in one respect . . . paradoxical." Spinoza, I had contended, used certain literary devices in order to conceal his seriously held views from the vulgar; but, Sabine says, "the vulgar whom he had most occasion to fear, namely, the Calvinist theologians" "were just the ones who were not deluded." I thought I had left no doubt about this point: I had spoken of Spinoza's extraordinary boldness. His whole enterprise consists

of what one might call an open attack on all forms of orthodox Biblical theology. He could dare to make this attack because he could count, within certain limits, on the sympathy of liberal believers or, more precisely, on the sympathy of those who regarded the moral teaching, as distinguished from the teaching about dogma and ritual, as the chief teaching of divine revelation as accessible in the Bible. The explicit theses of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* may be said to express an extreme version of the "liberal" view. But there are strong reasons for doubting that Spinoza himself agreed with that extreme version of the "liberal" view. Spinoza attempted to appease not any orthodox theologians but those who were more or less inclined toward a liberal Christianity. He concealed his partial, but decisively important, disagreement not with the orthodox theologians but with liberal believers of various shades.

In speaking of another "paradox" of mine, Sabine suggests that I regard the commentators as even less penetrating than the vulgar. This suggestion is not entirely wrong: I regard many present-day commentators as less penetrating than the vulgar of the seventeenth century, because the latter had a much greater awareness of the serious character of the theological problem and even of its details than do men brought up in the belief that enthusiasm for science and progress constitutes a form of religion. When Sabine says that Spinoza knew "that a frontal attack on Calvinist theology was impossible," I can only ask him whether Spinoza does not make a frontal attack on the belief in any miracles and whether a doctrine of a certain miracle (the miracle of resurrection) is not the very center of Calvinist theology as Spinoza knew it.

Sabine "should have preferred to believe that Spinoza was quite honest when he said that the chief aim of his book was to advocate freedom of speech and of investigation, rather than 'to refute the claims which have been raised on behalf of revelation throughout the ages' as Strauss says." The chief aim, or, according to the full title of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, the sole aim of that work is to advocate freedom of philosophiz-

ing. But, as Spinoza says in the preface, he cannot successfully defend that freedom without drawing the reader's attention to the chief prejudices regarding religion, i.e. especially to the prejudice that philosophy must be the handmaid of theology: he must advocate the radical separation of philosophy and theology. But such a radical separation appeared to him unreasonable if theology or the Bible could be assumed to teach theoretical truth. He was therefore compelled to try to show that the Biblical teaching has no cognitive value whatever: he was compelled to try to refute the claims which have been raised on behalf of revelation throughout the ages. It is legitimate to designate as the chief aim of a book that aim which the author consciously pursues in a very large part of the book, provided his having attained that aim is the necessary and sufficient condition for his other aim or aims becoming defensible. "If Spinoza was fully convinced that revelation ought to be refuted, he certainly knew that if toleration waited until there was general agreement on that point it would wait forever." Hence, I concluded, he argued exoterically on the assumption that, through the Bible, God has revealed to man, not indeed knowledge of things spiritual or natural, but the right principles of action, and that these principles demand toleration.

Sabine notes that my "argument about the esoteric interpretation of philosophical writings is combined with, and complicated by, another argument against . . . 'historicism'", but he does not see a "close logical relation between the two arguments." The strict connection is this. Esotericism necessarily follows from the original meaning of philosophy, provided that it is assumed that opinion is the element of society; but historicism is incompatible with philosophy in the original meaning of the word, and historicism cannot be ignored today. One can illustrate the connection between the two arguments as follows: Historicism may be said to be the view, accepted by Sabine, that "there are presumptions implicit in what Carl Becker called the 'climate of opinion' of an age that no contemporary ever fully grasps, precisely because they are so deeply ingrained in

the texture of his thinking.” In other words, even the greatest minds cannot liberate themselves from the specific opinions which rule their particular society. This view can be established more easily if all explicit statements of all great thinkers must be taken to express their private thoughts than if this assumption is questioned.

