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KARL LÖWITH AND LEO STRAUSS ON MODERNITY, SECULARIZATION, AND NIHILISM

Karl Löwith and Leo Strauss are thinkers who have not been reckoned with together too frequently. This state of things seems to be the more striking since at a first glance they appear to agree on some crucial points regarding the situation of the modern man. In this article I will try to explore their respective views on modernity with a particular emphasis on its political consequences. The first impression is that both Löwith and Strauss share a negative view of modernity and their writings provide a deeply insightful account of that dissatisfaction. But there are some other reasons that seem to encourage an attempt to compare their thought and life. They came to know each other during the tumultuous Weimar era and to some extent followed similar life paths by sharing the fates of émigrés. Given the footnotes, reviews and explicit quotations, Strauss and Löwith read each other's works, and maintained lifelong correspondence. It is not a completely negligible fact that in a letter from April 28, 1954 to Alexandre Kojève Strauss asked him to send a copy of *On Tyranny* to Karl Löwith saying that he would have an understanding of the issue controversial between him and the Frenchman.[1]

However, one should not forget that in the final analysis Leo Strauss came to be seen as a political philosopher who had attempted something very ambitious, namely, a thoroughgoing critique of the modern historical malady, the revival of classical political philosophy, and establishment of a school of political thinking. Compared to that Karl Löwith may seem to be a more restrained and introverted personality. He was a philosopher who may be referred to as a chronicler of European nihilism and explorer of continuity and change in modern historical consciousness. This difference becomes visible in their respective ways of writing. Strauss usually disguised his views in the form of dense commentary on philosophical texts; however, his moderation was scattered from time to time by the outbursts of a truly passionate prose, as in his debate with Alexandre Kojève. Löwith preferred a characteristic melancholy style and his mode of proceeding

[1] Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny.* Revised and Expanded Edition, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth, eds. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 263.

was perfectly captured by Strauss himself in his review of Löwith's seminal work *From Hegel to Nietzsche*: "It is written *sine ira et studio*, without sentimentality or vagueness, and with competence and a natural grace. The treatment is narrative and meditative rather than disputative or analytical. At times (…) the author (…) seems to draw rather than speak."[2]

Before taking a closer view at the picture of modernity they draw it may be profitable to recall a few basic historical facts that lie in the background of their encounter.[3] Strauss was born to an Orthodox Jewish family in a small city in northern Germany, but he relatively quickly emancipated himself from the Jewish tradition owing to his *Gymnasium* education. Löwith was born in Munich to a Protestant family of Jewish origin and grew up in a rather well-established world of the pre-war bourgeoisie. These different backgrounds seem to account for the fact that the problem of Jewish faith and the Jewish fate had always remained a strong presence in Strauss's thought. Correspondingly, Karl Löwith explored the meaning of Protestantism for German philosophy and was even mistakenly taken by some readers to be a Protestant theologian. In 1965, in the autobiographical Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, Strauss wrote that he was "a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grips of the theologico-political predicament."[4] In fact, the theologico-political problem had remained his lifelong challenge and may be regarded as the foreground of his concern.[5] In turn, Karl Löwith in his account of the situation in Germany written in 1940, entitled *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933*, claimed that he had never emphasized his Jewishness before Hitler's seizure of power and perceived himself as a German whose life was based firmly and completely on "emancipation."[6] But regardless of these differences they both had to leave Germany when the Nazis came to power. They both witnessed the turmoil and upheaval of European civilization, belonging to a generation which had very strong feelings of decay, crisis and hitherto unknown demise of belief in almost everything that had been previously deemed sacred or indispensible. In other words, they belonged to a generation that – in Löwith's own words – "had been cheated of any sign of homecoming."[7] Their confrontation with modernity must be seen against the backdrop of the imminent crisis of the European spirit which may be labeled as the crisis of modernity. One may rightly say that the experience

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[2] Leo Strauss, "Review of Von Hegel bis Nietzsche," *Social Research*, 8:4 (Nov. 1941), p. 513.

[3] I draw the biographical data from Wiebrecht Ries, *Karl Löwith* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1992).

[4] Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p. 224.

[5] Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. M. Brainard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 3-28.

[6] Karl Löwith, *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933*, trans. E. King (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), p. 57.

[7] Ibid., p. 16.

of political and cultural upheavals prompted them to undertake the philosophical investigation of the basic tenets of the modern world. Both Löwith and Strauss approached the problem of modernity by posing and exploring in a profound way the problem of its legitimacy. One of the most fundamental questions was the question of "whether our task is to push down what is falling, i.e., a disintegrating world, or whether it is the more responsible task of reforming and renewing our tradition."[8] As we will see, they ultimately decided in favor of the latter alternative. One may say that they both experienced a remarkable change of philosophical orientation. In case of Leo Strauss that change occurred around 1932 in the form of his rejection of his previously held "prejudice" that the return to pre-modern philosophy is impossible and was accompanied by his rediscovery of the art of writing practiced by philosophers of earlier ages.[9] In Karl Löwith that change of orientation seems to have occurred circa 1935 when he started subjecting the "historicist-relativist" point of view to criticism and defending the notion of philosophy as a "force of integral knowledge which gives rise to an order of human affairs" rather than committing itself to the demands of the time.[10]

In 1949, a few years after World War II, Löwith published in Chicago one of his most influential and discussed books, *Meaning in History. The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (the date of publication coincides with Strauss's Walgreen lectures, published later on as *Natural Right and History*), where he advances the so-called secularization thesis. The book's subtitle proved somewhat misleading since Löwith's main aim lies primarily not in showing the theological implications of history but, on the contrary, the theological presuppositions or theological background of modern philosophies of history, and our historical consciousness as such. In his study Löwith elaborates the problem of modernity on the plane of philosophy of history by which he understands "a systematic interpretation of universal history in accordance with a principle by which historical events and successions are unified and directed toward an ulti-

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[8] Karl Löwith, "Review of 'What Nietzsche Means' by George Allen Morgan," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Dec. 1941), p. 242.

