

A Controversy about the Natural Frame of Reference and a Universal Science: Leo Strauss and Kurt Riezler

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1. Introduction: Leo Strauss and Kurt Riezler

Leo Strauss (1899-1973) is one of the most important and controversial political philosophers of the 20th century, comparable to Hannah Arendt, Karl Popper or Isaiah Berlin. His prominence was in part due to the fact that other important philosophers who wrote before the Second World War – e.g. Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger, and Whitehead – appear to have lacked, or were blind to, political philosophy.¹ One indication, though by no means the most fundamental one, of Strauss' significance is that the prize of the American Political Science Association for the best dissertation written in political philosophy bears his name. His conception of philosophy of science, however, has been relatively unnoticed, if only because most of the texts written during the 1940s at the New School of Social

¹ Strauss, 1959, 17.

Research in New York, in which he develops this theme more explicitly, have only recently become available.

Leo Strauss studied at Marburg school, the Gymnasium Philippinum, where he was a colleague of Carl J. Friedrich, the future Harvard professor², and a student of constitutional government. Strauss attended the University of Marburg, then the center of the neo-Kantian movement, which had rejected Hegel's legacy. He completed his doctorate under Ernst Cassirer, who was in turn a student of George Simmel and Hermann Cohen (for both of whom Strauss had a certain regard). Cassirer had already produced a large body of work on various topics of intellectual history and was in the process of writing his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, on mythical and rational thought. Cassirer conceived of human beings as primarily "symbolic animals" interposing systems of signals between themselves and the world, which provide the decryption key for elucidating the conditions of possibility of a "cultural fact," similarly to the way Kant once explained the conditions of possibility of science. Much later, the *Myth of the State* provides an explanation of the rise of Fascism based on his conception of mythical thinking, a book that Leo Strauss later reviewed critically.³

Strauss also studied under Husserl and Heidegger in Freiburg where he heard the latter's intensive lectures on Aristotle's philosophy.⁴ He also met Hans-Georg Gadamer, the decisive figure in 20th century hermeneutics, Jacob Klein, whose work on the origin of modern mathematics Strauss admired⁵, Karl Löwith and, later, Hannah Arendt, all of whom were then part of Heidegger's circle. If until meeting Martin Heidegger the model of intellectual probity for him

² Cf. Friedrich, 1963. But Friedrich also wrote on Kant and about the age and culture of the Baroque, in addition to his specialty, constitutional right.

³ Strauss, 1959, 292-96.

⁴ Heidegger, 1994.

⁵ Strauss, 1953, 78.

had been Max Weber, the genius of the former soon eclipsed everyone else for Strauss. And in Davos in 1929 Ernst Cassirer seemed to pale in comparison with Heidegger, who may have remained for Strauss the greatest thinker of our time.⁶

From 1932 to December 1933, Leo Strauss lived in Paris, during which time he completed an important change of orientation which consisted in part in adopting the view that classical philosophy was still tenable in important ways. Strauss moved to England in early 1934 where he did not fail to be impressed by the contrast between the modesty of Downing Street and the importance of the British Empire. Strauss saw the British gentleman – and Churchill in particular⁷ – as a model of the magnanimous man or the Aristotelian *megalopsychos*. The research he did in England resulted in his writing *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*⁸. Among his books, this was the one Isaiah Berlin appreciated the most. The book made Strauss an authority on Hobbes⁹ and yet he was unable to get a permanent position in England. Consequently, in 1937, he accepted an invitation to be a lecturer at Columbia in New York and thereafter a temporary position, later made permanent, in the New School for Social Research, which became the home of a great number of Jewish scholars during this period. Strauss remained at the New School from 1938 to 1949. It is perhaps the most important period in his academic life for the formation of his thought and defining the characteristics of his teaching. His manner of teaching has some parallels with that of Heidegger. Both treated the classical authors as contemporaries, whose ideas were still alive, even vital, and not merely as precursors of the modern social sciences belonging to a distant and forgotten time. Likewise, the method of “careful reading” used by Strauss in his

⁶ Cf. Strauss explanation of Heidegger’s position in Strauss, 1956.

⁷ Strauss, 1983, 111.

⁸ Cf. Smith, 2009, 24.

⁹ Strauss, 2000, 225.

lessons demanded concentration on individual texts. What distinguishes Strauss from Heidegger is what he called, ironically, (in the introduction to *Persecution and the Art of Writing*) a rediscovery of the “sociology of knowledge,” art of exoteric-esoteric writing, as well as attention to both the argument and the action of great books of the past.