As regards my argument against historicism, Sabine doubts if he follows it. What I meant to say was that if one does not take seriously the intention of the great thinkers, namely, the intention to know the truth about the whole, one cannot understand them; but historicism is based on the premise that this intention is unreasonable because it is simply impossible to know the truth about the whole. I never said, as Sabine believes I did, that reading old books can support the truth of the statement “that, unless there is a single true account of the whole, no account of anything in particular can be true.” I merely said that reading old books is today indispensable as an antidote to the ruling dogma that the very notion of a final and true account of the whole is absurd. I never said that “a historian must proceed on the supposition that philosophers, even original and important ones, always know the presuppositions and consequences of all the statements they make.” I merely said that the historian must proceed on the supposition that the great thinkers understood better what they thought than the historian who is not likely to be a great thinker. Sabine however believes that “there are presumptions implicit in . . . ‘the climate of opinion’ of an age that no contemporary ever fully grasps.” He seems to imply that the historian may grasp fully the presuppositions, implicit in the ‘climate of opinion’, say, of early fourth century Athens which Plato, accepting those presuppositions, did not fully grasp. If Sabine had given an example he would have enabled his readers to consider whether he is right. I do not know of any historian who grasped fully a fundamental presupposition of a great thinker which the great thinker himself did not fully grasp.

The attitude of Sabine contrasts with the open-mindedness characteristic of M. Yvon Belaval’s review in the October, 1953,

issue of *Critique*. Even if Belaval had known only Renan's *Averroès* and the *Encyclopédie*, he would have been prevented from rejecting my suggestion *a limine*. He realizes that that suggestion gives unity and force to some fragmentary and scattered remarks which serious students of certain earlier thinkers could not help making. He realizes above all that my suggestion is not incompatible with compliance with the demands of historical exactness.

Belaval begins his criticism with the remark that my suggestion is based on the anti-positivist view "that the philosophic truth is untemporal" or on "a classical and rationalist conception of truth." He raises the question whether there is no contradiction between this view and my apparent concern with making historical inquiries independent of every philosophic postulate. I did not suggest that one can make the study of the history of philosophy independent of every philosophic postulate. History of philosophy necessarily presupposes the persistence of the same fundamental problems. This, and this alone, is the trans-temporal truth which must be admitted, if there is to be history of philosophy. On the other hand, history of philosophy is endangered if the historian starts from the acceptance of any solution of the fundamental problems: if he knows in advance that a given philosophic doctrine which he is studying is false, he lacks the incentive for studying that doctrine with sympathy or care. What I said does imply the rejection of positivism: positivism is blind to the fundamental problems, and therefore the positivist as positivist cannot be a historian of philosophy; a man who happens to be a positivist can become a historian of philosophy only to the extent to which he develops the capacity of questioning positivism.

Belaval raises the further question whether every philosophy finds itself in conflict with politics or only dogmatic philosophies. I can only repeat that there is a necessary conflict between philosophy and politics if the element of society necessarily is opinion, i.e. assent to opinion; this condition can be admitted by sceptics as well as by dogmatists; if this condition is rejected,

there can only be accidental conflicts between philosophy and politics, conflicts arising from the fact that philosophers sometimes reach positive or negative results which are at variance with the principles of a given society. Belaval notes that non-official dogmatisms sometimes provoked the opposition of religious authorities rather than of political authorities. We do not have to consider whether every authority proper is not in the last analysis political. It suffices to say that political men frequently welcomed the support of able unbelievers against religious fanatics who seemed to endanger the statesmanlike handling of affairs. But this fact—the fact, in other words, that philosophers generally speaking have preferred the rule of non-priests to the rule of priests—obviously does not prove that there is no fundamental tension between the requirements of philosophy and the requirements of political society. Belaval wonders whether in speaking of such a fundamental tension I did not “systematize a partial view,” i.e. the “Averroistic” view. The “Averroistic” view is no more partial than its contrary: both are total views about the relation of philosophy and politics. I would have to be much more ignorant than I am and in fact that anyone is if I had been unaware of the existence of the alternative to “Averroism.” Belaval is quite right when he says that one cannot infer an essential antinomy between philosophy and politics from the factual persecution of philosophers by political authorities. I am quite certain that I did not make this mistake. But I may add that one cannot infer an essential harmony between philosophy and politics from the factual recognition of a given philosophy, or even of all philosophies, by certain societies: that recognition may be based on capital errors. Belaval is also right when he says that one cannot accept the “Averroistic” view if one believes that M. Kojève teaches the truth.

