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*On Tyranny:
The Strauss-Kojève Debate*

Let's start with some preliminary words and some basic information about *Hiero*, and about the two protagonists of the contemporary return to of this work by Xenophon, Leo Strauss and Alexandre Kojève.

Hiero is a dialogue written by the Socratic philosopher Xenophon, presumably around 360 BC. It's worth noting here that two of the most significant political works by the other, more famous, Socratic philosopher, Plato, *The Republic* and *The Laws*, were written around 380-370 and 353 BC.

I emphasize this point because both *The Republic* and *The Laws* contain important remarks about tyranny: in *The Republic*, we find Plato strongly condemning it. Tyranny is the most degenerate form of government, the final act of a political degeneration that is also – given the Platonic correspondence between soul and city – a final degeneration of the soul of the man who rules tyrannically. So, starting from aristocracy, which is the form of government for the ideal city, the *Kallipolis* ruled by reason and wisdom, we go through timocracy, ruled by the love of honor, which will degenerate into oligarchy, driven by the love of money, which will degenerate into democracy, a form of government characterized by a dangerous love of freedom. Then, at the end of this cycle of degeneration, comes tyranny, where there is nothing but immoderate, excessive, destructive erotic desire for everything. Here, in this kind of *Politeia*, or government, the soul of the ruler and the soul of the city is sheer body, a body that craves more and more with no capacity for, or possibility of, happiness.

Here is what Socrates says about the tyrant in Book IX of *The Republic*: “And the tyrannical man in the true sense of the word comes into being when, either under the influence of nature, or habit, or both, he becomes drunken, erotic, melancholic.” This last adjective is sometimes translated by “passionate,” but Plato used “melancholikos” and the Greek word “melancholia,” as you may well know, has a clear, specific, medical meaning: the melancholic is one full of black bile, a sad, depressed, restless and worried soul.

So the tyrant is not just someone who loves all sorts of pleasures and knows no moderation or boundaries; he is also a lost human being, unhappy and fearful.

Plato's description of tyranny and of the condition of the tyrant seems therefore to recall some of the features we can also find in *Hiero* – as Paola showed us a moment ago recalling the reference to Hiero in La Boétie's book: the tyrant is powerful, but alone; the tyrant does evil things and as a result can trust no one; the tyrant can have everything, do whatever he wants, and yet isn't merely never satisfied, but is also filled with a sense of emptiness. And, of course, ruling degenerately and selfishly, he will create a degenerate city and will rule not over good citizens, but over beasts.

And sure enough, that's something we can find in Hiero's self-pitying portrait and something we find, with a radical condemnation of tyranny as such, of tyranny as a form of government, in Plato's *Republic*.

Before turning to Xenophon, I will briefly say something about the other Platonic dialogue I mentioned earlier, *The Laws*, which is also considered Plato's last dialogue. Here we find a slightly different position: the Athenian Stranger, the lead character of this dialogue, the one speaking in the place usually occupied by Socrates, is discussing with Megillos and Clinias the creation of laws for a new colony. The main themes of this dialogue are not the questions "What is just?" and "Which is the perfect political order?", as they were in *The Republic*; the issue here is to address in the best possible way the needs of an actual city, a city that will exist in reality, and not an ideal.

In this dialogue, then, the Athenian Stranger says that a young, valorous, magnanimous tyrant could, quickly and effectively, impose the new constitution that the three are talking about. In this dialogue, tyranny is not necessarily the height of degeneracy. If the tyrant is good-natured and knows how to moderate himself and his political acts, then his power can be a quicker path to imposing a good new constitution.

This different Platonic position is also something we can find, accordingly, in *Hiero*: although La Boétie highlights only the negative traits of the tyrant, Xenophon and his Simonides, the poet in discussion with Hiero, seem to be telling us under what conditions a tyrant can do good for the city and for himself.