In 1938, in his correspondence, Strauss was already referring to the importance of exoteric-esoteric writing as seen in the work of Herodotus, Hesiod, and Plato. He first published his ideas on the subject in 1941, in an article that was printed in the academic journal of the New School, *Social Research*, entitled “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” bearing the same title as the later book that includes this and other texts. This article is one of his essays that attracted more attention. Another salient feature of his teaching is the attention devoted to contemporary problems. His lectures “On German Nihilism”, “What can we learn from political theory?” and the “The re-education of the Axis countries concerning the Jews”, all relatively recently published, date from 1941, 1942 and 1943. However, even the classical texts, to which he directs his students, come alive in his teaching.

The issues of the day, the “problems of immediate and pressing importance”, to use Arendt’s words describing Heidegger’s method, usually occur in Strauss as a way of motivating a return to the classical texts. An example of this approach is the book *On Tyranny*, a commentary on Xenophon’s *Hiero*. In this book, all the architectural elements that can define Strauss’s philosophy are already present: the art of reading carefully, the differences between the classical and modern political philosophy, the challenge of historicism, and the question of the best life and of philosophy as a way of life.

Riezler (1882-1955) was a remarkable man of action – high-ranking cabinet member in Imperial and Weimar Germany and a

drafter of the Weimar constitution (it may have been his idea to put Lenin on the train back to Russia) – and a remarkable man of ideas – author of works on the theoretical foundations of politics, art, on ancient philosophy, on the fundamental structure of social life – with whom Strauss was friendly, especially during their New School years in the late 1930s and in 1940s. They co-taught courses on Aristotle’s *De Anima* and Descartes’ *Passions of the Soul* (along with Solomon Asch); and on Plato’s *Theaetetus*.¹⁰ Strauss seems to have been interested in thinking carefully about the alternative that Riezler represented, which he sometimes characterized as “humanism.”¹¹

2. The debate about the possibility of a “humanistic” universal science

As we will see, and perhaps surprisingly, Strauss will find considerable difficulties with Riezler’s suggestion, which may have also been Riezler’s life-long philosophical projection, to pursue a unitary science of man, in accordance with the fact that “man is one.” Yet while Strauss appears unimpressed by the great and fair promises of a *restitutio in integrum*¹² of the sciences dealing with man and especially of the social sciences, he appears to be in full agreement with what Riezler says about the present state of affairs of human sciences: “No attempt will be made to defend the indefensible.”

Even if both Strauss’s and Riezler’s attention and writings were focused on the human and social sciences, their concerns relate to the nature of things, to the cosmos as a whole, to man’s relationship to both the natural world and even the supernatural world – concerns

¹⁰ See Sheppard, 2006, 151, n. 122.

¹¹ On Strauss’s longer discussion of Riezler in the text included in *What is Political Philosophy?*, see Susan Shell’s chapter in Major, 2013.

¹² Riezler, 1945, 481-505.

that go beyond what any positive science can grasp. The human sciences articulate, or are in need of articulating, a natural order or a natural directedness, and cannot rest with an understanding of nature in merely empiricist terms.

One could argue further that science – and this requires qualification; we should perhaps speak only of modern or “mechanistic”, i.e. non-teleological science – also posits in its way a universal order of things in relation to one another, though not in terms that can make the specific human *differentia* fully meaningful or intelligible. The former science of nature as conceived e.g. by Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas did leave room for a human science of the “human things.” Not a single black swan disturbed this quiet world for centuries: Catholics, Scottish Protestants, and Theists of every brand remained both believers and scientists in good conscience for a very long time. Even Darwin represented no more than a “storm in a Victorian cup of tea”, to use an expression that Karl Popper repeated¹³.

It seems that today the problem goes beyond whether natural science or human knowledge are compatible, share the same basic method, or have superior claims to the truth, because many people do not even believe that there is *such a thing* as truth. Each of us makes his/her own truth. In this light, all truth is merely a provisional state of affairs, replaced later by another so-called “truth”. Thomas Kuhn’s “normal science” is dependent on paradigms that may suddenly change without any predictability. And as a consequence, if a mouse is not essentially different from man, morality is relative, fluctuating with social differences, historical epoch, or even mere convenience: cannibals are no inferior to liberals.

Relativism today seems to be resisted most vigorously by violent religious extremists (whom we fear) or entrenched Aristotelian or Thomist relics (whom we no longer fear), the only ones that still

¹³ Cf. Popper, 1964.

dispute positivist science and the strictly empirical claims that have long ago reduced the colors seen by human eyes to wavelengths or brain synapses. If someone in today's world suddenly became aware of the possibility of truth in an absolute sense as defined by Tarski,¹⁴ or aware of the simple experiences of meaning, or of right and wrong, or the need for an explanation of human pain – this person would be in danger of becoming a potential religious believer. Whether a restoration of Thomistic theology is a condition, an obstacle, or a different kind of factor, in the attempt to restore or discover an adequate science of man is one of the fundamental questions we pursue through Strauss's discussion of Riezler.