[9] Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, p. 31. Cf. Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, pp. 64-65: "The grounds that induced the philosophers to write exoteric-esoterically, however, go far beyond political considerations of censorship and persecution. They arise from the insight into the insuperable tension that exists between the political community and philosophy. The exoteric-esoteric double-face is the attempt to protect philosophers from society and nonphilosophers from philosophy. It is destined to take account of the necessities of politics on the one hand and of the requirements of the philosophical life on the other. The art of careful writing is therefore the expression of an equally fundamental and comprehensible reflection on politics, philosophy, and the nature of the philosopher."

[10] Berthold Riesterer, *Karl Löwith's View of History: A Critical Appraisal of Historicism* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), pp. 33-34.

mate end."[11] His point of departure is the claim that we find ourselves more or less at the end of the modern rope which "has worn too thin to give hopeful support." We encounter a situation in which "to ask earnestly the question of the ultimate meaning of history takes one's breath away; it transports us into a vacuum which only hope and faith can fill."[12] In other words, the ability of the modern philosophy of history to provide a meaningful account of human history has almost disappeared. Once a spell-binding and fruitful intellectual endeavor, now philosophy of history loses its credentials in the wake of the dissolution of the belief in progress and reason. Löwith tries to explain the current demise of philosophy of history as well as the more fundamental problem regarding the very possibility of raising the question about the ultimate meaning of history. As he put it, "it is the very absence of meaning in the events themselves that motivates the quest."[13] He claims that philosophy of history is dependent on theology of history, namely on the theological concept of history as a history of fulfillment and salvation. One can find the genuine source of philosophy of history in the Jewish and Christian faith. In this way he dismisses the prejudice that proper historical thinking begins only in modern times. In his study he reverses the historical presentation on the assumption that readers belonging to "a generation that is just awakening from the secular dream of progress" would have a better understanding of his thesis if they were shown the theological background of these trains of thought that are not completely unfamiliar, i.e., the belief in progress, and not as distant as the religious belief in providence. This explains why he starts from Burckhardt's renunciation of philosophy of history, which is closer to our mode of thinking than anything else, and goes back through the ages to the original Biblical story of salvation.[14] Löwith presents his arguments by contrasting the Greeks and the Bible. The Ancients did not look for the ultimate meaning of history; they were mesmerized by the beauty of the universe; they were concerned not with the *Lord of History*, but with the *logos* of the cosmos.[15] The Greeks believed in the rationality of the natural cosmos that was governed by the cyclical or periodical law of growth and decay. According to this law "everything moves within recurrences, like the eternal recurrence of sunrise and sunset, of summer and winter, of

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[11] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History. The Theological Implications of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 1.

[12] Ibid., p. 3.

[13] Ibid., p. 4.

[14] The "turning points" in Löwith's book are linked with the names of Marx, Hegel, Comte, Voltaire, Bossuet, Vico, Joachim, Augustine, and Orosius.

[15] Ibid., p. 6: "To the Greeks (…) historical events and destinies were certainly not simply meaningless – they were full of import and sense, but they were not meaningful in the sense of being directed toward an ultimate end (…) they supposed that it is possible to foretell the future; to the Old Testament writers only the Lord himself could reveal, through his prophets, a future which is independent of all that has happened in the past and which cannot be inferred from the past as a natural consequence."

generation and corruption."[16] This cosmic law set also the pattern for their understanding of history and, as Löwith contends, there was no room for the universal significance of a unique historical event like the incarnation of God. The eminent ancient historians like Thucydides, Herodotus or Polybius were concerned almost completely with political history, and – Löwith concludes – "that history, like a magnifying mirror reveals also the nature of man, but not as ever-changing, but rather constantly the same."[17] The Bible brings about the claim that history has an ultimate meaning which transcends the actual historical events; it accounts for the setting of eschatology as the basic pattern of Western historical consciousness. Thus Löwith contends that the Biblical faith brings into the world something of a tremendous importance:

> the significance of this vision [history as a story of salvation - AG], as both *finis* and *telos*, is that it provides a scheme of progressive order and meaning, a scheme which has been capable of overcoming the ancient fear of fame and fortune. Not only does the *eschaton* delimit the process of history by an end, it also articulates and fulfills it by a definite goal. The bearing of the eschatological thought on the historical consciousness of the Occident is that it conquers the flux of historical time, which wastes away and devours its own creations unless it is defined by an ultimate goal. Comparable to the compass which gives us orientation in space, and thus enables us to conquer it, the eschatological compass gives orientation in time by pointing to the Kingdom of God as the ultimate end and purpose.[18]