This reference to Plato, then, was necessary for two reasons: first, because it allows us to understand that to talk about tyranny, to deal both with the limits and the negative sides of tyranny as well as with its positive potentiality, was fairly commonplace in the Athens of the fifth and fourth century BC. In this period, Athens was the place in which philosophers and politicians were overcoming the heritage of archaic culture, a culture so deeply shaped and involved with a religious and traditional spirit, in favor of a new way of thinking about human beings and the human world. It's the century in which, as Nietzsche depicts it, the tragic spirit makes way for a new spirit: the spirit of individuals no more driven and oppressed by destiny or by the whim of the gods, but by their own capacity to reflect on their condition and on their possibilities. The Athens of the fifth century is the polis in which Socrates and the sophists could debate the nature of truth, of justice, of what's good for the polis and what's best for the human soul. On a political level, the Athens of the fifth century is the city of Pericles, a democratic polis that will eventually confront both the greatness and the limitations of this form of government. So the reflections of Plato and Xenophon on tyranny are part of a larger movement of reflection, and part of a need to reflect on the best form of government at a moment in which democracy has already shown its limits, its possible degenerations. Let's not forget that the trial against Socrates, held in 399 BC, was sought by a democratic government after the short period of the Thirty Tyrants, that is to say of the oligarchy that maintained power in Athens for eight months after the city's defeat in the Peloponnesian War. And let's not forget that Socrates had been the teacher of one of those tyrants, Critias, and that this fact contributed to formulating the charges against him: as we know, Socrates was accused of impiety and of corruption of youth.

As, the century changes, as we slip from the fifth to the fourth century, and as the fortune and power of Athens change, the philosophers, especially the Socratic ones, like Plato and Xenophon, have to deal with something we too have to grapple with in our time: the limits of democracy, if democracy is really the best form of government to ensure freedom and to increase knowledge; but also the limits of other forms of government and the temptation to give power to just one man or to some kind of oligarchy.

Just one more consideration: Tyranny becomes a problem, becomes something predominantly negative, only in this period, while in the archaic period "tyrannos" was simply the name given to someone who assumed absolute power over a city, usually with the favor of the popular classes. Of course, the tyrant wasn't elected and of course he had the power to make his

own laws, set his own rules. But the problem of legitimacy, the fact that he hadn't been wanted on the basis of a free covenant between the citizens, wasn't a big deal.

If we think of Oedipus, we have a clear view of this matter. Often, I know, the title of Sophocles' tragedy is translated as *Oedipus Rex* (in Italian too we usually say *Edipo re*). But the title should be "Oedipus Tyrannous," because that's what Oedipus was: a stranger who solved the riddle of the Sphinx, a brilliant, intelligent yet impulsive man who gains the throne of Thebes and rules over the city enjoying the respect and the gratitude of the people, until a plague spreads there, forcing him to discover the killer of Laius in order to end it.

Well, we know how that story goes and how it ends; but what I want to underline is that the power, the absolute power of Oedipus, the tyrannical power of Oedipus, is safe and legitimized as long as his power keeps the city safe and possibly happy. It's not a question of respect for some constitutional process, nor of respect for some kind of superior legitimacy: as long as a tyrant like Oedipus is doing good for the city, for the people, his power is a good and a legitimate one. But once things go bad, once the people grow unhappy or afraid, then his power starts to show its limits. Because there's a double bind between the tyrant and the city that eventually makes both insecure.

So, to rethink tyranny, to deal with it in a politico-philosophical way, is to deal, at the end of the day, with the problem of legitimacy and with the need to shape a political power and a political world not so exposed to the easily changing moods of both the ruler and the ruled.

This last point well epitomizes one of the reasons why Leo Strauss became so interested in writing a long interpretation of this minor, not very famous dialogue of Xenophon's. Strauss, a German-Jewish philosopher, moved to the United States in 1937. Shortly before doing so, he had had the tragic privilege to see all the best German and Jewish-German political hopes dashed in the madness of Nazism. Born in a small German city in 1899, with a precocious love for philosophy and a youthful devotion to the Zionist movement, Strauss saw the end of the German Empire (with the abdication in 1918 of Kaiser Wilhelm II) and the rise of the Weimar Republic, with all its liberal and democratic hopes. But, as we know, the Weimar Republic was to be just a moment of light – difficult and sometimes terrible, at that – before darkest night. Recalling that time in 1965, Strauss wrote:

The Weimar Republic was weak. It had a single moment of strength, if not of greatness: its strong reaction to the murder of the Jewish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Walther Rathenau, in 1922. On the whole it presented the sorry spectacle of justice without a sword or of justice unable to use a sword (Strauss, 1965, p. 137).