3. New sources of an old debate: The Perspective of the Social Scientist

Leo Strauss wrote the two papers we would like to discuss here in or around 1945, during his time at the New School for Social Research and went unpublished until the current year¹⁵. The first paper, "The Frame of Reference in the Social Sciences," contains analyses that would be familiar to readers of Strauss's later books¹⁶, especially in their critique of positivism and historicism. Yet in the "Frame" paper Strauss articulates with particular vividness how to find our way to the discovery of the natural frame of reference or to the recognition of the natural "cave" of society as a cave.¹⁷ He recovers the confrontation of

¹⁴ Cf. Popper, 1962 Vol. 1. 64, note 5 (2).

¹⁵ Cf. Colen and Minkov, Leo Strauss on Social and Natural Science: Two Previously Unpublished Papers. *Review of Politics*, Volume 76, Fall 2014, 1-15.

¹⁶ Strauss, 1953, 1959 and "An Epilogue" in Strauss, 1968.

¹⁷ Strauss, 1952: The natural frame of reference or "the natural horizon" seems akin to what Strauss elsewhere calls the "natural cave" (Strauss, 1952, 155). Its identification is thus only a preliminary step toward the universal science whose desirability is explained in the note on Riezler: "Historicism sanctions the loss, or the oblivion, of the natural horizon of human thought by denying

the ideas of science and nature with the authoritative but questionable and contradictory claims of divine law.¹⁸

The second piece, the note on Riezler, begins in the natural cave and goes further in its philosophic pursuit than the first. The notions of science and nature having been long established, the manner of their establishment perhaps even having being forgotten, Strauss argues for the necessity of a universal science that provides scientific knowledge of human nature. And since, as we will see, he draws a clear distinction between human nature and human affairs, he is not calling for a theoretical science only as an instrument for dispelling false theoretical opinions about the realm of prudence or practical human affairs.¹⁹ This is not to say that, in pursuing the conditions for a universal science and attempting to remove the obstacles to it, Strauss does not continuously think about the horizon of human affairs and investigate the most elementary strata of the relation of science to theological presuppositions about God, man, and world – the initiation of which investigation led in the first place to the discovery of the natural frame of reference.

The problem of acquiring scientific knowledge of human (political and social) affairs is the starting point of the “Frame” paper. Even if

the permanence of the fundamental problems. It is the existence of that natural horizon which makes possible ‘objectivity’ and therefore in particular ‘historical objectivity.’” Strauss 1951/52, 586.

See, however, Bernardete, 2013, 375 on Strauss: “He was more historically accurate than the ‘historians of ideas’ for the sake of recovering the human horizon whose articulation is indispensable for our ascending to the natural horizon.”

¹⁸ Cf. Strauss, 1953, ch. III.

¹⁹ Strauss, 1968, 206; for a mere extended statement of the protection theoretical science can offer prudence, see the first lecture in the seminar on Aristotle’s *Politics* from the Spring Quarter of 1960 at the University of Chicago. But “investigating the god’s or the gods’ contrivances” is necessary not only for convincing others, or oneself, of the existence of gods, and not merely to “refute the insane assertions of Anaxagoras regarding the sun,” but also to understand those assertions Strauss, 1972, 124.

one assumes that one knows the meaning of “facts” and “causes” in human life, these facts and causes are so many that one needs a framework to organize them. It would be better, Strauss seems to say in his own name, if we could find the natural frame of reference – a “conceptual scheme that mirrors or articulates the essential structure of society as such” – in other words, a scientific account of the part of the whole that is human society.²⁰

The social scientist as a scientist may be a “*teacher* of statesmen or citizens,” but he does not adopt their perspective, imbued with the “accidental and ephemeral.” Strauss immediately confronts this (at least implicit) goal of social science with the radical challenge of historicism. The notion of a natural frame of reference might be blind to the “all-important” fact of history. And even if there is a trans-historical core “man in society,” it is impossible to grasp and express that core in a permanently valid manner, since approaching that core depends on questions posed from a fundamentally variable point of view.²¹

In the next logical step, Strauss somewhat abruptly presents a sanguine recommendation by a hybrid historicist-positivist: embrace and clarify the historically fated scheme bestowed on your society, liberating yourself from the residues of any obsolete schemata; Strauss does not say here, as he does at the end of the paper, that this recommendation may be based on understanding the western frame

²⁰ Strauss, 1964. Strauss does not make here the crucial distinction he makes in the note on Riezler between “human nature,” which can be studied by theoretical natural science, and “the human things,” which are the object of political philosophy. This distinction may strike readers as less pronounced elsewhere in Strauss or at least appearing in a different guise. Nor does he raise, at this point, the possibility of an Aristotelian political science which is “nothing other than the fully conscious form of the common sense understanding of political things” (Strauss 1964, 12, 25).