In other words, the historical process is rendered comprehensible on the ground of the theological principle consisting of man's sin against God and God's willingness to redeem man from the state into which he has fallen.[19]

Löwith writes that the moderns are neither ancient Ancients nor ancient Christians, but a mélange of both; we still live on the Christian and classical capital

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[16] Ibid. When Löwith refers to the cosmos in the Greek thought he means a specific constitution of the natural world, "an orderly totality as distinct from a disorderly, chaotic totality of the same beings which, as cosmos, are *kata kosmon*, cosmos-like" (Karl Löwith, "Heidegger: Problem and Background of Existentialism," *Social Research*, 15:1/4, 1948, p. 353). It is the notion of an orderly cosmos which was known earlier, but its usage was firmly established only in Plato's *Timaeus*. But one should not forget that there is, to use Rémi Brague's expression, "the other Greece," e.g., Epicureanism which considers the sky not the source of repose and order, but the "primary source of terror," and which confronts Plato with a view of the world as a perishable arrangement of atoms that might have been completely different. Platonic "imitation of the world" is thus rendered impossible: "The fact that our world is only one exemplar prevents it from being an example." (Cf. Rémi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World. The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*, trans. T. Lavender Fagan, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, pp. 29-43).

[17] Karl Löwith, *Permanence and Change. Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (Cape Town: Haum, 1969), p. 12.

[18] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 18.

[19] Ibid., p. 183.

even if we are reluctant to think of ourselves in those terms. This ambiguity becomes perfectly visible in the philosophy of history of Alexis de Tocqueville, Oswald Spengler, and Arnold Toynbee. The author of *Democracy in America* perceives the progress democracy has made worldwide as something ordained by Providence and yet he believes that this process ought to be moderated by human efforts lest it take on dangerous and unwished-for consequences. In Spengler's view of the declining West the inescapable fate ought to be willed, which reminds one about Nietzsche's *amor fati* and not necessarily the classical writers. And finally, Toynbee no longer accepts the Christian reckoning of time and yet he tries to secure the claim that Christianity is still the greatest new event in history as seen from the "astronomical" perspective (i.e., time that has elapsed since the world's beginning). He avers that the movement of civilizations is cyclical, but the movement of religion is on a single track that goes continuously upward and will end up in establishment of Christianity as the world religion. Löwith dismisses his philosophy as a product of someone who is "neither an empirical historian nor good theologian," and who fell prey to modern naturalistic and secularized thinking.[20] These three examples may serve as an additional illustration of Löwith's secularization thesis which may be summarized as follows:

> The Greek historians wrote pragmatic history centered around a great political event; the Church Fathers developed from Hebrew prophecy and Christian eschatology a theology of history focused on the supra-historical events of creation, incarnation, and consummation; the moderns elaborate a philosophy of history by secularizing theological principles and applying them to an ever increasing number of empirical facts. It seems as if the two great conceptions of antiquity and Christianity, cyclic motion and eschatological direction, have exhausted the basic approaches to understanding history.[21]

It becomes clear that Löwith conceives modernity not in terms of a radical break with the preceding tradition; on the contrary, he underlines the persistence of the eschatological pattern in shaping our modern consciousness. In this sense he denies modernity's claim to radical autonomy, originality or legitimacy. One may wonder whether Löwith's account of the secularization of the Biblical faith does not blur the difference between the Middle Ages and modernity if, regardless of all differences, they share the same basic eschatological pattern, even if the latter has secularized it. However, this objection is qualified by the fact that Löwith's view of modernity is much more intricate. The already discussed eschatological pattern is only one of the essential "components" of modernity. The other, which is of utmost importance, refers to the demise of the vision of the world as an orderly *cosmos* as the consequence of the birth of modern natural science. In other words, modernity actually begins with "the dissolution of natural and social *order* in which man was supposed to have a definite *nature* and *place*, while modern man 'exists', displaced and out of place, in extreme situations on

[20] Ibid., pp. 14-15.

[21] Ibid., p. 19.

the edge of chaos."[22] Philosophers of early modernity, such as Francis Bacon and Descartes, declared that the goal of science is to make man the master of nature: "the better man succeeded in this the more could the natural science be serviceable to man's historical purposes and projects."[23] Löwith contends that the historical movements of modernity owe their intensity to modern natural science: "In consequence of this modern tendency to think and act in terms of purposes, the quest for meaning has become focused in history, because only as history can the world be related directly to man and his purposes."[24] The birth of historicism and existentialism is due to the modern scientific outlook which, by making the earth more "serviceable" to man, bears responsibility for our ever increasing estrangement from it. He writes:

> The exclusive emphasis on our human existence and on the world as a historical one has a concomitant in the lack of sense for that which is natural. The denaturation of human life to a historical existence did not, however, arise with modern historicism and existentialism, but with modern natural science. It is against the background of nature as conceived by modern natural science that existentialism itself comes into existence, for its basic experience is not of historicity but the contingency of human existence within the whole of natural world.[25]