Hence the Weimar Republic, this liberal-democratic experiment as the model of justice without force, without power, without the capacity to use some kind of force for establishing freedom and justice. Above all, the Weimar Republic became for Strauss the demonstration of the weakness of modern philosophical political reflection on justice and freedom or, we might say, for the progressive end, in modernity, of a serious and sincere philosophical-political reflection around some fundamental questions like "What is justice?," "What is freedom?," "Is freedom more important than justice or is justice more important than freedom?," and, above all, the fundamental Socratic question, "How should we live?"

Well, these questions, so important at the beginning of the philosophical reflection on politics, became, by the modern era, and starting in particular with Machiavelli, idle if not foolish questions: when it comes to politics, when it comes to political matters, the point is not to speculate about big Socratic concerns (like "What is justice?" or "What should the ideal city be like?"). No, the point is to show in the most direct and clear-cut fashion the strategy one should adopt to conquer power, or the strategy political power should adopt to maintain first of all peace and order.

If we think back to what we said some weeks ago about Spinoza and Hobbes, and we bear in mind that in their view natural right, the concept of natural right, wasn't about some ideal and moral order inscribed in nature, but rather about the individual and amoral power that everything in nature

possesses, then we can understand the distance between the old Socratic way of thinking about politics and the modern one.

Well, Leo Strauss stressed this distance and stressed the degradation of political philosophy into political science, that is to say, into a form of scientific reflection over politics that doesn't want to express strong, moral judgments on what's good and what's bad. And Strauss stressed the responsibility of philosophy in the face of contemporary tyrannies: if political philosophy becomes unable to pronounce some sort of judgment, and if political philosophy become unable to think, dialogically, about what's good and what's bad, then when a nightmare, like the Nazi one, comes onto the scene of history, philosophy will find herself silent, or mute. Or, as in the case of Heidegger, willing to speak in favor of that nightmare.

At the same time, Strauss stressed the limit of contemporary democracies, of contemporary liberal democracies, both because they are weak – as Weimar's was – and because they have reduced themselves, I think we can say, to some kind of “rights maker” with no higher project, no superior end, no superior goal. And this kind of democracy is for Strauss, as it was in the Athens of the fifth and fourth century, the step before tyranny.

From this standpoint, Platonic political philosophy becomes for Strauss the locus classicus and trans-historical paradigm of two problems: 1) of the reflection, the dialogical, open and never-ending reflection on justice and the right way of living; and 2) of the never-ending problem of the status of the philosopher within the city, within the human world. What I'm trying to say is that, for Leo Strauss, we have to come back to that initial moment for political philosophy in order to realize that we need to start thinking again about what is just but also in order to realize that the philosopher is a strange creature inside the city: he or she is a human being driven by a restless desire for truth, and this desire for truth can or could be in stark contrast with what the city, from a religious or traditional or more general political point of view, thinks to be true or to be just.

So, in a larger sense, political philosophy is about the search for the best form of political government but also about the reflection on the limits of the relation between philosophy and the city, philosophy and power. If we think back to the fate of Socrates, then we can easily realize this kind of perennial conflict between philosophy and the city.

Why, then, Xenophon's dialogue *Hiero*? Well, of course, Leo Strauss would deal in depth with Plato's works, but he always had a special love for Xenophon, this apparently minor figure in the history of philosophy. In a letter written in 1939 to his close friend Jacob Klein, Strauss says that Xenophon has always been “mein spezieller Liebling,” “my favorite,” “my special darling,” because, he says, “he had the courage to take on the guise of an idiot and to go through the millennia that way — he's the greatest con man I know“ (Strauss, 2001, p. 567).

So, right through the end of the thirties, Xenophon became for Leo Strauss the master, the paradigm of the true Socratic philosopher. That is to say of a philosopher who, while he seems to show love for morality and moderation, seems to show this kind of love for the sake of general morality and because he knows that the danger of persecution is always an option for the philosopher; so Xenophon becomes the model of the philosopher who takes on the guise of an idiot while, in reality, he is teaching between the lines that the true philosopher is always beyond good and evil, that philosophy is a radical search for truth which could, in its journey, destroy everything that the other human beings, the non-philosophers, hold true, or good, or sacred.