“Aristotle’s cosmology, as distinguished from Plato’s, is unqualifiedly separable from the quest for the best political order,” (Strauss, 1964, 21).

²¹ Cf. Strauss, 1951/52, 559-586.

of reference as “the last and richest stage of the cultural development of mankind.” As we note below, Strauss would in a sense agree at the end of the paper with this recommendation: think through or clarify your schema, but looking for a confirmation of its truth or else a liberation from it.

In the next paragraphs, Strauss spells out the inevitable defeat of social science if this prejudice in favor of the present and one’s own is adopted: we will never understand any other society but remain “enmeshed in a learned parochialism,” applying a Procrustean framework to other civilizations; we could not even speak confidently of the existence of “civilizations:” completely different concepts may come to guide us. The historicist-positivist may try to shrug off his incapacity to understand other cultures, but even he may balk at his inability to speak meaningfully of his own civilization.

Not resting there, however, and returning to an idea that might appear to have already been undermined by historicism – there is a core “man in society” that is inaccessible in a universally valid way – Strauss observes that all the various societies are still *societies*. Strauss then penetrates to a more elementary stratum, reformulating “society” as “we here with our way” and “they there with their way,” which has the advantage of “universal applicability” and “universal *intelligibility*.”²² Yet the historicist might not still insist that even if this elementary formulation is correct? Is it trivial because all the interesting specifics of the different “ways” are historically variable?

Instead of returning to this challenge, however, Strauss raises a related problem, a problem with which Kurt Riezler, whom Strauss brings up at this point, is especially concerned. In our attempt to articulate the way of another society, would not our very attempt at objectivity befuddle and alter the object of our examination? Of course, we cannot and should not make ourselves more ignorant than

²² See Strauss, 1953, ch. III.

we are and should acknowledge our superiority to tribes who take tin cans to have magic powers; and in the note on Riezler, Strauss asserts this superiority of the objective or intelligent orientation even more emphatically. Still and all, “by getting a glimpse of the idea of science, of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge,” the people whom the scientist is examining “cease to be the people they were.” The full understanding of a society would indeed consist in understanding it in its truth *and* its appearance to its ordinary members. However “it is impossible to leave it at trying to understand other societies as they understand themselves”: we “are forced to transcend the self-understanding of the various societies.”

As Strauss puts it in 1955, “[u]niversal sympathetic understanding is impossible”: “[t]o speak crudely, one cannot have the cake and eat it; one cannot enjoy both the advantages of universal understanding and those of existentialism.”²³ In both of the pieces we analyze here, Strauss directs himself to the “in itself,” to “the universal understanding,” sacrificing the “advantages of existentialism.”

What is this universal understanding or what is, to begin with, the natural frame of reference that Strauss searched for earlier in his text, but of the discovery of which he seemed to despair? In trying to recover that frame, in the concluding paragraphs of the paper, Strauss returns to the “our way here” or the “for us” perspective. Our particular frame of reference happens to be “the outgrowth of the combination of two radically different traditions [Greek and Hebrew].” The question

²³ Strauss, [1970], 11. This is true even in the case of Nietzsche, according to Strauss. While “one cannot behold, i.e., truly understand, any culture unless one is firmly rooted in one’s own culture or unless one belongs in one’s capacity as a beholder to some culture,” “the universality of the beholding of all cultures is to be preserved, the culture to which the beholder of all cultures belongs, must be the universal culture, the culture of mankind, the world culture; the universality of beholding presupposes, if only by anticipating it, the universal culture which is no longer one culture among many” (Strauss, 1983, 148).

is “whether a better understanding of our frame of reference, in its peculiar character, will not liberate us from its limitations.”

In moving from the peaks of our civilization to its roots, Strauss arrives at the common basis of both elements, “provisionally expressed” as “divine law, a notion that can be shown to be a necessary consequence or a more thoughtful expression of what all peoples originally mean when they speak of their way.” And since this notion is “historically so close to what was originally common to all peoples,” when one has confronted it with a “simple and clear scheme which is still immediately intelligible to us”²⁴ and has found it to be questionable, one would have derived the ideas of science and of nature in a way that does justice to what is “first for us” while transcending that in the direction of universal objectivity. To the charge that this may be a kind of “reverse historicism,” glorifying a particular period as the peak moment (or a particular society as most purely pre-theoretical²⁵), Strauss responds elsewhere:

In regarding Socrates, Plato and Aristotle as the classics of natural right I do not assert, like a historicist, that there is of necessity and essentially an absolute moment in history. I merely say that it is so happened that the clearest exposition of the issue was given by that practically contemporary triad – it could have happened elsewhere or at other times, perhaps it did and we merely do not happen to know it.²⁶

²⁴ Cf. Strauss, 1953 NRH, ch. III on the distinction between hearsay and seeing for oneself; between man-made things and non-man-made things; and between the ancestral and the good or, initially at least, the pleasant.