This rise of the experience of "contingency" of man's being in the world is understood by Löwith as the reverse side of the destruction of the vision of an orderly cosmos, the experience one can find expressed in the writings of such various philosophers and poets as Pascal, John Donne, Kant, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. In other words, modernity is marked by the demise of the natural theology and cosmology of antiquity and supernatural theology of Christianity: "If the universe is neither eternal and divine (Aristotle) nor contingent but created (Augustine), if man has no definite place in the hierarchy of an eternal or created cosmos, then, and only then, does man begin to 'exist', ecstatically and historically."[26] Löwith concludes that there are discernible connections between this "cosmological nihilism of modern subjectivity" and the political implications of modern thinking. More specifically, he focuses on the 19th century process of dissolution of the Hegelian philosophy of spirit and the shift in the very notion of philosophy which now becomes a "world-view" or "interpretation of life."[27] Löwith claims that the political consequences of existentialism become visible in the proximity between Martin Heidegger's existentialist philosophy and Carl

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[22] Löwith, "Heidegger: Problem and Background of Existentialism," p. 347.

[23] Karl Löwith, "Nature, History, and Existentialism," *Social Research*, 19:1/4 (1952), p. 83.

[24] Ibid., p. 84.

[25] Ibid., p. 88.

[26] Löwith, "Nature, History, and Existentialism," p. 94.

[27] Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche. The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought*, trans. D.E. Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 64.

Schmitt's political "decisionism." According to him, Heidegger's affirmation of the authentic *Dasein* corresponds to Schmitt's affirmation of the political; "freedom for death" to "sacrifice of life." He believes that in both cases the principle is the same, i.e., naked "facticity" or all that remains when one has disposed of all life content.[28] And, as we have learnt from Löwith's narrative of the development of Western thought, "there is an intimate relation between the experience of a naked, factual, absurd existence, and the anonymity of the world itself in which we happen to exist."[29]

Strauss and Löwith agree as to the essential aim of modern natural science. Strauss in the Introduction to *City and Man* expresses a thought that he has advocated in many places, i.e., that the modern project was originated by philosophers who viewed nature as something to be conquered for the sake of man and his natural needs.[30] To some extent Strauss acknowledges that it is possible to consider modernity in terms of the secularization thesis.[31] Nonetheless, he claims that the common notion of secularization, i.e., the becoming of what is transcendent and other-worldly, immanent and this-worldly, needs to be qualified. First, the secularization thesis attempts to integrate the eternal into a temporal context, so the former is no longer understood as eternal. In this way secularization presupposes a radical change of thought, and according to him that change occurred primarily not within theology itself but came into being with the emergence of modern natural and political philosophy or science. In the final analysis secularization is an accommodation of theology to that new intellectual climate and it ends up in the conceited contention that the providential order can be known to the enlightened men. Strauss claims that:

> The theological tradition recognized the mysterious character of Providence especially by the fact that God uses or permits evil for his good ends. It asserted, therefore, that man cannot take his bearings by God's providence but only by God's law, which simply forbids man to do evil. In proportion as the providential order came to be regarded as intelligible to man, and therefore evil came to be regarded as evidently necessary or useful, the prohibition against doing evil lost its evidence. Hence various ways of action which were previously condemned as evil could now be regarded as good. The goals of human action were

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[28] Karl Löwith, *The Political Implications of Heidegger's Existentialism*, in *The Heidegger Controversy*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge, Ma.-London, Eng.: The MIT Press, 1993), pp. 173-174. Cf. Karl Löwith, "Der okkasionelle Dezisionismus von C. Schmitt," in Karl Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 8, ed. K. Stichweh (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1984), pp. 61-62.

[29] Löwith, "Nature, History, and Existentialism," p. 89.

[30] Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 7.

[31] Cf. Nathan Tarcov, "Preface to the Japanese translation of *On Tyranny*," *Perspectives on Political Science*, vol. 33, no. 4 (Fall 2004), p. 225: "Strauss ultimately leaves open the question of 'how far the epoch-making change that was effected by Machiavelli is due to the indirect influence of the Biblical tradition' and, therefore, also the question of the truth of Kojève's view that modern philosophy is the secularized form of Christianity."

lowered. But it is precisely a lowering of these goals which modern political philosophy consciously intended from its very beginning.[32]

Second, Strauss points out that the secularization thesis may have too general a character: "Secularization means the preservation of thoughts, feelings, or habits of biblical origin after the loss or atrophy of biblical faith (…) [It] does not tell us anything as to what kind of ingredients are preserved in secularizations."[33] Yet modernity, as understood by Strauss, was conceived as a positive project which at the same time may be characterized in a most general way as a radical modification, or rather rejection, of premodern political philosophy. This shortcoming on the part of the explanatory force of the secularization thesis prevents Strauss from embracing it as the main interpretive tool in his explanation of the origins of modernity; nevertheless, secularization of the Christian legacy, as we will see, will play an important role in Strauss's explanation of some characteristic features of modernity.

