

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION



For the last fifty years philosophy of history has been pursued in Poland along the lines drawn out by the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas. Its adherents—historicist in their inclinations—believed that the philosophical questions which the Ancients put forward were relevant only inasmuch as they helped to understand the world of today. The Warsaw historians were not particularly interested in why thinkers of old time gave the answers which they did and not others—they took them as their own if they conformed with their modern sensibilities and self-awareness. What matters for

the historicist is the context which always determines the meaning of philosophical utterances: the question concerning truth was something entirely different for Pontius Pilate than it is for us, the Moderns. Time alters the meaning of philosophical concepts, redefines them, reshapes them without any apparent purpose or aim. Should anyone attempt to understand Plato, Dante or Machiavelli on their own terms—the way they understood themselves—his or her deliberations would run the risk of mutating into scientific fiction. It is impossible to reconstruct the historical context accurately and faithfully enough to be able to say that “Nautilus” has finally reached the shores of unadulterated truth about things past—no, truth is always a truth for us. Does that mean, however, that thoughts of ages past properly belong in a museum cabinet, or can they still exert influence? We can never know that beforehand. That is why we need to thoroughly examine the conditions—social and economic ones primarily—in which these thoughts evolved if we hope to distinguish their proper meaning from anachronistic sediment. Only thus rectified can thoughts of the past prove their usefulness for modernity. The Warsaw historians, infected by “the Hegelian virus,” assumed that every human thought, every truth, is a product of its own time and passes with it. But if this assumption is correct, we have to admit that there can be no transhistorical truth, no truth tout court, and that therefore the Warsaw historians themselves represent a short-lived phenomenon in the course of the human spirit’s development. We bid them farewell without any qualms.

The Classical thinkers—as Leo Strauss believed—did not claim that philosophy, and its truth, was limited to the time in which they happened to live and work. In Thucydides’ words, they wrote so that “their teaching would be the property of all future generations.” They wrote believing in the existence of transhistorical, eternal meanings which needed to be uncovered. For great thinkers always create “beyond time”—their ideas have their “roots,” but they do not have a history; they are not generated, they simply are. Strauss, however, did not reject history as

such; he knew how to use it in revealing ways. It is sometimes useful to take into account the historical context of philosophical statements—he stressed—but this approach can only have a supplementary function. As Thomas Pangle rightly observes in his study of Strauss: “In studying the rare cases of authorial minds from the past whose liberation appears to be complete, we need to learn to see the author’s historical environment exactly as he saw it and conveyed it to his alert and demanding readers.” Abandoning this methodological rule is harmful to historical investigations; it is tantamount to an arrogant belief that we understand Ancient thinkers better than they understood themselves—that we are more modern and therefore wiser than them. It is more challenging, however, to listen to the great thinkers of past ages without interpreters; to let them say what they wanted to say and not what we would like to hear. The esoteric method of constructing their philosophical texts—Strauss argued—points to the existence of transhistorical meaning which is passed on beyond and above time like the holy fire from the temple of Zeus. The careful reader’s obligation is to try and grasp this esoteric message and to understand the text the way its author intended it to be understood. This means that philosophical texts always conceal a meaning which should not be spoken out loud because it can be applied in destructive ways. Responsible philosophers will not only avoid putting themselves at risk but will make sure not to hurt others unintentionally. Nevertheless, conflict seems inevitable: by challenging general opinions, the philosopher provokes the polis. A given thinker’s greatness is always measured by his nonconformism; his thought is valuable only inasmuch as it exceeds its time and undermines contemporary convictions—only dead fish go with the flow. Thus philosophy turns out to be a discipline very harmful to the proper functioning of the polis: it erodes its foundations of common sense, gossip and half-truths. The polis, in its turn, threatens the philosopher by imposing its “notions” on him. In such circumstances the philosopher has to practice the art of elusion: he accepts the city’s “notions” only outwardly and writes in such a way as to deceive the many while getting his message across to the intelligent few. The purpose of this is noble, however; it is a “noble lie.” The philosopher protects the polis against the consequences of his wild and subversive thoughts. Writing “between the lines” allows the philosopher to resist the power of the polis and—conversely—safeguards the city against the power of philosophical truth which becomes diluted and difficult to grasp by the many. The philosopher thrives on truth; the polis needs illusions, veils, myths and poets, since no community—imperfect in its nature—can live up to the demands which philosophy make on its practitioners.

What then is philosophy’s attitude towards religious thought? Sergio Quinzio believed that no human community can survive long if it is cut off from religious “energy.” From this perspective, philosophy—impermeable to myth—is and has always been an alien element, an irreligious force in the ordinary man’s world. It constitutes a realm of freedom—freedom, above all, from moral and religious obligations—and as such is difficult to accept and potentially dangerous because it rejects all authority, including the authority of God. Such things, however, cannot be spoken of—the philosopher must learn to lie. As Strauss says: “The exoteric teaching was needed for protecting philosophy. It was the armor in which philosophy had to appear. It was needed for political reason. It was a form in which philosophy became visible to the political community. It was the political aspect of philosophy. It was ‘political’ philosophy.”

“Political philosophy” is the philosopher’s means of survival. Its main task is to convince the majority of citizens that philosophers are not atheists.

The third issue of the English edition of *Kronos* opens with a previously unpublished passage from Leo Strauss's lectures on Aristotle. I would like to thank Professor Nathan Tarcov, the director of The Leo Strauss Center, for giving us permission to publish it.

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