²⁵ Cf Pippin, 2005, ch. 6 of *The Persistence of Subjectivity*. See, on the other hand, Melzer 2006, 282, statement: “Esotericism is, then, the necessary supplement for a philosophy of return: it helps to preserve that to which philosophy needs to return – preserve it from the effects of philosophy. It is the natural corrective for the inherently self-undermining character of philosophy: it makes it possible for philosophic activity to live safely side by side with the prephilosophic awareness that it needs”

²⁶ Strauss, 1978, 24.

4. The Possibility of a Universal Science and Longing for Unity

Strauss's "Note on Riezler's 'Some Critical Remarks on Man's Science of Man'", written in December 1945, reflects Strauss's abiding concern with the possibility of a science that does justice to the natural and human phenomena. He writes about Riezler's²⁷ at a time when science appears to have lost its pre-philosophic roots and to have become unable to apply to ordinary human experience the "simple and clear schema" which gave rise to the idea of nature and science in the first place. In this situation, Strauss examines Riezler's hope that by returning, as Strauss puts it, to the "green pastures of the phenomena themselves," man will liberate his mind from the prideful domination of the established parochial sciences and pseudo-sciences. Man is one, so there "ought to be" one science of man. Riezler's suggestion holds such "great and fair promises" of the restoration of the integrity of the sciences and especially of the social science that Strauss even gives the impression that he is hesitant to raise objections lest he be considered "invidious." Yet, despite the fact that Strauss has no disagreement with Riezler about the deplorable state of contemporary science and social science, he raises some objections.

Strauss's first observation is that it is not clear that the demand for a unified science of man is reasonable. It is not as if every thoughtful person prior to the 19th century regarded such a science as possible or desirable. Strauss does say in his own name, on the other hand, that we have a reasonable longing for unity and intelligibility but this applies more to the science of nature than it does to the science of man, which itself depends on a comprehensive and adequate natural science.²⁸ It would be an Aristotelian or perhaps a Goethean

²⁷ Riezler, 1945, 481-505.

²⁸ Among other statements: "For the meaning of the part depends on the meaning of the whole," (Strauss, 1953, 126); or: man "must understand

natural science.²⁹ Yet far from striving for such a universal natural science, Riezler demands a unified science of man precisely because of his historicist rejection of any “system of permanences.” Historicism, however, is not “a cab one can stop at one’s convenience.”³⁰ If nature itself is in dynamic flux, man would also be in the same flux. It is not

himself in the light of the whole or the origin of the whole which is not human” (Strauss, 1958, 78).

Strauss provides a helpful explanation in a 1957 course on the *Republic*: “Let us take an everyday example. At this very minute someone is wiping his nose. Let us say ‘X’ (in order to avoid ridiculing anyone) is now wiping his nose. Nothing could be truer. Since it is true it will keep when written down. It must be written down for this reason. What is known is communicable; moreover, communicable to all. Communicable not only to man sitting in this room at the present time but in principle communicable to all men regardless of time. So we preserve our truth – ‘X’ is now wiping his nose--by writing it down for all posterity. But if we look at our truth – the truth written down on a sheet of paper – a half minute later, we see that the solid truth has evaporated. The solid truth – that Mr. X is now wiping his nose – has changed into a monstrous falsehood. He does not wipe his nose now. To keep our fleeting truth true what do we do? What do you do in such cases in order to protect yourself against this evasiveness of truth? (Student: You add the element of time.) Give me an example. (Student: At 5 o’clock he wiped his nose.) But you have to add the year as well and the day. Now what happens? What did we do by this? We referred this momentary happening to an all-comprehensive scheme – years, days and so on. This scheme is by its nature communicable to all and does not change. But we see if we look at this date that this scheme is arbitrary. We have been using a certain calendar. The date should look entirely different in the Jewish calendar. The scheme, this allegedly permanent scheme, is essentially impermanent because of its fundamentally arbitrary character. From the point of view of man’s natural reason there is no reason for choosing this or that calendar. We must do much better than this. We must seek for a natural, non-arbitrary, permanent, immutable scheme if there is to be any knowledge of this simple fact or any other fact. By the nature of things this cannot be done through any calendar, because where you begin to count in setting up your calendar is arbitrary. We have to go over to a different dimension – beyond time. What you find then is something permanent. As a result this can be known and communicated to all as known. The knowable is the comprehending or comprehensive. The comprehended, e.g., the wiping of the nose, can be known only through something comprehensive which must be permanent.” On the other hand, see the statement about the priority of nuclei to macrophysical phenomena quoted below. (Strauss, 1957)

²⁹ Shell, 2013. On Strauss’s reservations about Goethe, see Shell, 210, n. 18.

