3

The Natural Frame of Reference and the Possibility of a Comprehensive Science*

In or around 1945, during his time at the New School for Social Research, Strauss wrote two short papers on the possibility of a natural frame of reference.[1] These may well be Strauss's clearest statements on the original meaning of science. The first paper, "The Frame of Reference in the Social Sciences," contains analyses that would be familiar to readers of Strauss's later books, 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.[2] He recovers the confrontation of the ideas of science and nature with the authoritative but questionable and contradictory claims of divine law.[3] The second piece, a 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 now 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.[4] This is not to say that in pursuing the conditions for a universal science and attempting

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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 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 best, 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.[5] The social scientist as a scientist may be a "*teacher* of statesmen or citizens," but he does not adopt their perspective, which is imbued with the "accidental and ephemeral." Strauss then 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 based on "blindness" to the "all-important" fact of history. And even if there is a transhistorical 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.[6]

In the next 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 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 two 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*."[7] Yet might not the historicist still insist that even if this elementary formulation is correct, it is 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 we are and should acknowledge our superiority to tribes who take tin cans to have magical powers; and in the note on Riezler, Strauss assert this superiority 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."[8] In both of the pieces we present 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 which Strauss searched for earlier in the paper but of the discovery of which he seemed to despair? In trying to recover that frame, Strauss now, in the concluding paragraphs of the paper, 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 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"[9] 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-theoretical[10]), 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."[11]

The second paper to draw attention to is "Note on Riezler's 'Some Critical Remarks on Man's Science of Man.' " Kurt Riezler (1882–1955) was a remarkable man of action (a high-ranking cabinet member in Imperial and Weimar Germany; a drafter of the Weimar constitution; and it may have been his idea to put Lenin on the train back to Russia) and of thought (with 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's *Passions of the Soul*, along with Solomon Asch; and on Plato's *Theaetetus,* along with Alexandre Koyré, and Strauss seems to have been interested in examining the alternative that Riezler represented, which he sometimes characterized it as "humanism."[12] In the note here published, written in December 1945, Strauss is commenting on Riezler's "Some Critical Remarks on Man's Science of Man"[13] in connection with Strauss's abiding concern with the possibility of a science that does justice to the natural and human phenomena.

Relative to the "Frame" essay, Strauss begins his account in the Riezler note millennia later 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 sciences 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, objections he must raise.

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 nineteenth 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.[14] It would be an Aristotelian or perhaps a Goethean natural science.[15] 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."[16] If nature itself is in dynamic flux, man would also be in the same flux. It is not 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 split 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 still 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 at least based 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 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 always at least 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 indeed 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,[17] 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 to sense-perception to everyone and things that owe their being to beliefs of specific groups.[18] Strauss does not indeed establish here the 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 then 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,[19] 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 the Cartesian ego, and yet it is merely a correction of the Cartesian abstraction.[20] 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.[21] 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."[22] 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 in fact is guided 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 articulated 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.[23] 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. On the other hand, Strauss suggests, at the bottom of Aristotle's 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.[24] The first type is true of things as what they are simply, while the second concerns 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.[25] 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.[26]

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.[27] 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."[28]

What light do these reflections throw on the problem of the "typically modern dualism of a nonteleological natural science and a teleological science of man"?[29] In this note, Strauss opens up the prospect 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[30] 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." 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."[31] And he will tell students that "this comprehensive science is today only a pious wish; and therefore one cannot say more than it is to be desired."[32] 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."[33]

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 functionalist teleology?[34] 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."[35] 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. . . ."[36]