Turning to the question of methods of reading, Belaval takes issue with my “axiom” that one writes as one reads. He asserts that very careful philosophers like Leibniz and Kant have not been very careful readers. I had not spoken of careful philosophers but of careful writers. Belaval has not proved that the

Nouveaux Essais and the *Critique of Pure Reason* are carefully written in the sense in which the *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di T. Livio* are carefully written, to say nothing of certain pre-modern books. In the same context, he expresses the suspicion that I might have mistaken the scholar for the philosopher, for he believes that by starting from certain Jewish and Islamic philosophers of the middle ages, I studied in fact scholars and commentators rather than philosophers: the writers in question were commentators on Plato and Aristotle rather than original philosophers. I doubt whether originality in the sense of discovery or invention of “systems” has anything to do with philosophic depth or true originality. Spinoza was much more original in the present day sense of the term than was Maimonides; but Maimonides was nevertheless a deeper thinker than Spinoza.

Belaval also questions the “axiom” that, of two contradictory statements the one that is the more subversive in the time of the author is the more secret. I had said that if we find in writings of a certain kind two contradictory theses, we are entitled to assume that the thesis which is more secret, i.e. which occurs more rarely, expresses the author’s serious view. Belaval believes that such a secret cannot be concealed at all. I must disagree. I have noticed more than once that if an author makes a statement on a very important subject only once, while in all other places he either asserts its contrary or remains silent on the subject, students of the author invariably ignore the unique statement when presenting the author’s doctrine: the unique statement is disregarded as unintelligible or unimportant. Belaval overestimates the carefulness and perspicacity of most readers. To prove his contention, he refers to the fact that the persecution of men like Maimonides and Spinoza began immediately after they had published certain books. This fact proves merely that they became immediately suspect of heterodoxy. It does not even prove that that suspicion was well-founded; there are examples of persecution of innocent men. It does not prove at all that their persecutors recognized how heterodox those great men were. Besides, these men or their causes had defenders

who would not have been allies if the degree or the precise character of their heterodoxy had been known. It is also not irrelevant to refer to the relatively mild character of the persecution in the two cases mentioned and in other similar cases. It is not sufficient to say, as Belaval does, that the security of philosophers depended less on the cautious character of their writings than on the political support from which they benefited: a completely imprudent philosopher is beyond support if he does not have the good fortune to be regarded as insane.

The main objection of Belaval is to the effect that the method of reading which I suggest can never lead to absolute certainty. He is right in questioning my comparison of the deciphering of esoteric texts with the deciphering of cuneiform texts: that comparison occurred in what I thought was rather obviously an argument *ad hominem*. I shall limit myself here to a counter-objection to Belaval's main objection: Do the alternative methods of reading lead to absolute certainty? Are not the alternative methods of reading based on the demonstratively false premises that in interpreting a book one may disregard completely what its author says about the necessity of secrecy or caution, and that one may disregard completely the unique or rare statements on important subjects in favor of what the author says most frequently or in all cases but one? As Belaval notes, M. Kojève, comparing my method to that of the detective, asserted that there is this difference: that my method cannot lead up to the confession of the criminal. My answer is twofold: I know of cases where the criminal confessed posthumously after having made sure that the detective would not condemn him; and I would be happy if there were suspicion of crime where up to now there has only been implicit faith in perfect innocence. At the very least the observations I have made will force historians sooner or later to abandon the complacency with which they claim to know what certain great thinkers thought, to admit that the thought of the past is much more enigmatic than it is generally held to be, and to begin to wonder whether the historical truth is not as difficult of access as the philosophic truth.

JOHN KEATS

ODE ON A GRECIAN URN

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st
Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.