³⁰ Strauss, 1959. An expression he also uses in Strauss, 1959, 72.

sufficient to protest that the cosmos as a whole is far and man is near, arguing that this would allow for a unified science of man. There “cannot be a true understanding of man but within the framework of a lucid ‘cosmic scheme.’ ”

One could try to argue on Riezler’s behalf that he has not asserted that there is a division between human life and nature, but between human beings and the world of their concern. Perhaps he thinks that the unity of man can be recovered by reuniting man with the world of his concern. But, Strauss objects, this reunion would not succeed if the world itself is understood in a way that does not allow for achieving clarity about human life. Riezler cannot separate human nature from the nature of stones, plants, and animals. He is thus in need of a comprehensive natural science and yet he has despaired of it.

Riezler, or someone else, could also try to argue that we can have two sciences of man: a reductionist or homogenizing one, which treats man the way it treats minerals, plants, etc. and another one which studies man in his own terms, in light of human life. But on Riezler’s own understanding, this would lead to disintegration, not to unity.

To try to understand man in the dynamic, individualized context of each situation would be to abandon any claim to “objectivity.” It is true that in “The Frame of Reference of the Social Sciences” Strauss himself holds out the hope that one can understand society not only on its own terms but also in itself or objectively, which in many cases would mean better than it understands itself (the way, we can understand tin cans more fully than the Andamans). This not based, however, on a view of social life as dominated by a “dynamic context,” but on taking seriously pre-philosophic life and its implicit idea of divine law, of the right path, and applying to that life the still – and always (at least potentially) intelligible idea of nature and science.

Riezler is consistent in scoffing at bloodless objectivity: in trying to understand the human world or environment, we may need to pay

more attention to “spirits in trees and rivers” and “souls of the dead.” While Strauss is open to, and may even insist on,³¹ beginning one’s investigations with the pre-philosophic world in which ghosts and witches abound, he indicates that it is indispensable to any intelligent orientation in the world to draw a distinction between things accessible by sense perception to everyone and things that owe their being to beliefs of specific groups.³² Strauss does not indeed establish a criteria for ranking civilizations, but he exhorts, if not Riezler, then other future scientists and philosophers not to “abandon forever every hope of ever getting hold of criteria which would enable every sufficiently intelligent and industrious man reasonably to judge of the various civilizations, of the justice of their customs and of the truth of their beliefs.”

Strauss raises an objection that is apparently new: Riezler is interested in a theoretical science of man, guided by the idea of bringing a definite structure to human life, not by the practical aim of discovering the right way of life. Yet Strauss says “this is merely another formulation of the same objection.” How can the objection that Riezler is not theoretical enough in the pursuit of a universal science be the same as the one that he is too theoretical in the pursuit of a science of man?

The explanation lies in Riezler’s modified Baconianism or Cartesianism. Riezler begins with an abstraction or a construction,³³ both with respect to nature and with respect to human nature: the substance or being is the subject or man. As Strauss says in his eulogy essay for Riezler, the latter’s “we in our world” is more concrete than

³¹ Strauss, 1953, 79.

³² Strauss, 1953. See the first 15 paragraphs of ch. III.

³³ See Strauss, 1959, 75, where he quotes Hegel’s “In modern times, the individual finds the abstract form readymade” (the reference is to Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Preface, section 33). Major, 2013. See Zuckert’s chapter in Major’s collection cited above.

the Cartesian ego, but it is merely a correction of the Cartesian abstraction.³⁴ Riezler's approach is evident in his major work *Man, Mutable and Immutable*, which does not have virtue and justice as its central subject, but passions, moods or attitudes.³⁵ Despite his awareness of the fact that "one must not look at social phenomena in the light of questions or doctrines, 'to which no society pays any attention,' " Riezler does not begin "at the true beginning of analysis, with the surface," "the perspective of the citizen or statesman."³⁶ By contrast, Strauss begins with the question of the right life as seen by the citizen and statesman in order to ascend to a truly theoretical or objective perspective.

Riezler, on the other hand, begins with a skeptical metaphysics and a dogmatic subjectivity, which is guided in fact by an unexamined practical imperative. We can already see in these critical remarks Strauss's own dualistic understanding of human life: the pre-philosophic or practical life and the philosophic or theoretical life.

Classical philosophy had split up the study of man into theoretical and practical philosophy. The most memorable denial of that split, Strauss says, is that by Bacon. Strauss quotes a remarkable section from the second book of *The Advancement of Learning* in which Bacon denies in the same breath that man is the microcosm and asserts that man is in the image of God, leaving the world without the honor of being in the image of God.³⁷ The adoption of this assertion would explain at the same time the "idealistic" view that "the subject is the substance" and the radical skepticism about the intelligibility of the world. Conversely, Strauss suggests, at the bottom of Aristotle's

³⁴Strauss, 1959, 258.