Strauss explains the project of modernity as comprising three waves of modernity. The first wave began with Machiavelli and was completed by Bacon and Hobbes; the second is connected with Rousseau; the third with Nietzsche. According to Strauss, the author of the *Prince* rejected the entire philosophical and political tradition by lowering the standards, by taking his bearings not by how men ought to live, but how men actually live. Classical political philosophy was concerned with the search for the best political order, i.e., the political order which gives support to the practice of virtue. Its basic premise is that the good life is the life according to nature, and nature is conceived as providing man with the standard that is independent of his will. Strauss dismisses the accusation exerted by some contemporary thinkers that Plato was a utopist (i.e., in Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*) with the remark that the classical philosophers were perfectly aware that the best city is a city in speech, not in deed; that the bringing of the best city into existence is so demanding that it ultimately depends on improbably favorable circumstances.[34] Machiavelli is more modest but at the same time he is more ambitious as well; he claims that chance can be controlled

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[32] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 317. According to Hans Blumenberg, "Leibniz's theodicy characterizes the bad things in the world no longer in moral terms but rather in instrumental ones. Leo Strauss saw the element of 'secularization' precisely in this that not only has providence lost its mysteriousness for reason, but at the same time the claim to absoluteness of the divine laws has been overlaid by the justification of evil means by the grandeur of the overall end. The *Theodicy* paves the way for the modern concept of history to the extent that it demonstrates the rationality of absolute ends by the model of divine action." (Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of Modernity*, trans. R. Wallace, Cambridge, Ma.- London, Eng.: The MIT Press, 1985, p. 55).

[33] Leo Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity," in *Political Philosophy. Six Essays*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Indianapolis-New York: Pegasus-Bobbs-Merill, 1975), p. 83.

[34] Ibid., p. 84: "The establishment of the best regime depends necessarily on uncontrollable, elusive fortuna or chance (…) According to Plato's *Republic*, e.g., the coming into being

and the human matter transformed. Hence the moral or political problem becomes a technical problem, and nature as a standard gets overlaid by the ideal of civilization. The conquest of nature is conducted in order to relieve man's estate and to make man's life easier and safer. In Strauss's narrative each wave of modernity ends up in crisis, and each consecutive wave may be essentially understood as a response to the previous crisis, though it always brings about the radicalization of modernity. When Machiavelli destroyed the connection between politics and natural law, Hobbes restored it in such a way that it no longer accorded with the classical notion of natural law but with the modern theory of the state of nature which presents nature not as a standard of good life, but as hostile to human wellbeing. Strauss understands Hobbes's state of nature in which war of all against all is a real threat and constant possibility as essentially polemical; in other words, the state of nature has been conceived in such a way that men cannot help but want to get out of it; they must embark on a civilizing mission aimed at establishing a civil state that will let them live relatively peacefully and safely under the power of that mortal god Leviathan.[35] Hobbes replaces natural law, understood in terms of duties and obligations, with the rights of man (e.g., the right to self-preservation) which makes him the true founder of liberalism. Rousseau's intention to restore the classical notion of virtue dismissed by Hobbes marks the second wave of modernity. However, his attempt failed due to the fact that he was unable to extricate himself from the modern concept of the state of nature; in Rousseau man's humanity is a product of the historical process which is not teleological; in Strauss' words, "man becomes human without intending it."[36] The discovery of history which has taken place between the times of Rousseau and Nietzsche is crucial to the third wave of modernity. In the course of the 19th century Hegel's belief in the absolute moment in history became shattered and replaced with the belief that the historical process is either unfinished or unfinishable, though the belief in rationality and progress survived. The thoroughgoing critique of rationality and progress is the product of the third wave of modernity, namely Nietzsche. He draws the final and radical conclusion that the historical insight uprooted the claim on the part of all known ideals to be grounded in nature, God, or reason. Nietzsche teaches us that reason builds upon irrationalities and that all hitherto known ideals are merely of human invention.

Strauss's stance on modernity may be briefly summarized as follows. Modernity not only lowers the goal of man and seeks actualization of the best social order complying with it, but it promises a universal reconciliation between citi-

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of the best regime depends on the coincidence, the unlikely coming together, of philosophy and political power."

[35] Leo Strauss, "Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*," in Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss. The Hidden Dialogue*, trans. J.H. Lomax (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 99.

[36] Strauss, "Three Waves of Modernity," p. 90.

zens.[37] Contrary to the classical thought, modernity presupposes that that there are no insurmountable differences between men; in other words, if universal Enlightenment is possible, the efforts of philosophy and politics can go hand in hand. Strauss engaged in the debate with Kojève because he regarded him to be exemplary representative of the "modern solution" (i.e., the replacement of the moral virtue by universal recognition[38]). The nature of the modern solution implies that the esoteric-exoteric distinction no longer needs to be upheld.[39] The crisis of modernity springs from its unfulfilled promises; as Strauss put it, "the classical solution is utopian in the sense that its actualization is improbable" while "the modern solution is utopian in the sense that its actualization is impossible."[40]

But there is much more to Strauss' view of modernity than the three wave hypothesis. It is important to add that the Christian legacy plays an important role in Strauss's understanding of the development of Western thought. In contrast to Löwith he points towards the difference within so-called Judeo-Christian tradition by discussing an agreement between the Jewish and Muslim thought on the one hand and ancient thought on the other:

> it is not the Bible and the Koran, but perhaps the New Testament, and certainly the Reformation and modern philosophy, which brought about the break with ancient thought. The guiding idea upon which the Greeks and the Jews agree is precisely the idea of the divine law as a single and total law which is at the same time religious law, civil law, and moral

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[37] Robert Pippin, "The Modern World of Leo Strauss," *Political Theory*, vol. 20, no. 3 (Aug., 1992), p. 451: "The 'ancient' position by contrast (…) is easy to state: no reconciliation. The city or the public world is a permanent cave. Even if the philosopher in the *Republic* can be persuaded (perhaps by the force of the argument that he owes the city a debt) or, paradoxically, can persuade the many to compel him to return, it is clear that he must rule in the dark. He cannot bring the outside light in, and it never seems to enter his mind to attempt to bring those inside out (apart from a select few)."