³⁵Strauss, 1959, 257.

³⁶Strauss, 1959, 257.

³⁷ Strauss, 1952, 91 also quotes this passage [originally 1936] to indicate that the separation of man from world and the way in which man "becomes the central theme of philosophy." Cf. Strauss, 1964, 41.

distinction between practical and theoretical philosophy lies the distinction between qualities such as “white” or “straight,” on the one hand, and “healthy” or “good,” on the other.³⁸ The first type is true of things as what they are simply, while the second concern man as man, “to say nothing of other [even less universal] things that are what they are only for men belonging to specific groups.” It would be of great interest to compare the way of making such distinctions that Strauss finds here in Aristotle and Locke’s way of distinguishing between primary and secondary qualities.³⁹ At any rate, it appears that the “facts” that are at the same time the “values” or goods of human nature, the natural purposes of human life, are an integral but secondary part of the universal natural science to which Strauss is pointing.⁴⁰

³⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141a 22-24.

³⁹ Locke, to be sure, would “see” color, let alone a particular color, as a secondary quality. But is this a fundamental difference from Strauss’s or Aristotle’s approach or an important detail? For Strauss’s observations on the distinction between primary and secondary qualities (which plays a role in his account of the origin and nature of philosophy, Strauss, 1953, 103-04, and “the intelligent orientation” he describes above), see, e.g., a *marginalium* to his “Introduction to Mendelssohn’s Phädon,” in Yaffe, 2012, 45, n. 90; Strauss 1967 lecture 5 of his course on Nietzsche at the University of Chicago in the Winter Quarter of 1967; Strauss 1989, 31, 35; and Strauss’s notes on Kant’s metaphysics from his course “Political Philosophy in the Age of Reason” (1941; Strauss Archives, Box 6, folder 8).

While the distinction between primary and secondary qualities is necessary, as is, in the first place, the distinction between natural primary or secondary qualities and sacred qualities, the modern development leads to a radicalization of Locke, visible, e.g., in Kant’s thought, where both primary and secondary qualities become merely phenomenal, which in turns leads to Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s (as well as Riezler’s) attempt to recover the given and concrete “fullness of the thing” but now by restoring primary, secondary, and sacred qualities in their (unexamined) togetherness, and without making the distinctions Strauss regards as essential to philosophy and to an intelligent orientation in the world.

⁴⁰ Consider, on the other hand, Jacob Klein’s provocative statement: “That we today make that famous distinction between ‘Being’ and ‘Ought’ is a consequence of the Christian turn” (letter to Gerhard Krüger from March 14, 1930, in Patard, 2006: 309-329). On the “facts” of laughter and friendship, see

Strauss provides one final illustration of Riezler's position as opposed to that of Aristotle. For Riezler the objectivity of a stone consists in its "functional significance": its being thrown, stumbled upon, used in building a house.⁴¹ Strauss, referring obliquely back to the Bacon passage, notes the similarity between Riezler's view and the Bible's anthropocentric understanding of the sun, moon, and stars as useful "for signs, for seasons, for days, and for years." In returning to but also questioning this theological view, Strauss exemplifies his "intransigent return to the surface" as "the indispensable condition for progress toward the center."⁴²

Strauss 1959, 259; also Strauss 1972, 316: are there no "funny facts"?

⁴¹See Strauss, 1959, 253: "only in the good work of art 'is' the stone truly"; the "beingness of soul" is, for Riezler, is "beingness as such". Strauss attributes to Riezler, Heidegger's argument on "The Origin of the Work of Art". This is connected with Hegel's "subjectivity = substance" that Strauss mentions earlier.

⁴² Strauss, 1959, 251; Strauss, 1959, 13. This surface, this naiveté, this anthropocentric perspective, is, however, something that "cannot be avoided"; "there is no possible human thought which is not in the last analysis dependent on the legitimacy of that naiveté and the awareness or the knowledge going with it" (Strauss 1959, 213). Put another way, "what we may call the phenomenal world, the given whole, the whole which is permanently given, as permanently as are human beings" or "[a]ll human thought, even all thought human or divine, which is meant to be understood by human beings willy-nilly begins with this whole" (Strauss, "On the Interpretation of Genesis," 14). Empiricism, including the empiricism of classical philosophy, cannot be established "empiricistically," but one may try to establish it "empirically," by making use of the awareness of being empiricism itself would cast doubt on (Strauss, 1959, 212). Cf. Strauss reply to Schaar et al. in the *American Political Science Review*, 1963, 154; and Strauss, 1953, 79. The question is whether one can establish empiricism empirically (that is by being at first open to the existence of beings or things whose existence later would be subject to doubt or even rejection), though not "empiricistically." Of course, the empiricism so established may not look like the empiricism that understands the world in terms of "functional relations between different series of events." It could be an empiricism that still understands the world in terms of "things with qualities."

5. Some Concluding Remarks: the Relevance of Straussian Cosmology?

What light do these reflections throw on the problem of the “typically modern dualism of a non-teleological natural science and a teleological science of man”?⁴³ In this note, Strauss opens up the necessity of a comprehensive, universal science, but does not say what the new cosmology would look like when developed. He has in mind perhaps an “Aristotelian cosmology [that] is in harmony with what we may call the common-sense understanding of things in general, and of the human and political things in particular.” Yet even in the lecture course in which he makes that statement he only articulates the *beginning* point from which any cosmology must start:

all cosmology, Aristotelian or modern or what have you, must start from the world as given, from the world in which the sun rises in the East and sets in the West and the earth is resting. It must ascend from the world as given to its causes. Aristotle takes this starting point, the world as given, more seriously than all other cosmologies; and for this reason Aristotelian cosmology, regardless of whether it is tenable in its details, has a kind of theoretical superiority.⁴⁴

Elsewhere Strauss says it is “the quest for cosmology rather than a solution to the cosmological problem [that is] the foundation of classical political philosophy.”⁴⁵ And he will tell students that “this

⁴³ Strauss, 1953, 8; see Hassing, 1997). Strauss indicates in a way that may be easy to miss that “the nuclei proper are *simply prior* to macrophysical phenomena” (emphasis added). On the other hand, “political” nuclei, “which are meant to supply explanations for the political things proper are already molded, nay, constituted, by the political order or the regime within which they occur...” (Strauss 1959, 210). On the “compound of atoms” called man, for which “good and bad” can come to have a (distinctive) meaning, see Strauss 1953, 94.

⁴⁴ Strauss, 1962, lecture 2.

⁴⁵ Strauss, 1958, 38-39. See also AAVV, 1945, 392-93: Farabi “has infinitely more in common with a philosophic materialist than with any non-philosophic believe however well-intentioned” and for him, “philosophy is essentially and

comprehensive science is today only a pious wish; and therefore one cannot say more than it is to be desired.”⁴⁶ Yet, even in the mid-1950s, he still speaks with some confidence of the prospect of such a science: “the true universal science into which modern science would have to be integrated eventually.”⁴⁷

Strauss points to a universal science that is unlike the “theological” anthropocentric functionalist view of the beings implicit in Riezler’s thought and yet is able to do justice to the phenomenon “Man.”

Could these apparently mixed messages about the possibility of a comprehensive cosmology be reconciled or explained if we envision a Socratic or Straussian cosmology of “noetic heterogeneity” which maintains essential differences while remaining agnostic about an ultimate teleology?⁴⁸ Strauss says:

the key point is this – *and this has in itself nothing to do with teleology, at least not with teleology as ordinarily understood* – modern natural science, if it is left entirely to itself, and not influenced by other considerations, implies the denial of essential differences.⁴⁹

And toward the end of his life, he writes of Socrates’

dissatisfaction with simple teleology – whether anthropocentric or not – which *at first glance* seems to supply the most rational solution to all difficulties, and [Socrates] turn[ing] for this reason to ‘what is’ questions...⁵⁰

purely theoretical,” “the way leading to [the] science [of the beings] rather than that science itself,” “the investigation rather than the result.”

⁴⁶Strauss, 1962, lecture 2.

⁴⁷Cf. Strauss, “Social Science and Humanism,” in Pangle, 8.

⁴⁸Strauss, 1953, 121-23.

⁴⁹Strauss, 1962, lecture 2; emphasis added.

⁵⁰Strauss, 1972 *Xenophon’s Socratic Discourse* (Cornell University Press, 1972), 149 and 149 n. 8; Strauss *Xenophon’s Socrates* 7-8: not long after providing the outlines of Socrates’ cosmology, Strauss suggests that Xenophon conceals the intransigence of Socrates’ “what is” questions regarding human as well as divine or natural things.

In the paper, we discussed the way in which Leo Strauss examines the philosophical project of Kurt Riezler. Riezler's life-long preoccupation was with the pursuit of a unitary science of man, in accordance with the view that "man is one." Strauss uncovers a number of fundamental difficulties with Riezler's approach, in the process providing indications about how Strauss himself understands the requirements of an adequate science of man. Nevertheless, while Strauss appears unconvinced by Riezler's promises of a unity of the sciences dealing with man, and especially of the social sciences, he is in full agreement with Riezler concerning the present state of affairs of human sciences. While both Strauss and Riezler focus on the human and social sciences, their concerns extend to the nature of all things, to the cosmos as a whole, to man's relationship to both the natural world and even the supernatural world. And both thinkers hold that the human sciences are in need of articulating a natural order while neither can rest content with an understanding of nature in merely empiricist terms.

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