[38] Strauss, *On Tyranny*, p. 210.

[39] David Janssens underlines the importance of the difference between esotericism and exotericism for understanding the difference between classical and modern philosophy: "The philosopher as such transcends the political realm, as a human being he owes obedience to the laws of the polis and respect to its opinions. For this reason, Plato subjects the philosopher to the divine law of the best regime, which compels him to devote his wisdom to justice and the care of his fellow men. In this way, he exoterically preserves the primacy of justice and courage, while esoterically crowning wisdom as the highest virtue. We should not forget, however, that wisdom is understood here in the Socratic sense, as the awareness of ignorance regarding the good and the just. The distinction between an esoteric and an exoteric dimension allows Plato to mediate between the political power of opinion and the philosophic pursuit of the truth, without detracting from either. In contrast, Hobbes's radical critique of courage starts from a passion that is equally developed in all human beings, and ultimately aims at eradicating the difference between esotericism and exotericism." (David Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem. Philosophy, Prophecy, and Politics in Leo Strauss's Early Thought*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008, p. 162).

[40] Strauss, *On Tyranny*, p. 210.

> law. And it is indeed a Greek philosophy of the divine law which is the basis of the Jewish and Muslim philosophy of the Torah or the Shari'a; according to Avicenna, Plato's *Laws* is the classic work on prophecy and the Shari'a. The prophet occupies in this medieval politics the same place the philosopher-kings occupy in Platonic politics: by fulfilling the essential conditions of the philosopher-kings, enumerated by Plato, he founds the perfect city, i.e., the ideal Platonic city.[41]

Strauss claims that Christianity seems to account not only for the "Christianization" of Plato, but also for the radical character of the modern critique of religion. On this point both Strauss and Löwith remain in fundamental agreement with Nietzsche: modern atheism has little in common with the age-old Epicurean motif and is descendant of Biblical morality.[42] This new atheism from "intellectual probity" fights religion not because of its allegedly disturbing character but because it is a delusion.[43]

One may also wonder whether in fact there is in Strauss the fourth wave of modernity, which would belong to Heidegger. This seems to be justified at least by the importance Strauss gave to Heidegger's radicalization of modernity, i.e., his existentialism.[44] Here it suffices to remark that Strauss's appraisal of the significance of Christian legacy for the modern thought reveals itself again in his judgment that Heidegger and the "new thinking" have failed to extricate them-

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[41] Leo Strauss, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," trans. R. Bartlett, *Interpretation*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Fall 1990), pp. 4-5.

[42] Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, p. 29. Cf. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 7: "Nietzsche was right when he said that to look upon nature as if it were a proof of the goodness and care of God and to interpret history as a constant testimony to a moral order and purpose – that all this is now past because it has conscience against it." Both Strauss and Löwith refer to fragment 357 of *Gay Science* where Nietzsche says that that what really triumphed over the Christian God is Christian morality itself, "the concept of truthfulness that was understood ever more rigorously, the father confessor's refinement of the Christian conscience, translated and sublimated into a scientific conscience, into intellectual cleanliness at any price." (in *The Nietzsche Reader*, eds. K. A. Pearson, D. Large, Malden-Oxford-Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp. 371-372).

[43] According to Leo Strauss this new atheism, contrary to the Epicurean critique of religion, is bold and active, and it accords with the general outline of the "modern solution:" "Liberated from the religious delusion, awakened to sober awareness of his real situation, taught by bad experiences that he is threatened by a stingy, hostile nature, man recognizes as his sole salvation and duty, not so much 'to cultivate his garden' as in the first place to plant a garden by making himself the master and owner of nature. But this whole enterprise requires, above all, political action, revolution" (Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, p. 29).

[44] Cf. Leo Strauss, "An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism," in Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

selves from the Christian presuppositions and represent awareness that is in the fundamental sense "a secularized version of the Biblical faith."[45]

All differences regarding the understanding of the origins of modernity aside, both Strauss and Löwith conclude that modernity ended up in crisis which proper name seems to be nihilism. While Löwith speaks about existence in existentialist ontology as "blind and deaf to any light that does not burn in its own sphere and to any voice that does not sound from itself," existence that is "a cave-dweller who knows neither Platonic sun nor the Christian regeneration, nor the Jewish waiting till the day of redemption,"[46] Strauss goes even further and employs the highly suggestive picture of the "second cave" with regard to modernity in general. Strauss's attempt to reopen the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, as well as his defense of the claims of Revelation against the assault of modern rationalism (i.e., his critique of Spinoza's refutation of the Revelation), and rejuvenation of the notion of natural right may be seen in the light of his task to undermine the predominant historical consciousness of our times and return to philosophy in its original Socratic sense. As he reflected, "philosophy in the original meaning of the word presupposes the liberation from historicism (…) liberation from it, and not merely refutation (…) the liberation from historicism requires that historical consciousness be seen to be, not a self-evident premise, but a *problem.*"[47] In turn, Löwith describes his efforts as a correction of our obsession with temporality or history and its vicissitudes.[48] He wants to regain an attitude toward the world that is theoretical in the classical sense, i.e., free of historical consciousness and elevated above practice and pragmatic restrictions.[49] This attitude is less anthropocentric since, as he reminded us, the world and the human world are not equivalent; one can imagine the natural world without a reference to man, but man cannot be imagined without the existence of the world:

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[45] Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, pp. 12-13: "Heidegger wishes to expel from philosophy the last relics of Christian theology like the notions of 'eternal truths' and 'the idealized absolute subject.' But the understanding of man which he opposes to the Greek understanding of man as the rational animal is, as he emphasizes, primarily the Biblical understanding of man as created in the image of God. Accordingly, he interprets human life in the light of 'being towards death,' 'anguish,' 'conscience,' and 'guilt'; in this most important respect he is much more Christian than Nietzsche." Cf. Karl Löwith, "Heidegger: Thinker in a Destitute Time," in Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger. European Nihilism*, ed. Richard Wolin, trans. G. Steiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 116.

[46] Karl Löwith, "M. Heidegger and F. Rosenzweig or Temporality and Eternity," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Sep., 1942), pp. 60-61.

[47] Leo Strauss, "Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy," in Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 133.

[48] K. Löwith, *Permanence and Change*, p. 8.

[49] Jürgen Habermas, "Karl Löwith: Stoic Retreat from Historical Consciousness," in *Philosophical-Political Profiles* (Cambridge, Ma.-London, Eng.: The MIT Press, 1990), p. 84.

"We come into the world – he does not come to us – and we separate from it while he outlives us."[50]

The recognition of the crisis of modernity led them to reflect on whether there might be any possibility of return. For Strauss the problem of return is ambiguous at the very outset since the Western tradition consists of the two major elements that oppose each other: the Bible and Greek philosophy, Jerusalem and Athens. This disagreement, this battle for minds and hearts has been increasingly neglected though it is the crucial element of the vitality of the Western civilization. In turn, for Löwith the problem of return emerged above all in the form of two interpretations of nihilism delivered by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.[51] Their philosophies may be understood as returns – the former as the return to the uncorrupted purity of early Christianity, and the latter as the return to the ancient vision of the cosmos in the form of the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same. They shared the insight that men need eternity in order to withstand the flux of time and aimed to restore the right place to eternity, which has come into oblivion[52]. Kierkegaard's "eternal instant" and Nietzsche's paradox of "the eternal recurrence" are the means by which they attempted in a distinctly different ways at the overcoming of nihilism. But while for the Danish philosopher nihilism is the product of our estrangement from the ideals of the first Christians, for the German philosopher it is the consequence of our being Christians for two millennia. Löwith was deeply concerned with both authors in his writings; however, he had chosen Nietzsche as one of his major themes because he seemed to be a touchstone of the present and at the same time the sharpest negation of his own time. "In contrast to this timely or untimely use" Löwith "tried to establish the idea of eternity as the central focus of his philosophy."[53] Löwith's book on Nietzsche published in 1935 as *Nietzsches Philosophie der ewigen Wiederkunft des Gleichen* was acclaimed by Strauss himself; in one of his letters to Löwith he acknowledges his debt to his book by saying that it enabled him to understand the relation between nihilism and the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same.[54] Nietzsche seems to have formulated at the early age the key alternative which he reiterated during his life and expressed it in words that sound both beautiful and dramatic: "Thus man outgrows everything that once embraced him; he has no need to break the shackles – they fall away unforeseen when a god commands

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[50] Karl Löwith, "Mensch und Geschichte," in Karl Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 2, eds. K. Stichweh and M.B. de Launay (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1983), p. 346.

[51] Karl Löwith, "Kierkegaard und Nietzsche oder philosophische und theologische Überwindung des Nihilismus," in Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 6 (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1987), pp. 53-74.

[52] Löwith, "M. Heidegger and F. Rosenzweig or Temporality and Eternity," p. 77.

[53] Löwith, *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933*, p. 83.

[54] Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, eds. Heinrich Meier, Wiebke Meier (Stuttgart-Weimar: J.B. Metzler Verlag, 2008), p. 648.

them; and where is the ring that in the end still encircles him? Is it the world? Is it God?"[55] Löwith sees in Nietzsche's decision in favor of the latter the most crucial part of his thought. According to him Nietzsche's attempt is "the attempt to tie the existence of modern man, which has become eccentric, back into the natural whole of the world."[56] Though sympathetic to Nietzsche's goal, Löwith claims that his attempt failed. The reason is that Nietzsche was too modern and thus unable to free himself from not only modern presuppositions and a way of feeling, but the Christian one as well. It may be said that he attempted something great, i.e., he attempted to re-marry the modern man to the ancient vision of the world at the peak of modernity. Yet the means at his disposal in the 19th century could not be other than the means of the post-Copernican world. In this historical situation the age-old idea of the eternal recurrence of the same remerged in a deeply flawed modernized form. According to Löwith, Nietzsche sang his song to the "innocence" of existence with a broken voice because he sang it on the ground of Christian experience:[57]

> For the Greek understanding of man, being a man means in effect being a 'mortal,' whereas Nietzsche wanted to 'eternalize' the fleeting existence of finite man. For the Greeks the eternal recurrence of emergence and decline explained the constant change in nature and history; for Nietzsche the recognition of an eternal recurrence demands an extreme and ecstatic point of view. The Greeks felt fear and reverence before inexorable fate; Nietzsche made the superhuman effort to will and to love fate (…). Nothing else is so striking in Nietzsche's thought as the emphasis on our creative essence, creative through the act of will, as with the God of the Old Testament. (…) Nietzsche lived and thought to the end the metamorphosis of the biblical 'Thou shalt' into the modern 'I will,' but he did not accomplish the decisive step from the 'I will' to the 'I am' of the cosmic child of the world, which is innocence and forgetting. As a modern man, he was so hopelessly separated from an original 'loyalty to the earth' and from the feeling of an eternal security under the vault of heaven, that his effort to 'translate' man 'back' into nature was condemned to failure from the outset. His teaching breaks apart into two pieces because the will to eternalize the existence of the modern ego (an existence it is thrown into) does not harmonize with the beholding of an eternal cycle of the natural world.[58]

In Nietzsche's definition of nihilism ("since Copernicus man rolls from the center toward an unknown place X") Löwith found the compelling expression of his own concern with the demise of cosmological thought. In turn, Strauss employs the term nihilism in different contexts, but it seems plausible to speak about its two major applications. The first one is connected with the three waves

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[55] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Mein Leben," in *Werke in drei Bänden*, vol. 3 (Munich: Carl Hauser Verlag, 1954), p. 110.

[56] Karl Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: The University of California Press, 1997), p. 94.

[57] Ibid., p. 120.

[58] Ibid., p. 121.

of modernity, or their outcome – historical malady, relativism, and the crisis of political philosophy, i.e., the situation of the modern individual who knows only the Weberian wars between rivaling gods or ideals. The second use is developed by Strauss in his text on German nihilism where he says that "nihilism is the rejection of the principles of civilization as such."[59] Strauss conceives German nihilism in terms of a protest against the ideal of modern civilization we have learnt while discussing the origins of modernity. In this view nihilism is born out of a moral protest at the root of which one can find the hatred for the vision of the world in which everyone would be satisfied and pacified; in other words, against the world which permits no place for seriousness. The basic demands of the moral life are connected with the so-called closed society, i.e., society that is permanently confronted with the possibility of *Ernstfall* or war, with seriousness as such. Strauss claims that this very passion or conviction is not contemptible in itself, although it took on the basest form of nihilism known as the National Socialism. It would not be a misappropriation were we to defend the view that Strauss remained favorably disposed to that conviction; one of the most visible places where he dwells on this "conviction" is his passionate debate with Alexandre Kojève. He launched a powerful attack on what came to be known as the universal and homogenous state using arguments familiar to that of young "German nihilists:"

> If the universal and homogenous state is the goal of History, History is absolutely 'tragic' (…) For centuries and centuries men have unconsciously done nothing but work their way through infinite labors and struggles and agonies, yet ever again catching hope, toward the universal and homogenous state, and as soon as they have arrived at the end of their journey, they realize that through arriving at it they have destroyed they humanity and thus returned, as in a cycle, to the prehuman beginnings of History. *Vanitas vanitatum. Recognitio recognitionum.*[60]

Strauss wonders whether the nihilistic revolt against the universal and homogeneous state may not be the only possible action on behalf of man's humanity, even if it will lead to the repetition of the entire historical process "from the horde to the final state." That kind of "new lease on life" is for Strauss more preferable than the "indefinite continuation of the inhuman end." After all, Strauss asks rather rhetorically, "Do we not enjoy every spring although we know the cycle of the seasons, although we know that winter will come again?"[61]

Coming to the conclusion: At the beginning of these remarks it was said that Strauss regarded Löwith as someone with whom he shared understanding of some most important issues, e.g., the problem of the universal and homogeneous state. Having briefly compared their views on modernity one can understand that there

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[59] Leo Strauss, "German Nihilism," eds. David Janssens and Daniel Tanguay, *Interpretation*, 29:3 (Spring 1999), p. 364.

[60] Strauss, *On Tyranny*, pp. 208-209.

[61] Ibid., p. 209.

are insights in their thoughts that seem to draw their reflection upon modernity close to each other. This proximity becomes particularly visible in their rejection of the universal and homogenous state. However, the ground of that rejection is slightly different. Strauss rejects it in the name of a truly human life which has become increasingly endangered by the tyranny of universality and homogeneity. One may say that his rejection is based primarily on his adherence to the ideal of a morally serious political community, which he found formulated most compellingly in the writings of the ancient political philosophers, and embodied in the life of Greek *polis*.[62] Löwith's rejection would not be apolitical, but rather "trans-political." His adherence to the ideal of being loyal to the earth or being citizens of the world rather than of the universal and homogeneous state seems to be of Stoic origin albeit blended with Nietzschean attempts. In this way he reminds us about the perspective that transcends both the small political community and the inhuman community of universal and homogenous state. In our times, when the seriousness of life and the very prospects of life on earth are at stake, Strauss' and Löwith's perspectives seem to be all the more worthy of consideration.

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[62] Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, p. 662.