We don't have time to dig into this conjecture of Strauss's. Let's just say that his obsession for esoteric writing and for the need of the true philosopher to mask him- or herself in order to avoid persecution, is one of the main, and most debated, premises, of Leo Strauss.

Nevertheless, this point is an important one if we want to understand Strauss's interpretation of the *Hiero* and the conflict about this interpretation with Alexandre Kojève. First, we have Strauss's special love for Xenophon and the idea that also under this small and simple dialogue between Hiero, the depressed and unhappy tyrant of Syracuse, and Simonides, the poet who tries to show to show the tyrant how to be happy, we can find some fundamental truths not – or

not primarily – about tyranny in itself but about the general relation between philosophy and power, and to what extent the philosopher can work with power or can try to give pieces of advice to the ruler.

Secondly, we have the debate with Alexandre Kojève. Strauss and Kojève knew each other since 1932, when they met in Paris. They remained friends for the rest of their lives, although there are radical, profound, differences between the two, starting from each one's view of the status of the philosopher in society. If, for Strauss, the philosopher should never get directly involved in politics, for Kojève, this brilliant Russian mind who moved to France after 1917 and who after World War Two left, in a sense, his philosophical career to become a statesman in the French Government, the Wise, the true Philosopher, the one who knows himself and the reasons of his actions and who can see the rational and teleological development of history, must put himself at the service of History itself, at the service of practical actions and practical purposes.

To underscore the differences between Leo Strauss and Alexandre Kojève, between the former's heterodox Platonism and the latter's heterodox Hegelianism, I think it's enough to recall this anecdote: when Kojève was asked once why he left philosophy to become a bureaucrat, he replied: “Well, because I wanted to know how history is made.”

So, while for Kojève history and politics are the fields in which philosophy must dwell because self-knowledge and teleological development of history must proceed together and because, as we saw just a second ago with the answer Kojève gave, there is in the philosopher, or at least there was in him, a desire not for power but surely for being, through an active role, where power is and where power can make history.

This horizon, this desire, are absent in Strauss. The philosopher could, as in *Hiero*, try to educate the ruler or the rulers and in so doing, he or she could try to imprint a more rational or, at least, peaceful and stable, order within the city. And he or she could do so for the sake of the city and for his own good. But, in the end, the true philosopher is, for Strauss, the only human being who doesn't want, or need, to be recognized. He or she is independent, not interested in politics, and moved by a different kind of desire: a vertical one, in the shape of love and desire for knowledge and truth. He or she doesn't want, or doesn't want primarily, bodies, and he or she doesn't need the gaze of the Other. He or she has moved on, and moved away, from the human need for recognition and from all those forms of human co-dependence in which the tyrant too, the man who has all the power, is trapped.

Thus in 1948, when Strauss wrote this commentary on Xenophon's *Hiero*, that book offered the opportunity for a reply by Kojève and for a re-statement by Strauss in the years immediately following.

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Well, I will try now to summarize the most important points of Strauss's interpretation of *Hiero* and of the debate between Strauss and Kojève, starting with a quotation from Kojève's essay *Tyranny and Wisdom*:

Indeed, in order to justify the philosopher's absolute isolation, one has to grant that Being is essentially immutable in itself and eternally identical with itself, and that it is completely revealed for all eternity in and by an intelligence that is perfect from the first; and this adequate revelation of the timeless totality of Being is, then, the Truth. Man (the philosopher) can at any moment participate in this Truth, either as the result of an action issuing from the Truth itself (“divine revelation”), or by his own individual effort to understand (the Platonic “intellectual intuition”), the only condition for such an effort being the innate “talent” of the one making this effort, independently of where he may happen to be situated in space (in the State) or in time (in history). If such is indeed the case, then the philosopher can and must isolate himself from the changing and

tumultuous world (which is nothing but pure “appearance”), and live in a quiet “garden” or, if necessary, in a “Republic of Letters” (Strauss, Kojève, 1961, pp. 151-152)

It does not seem possible in Strauss's case to speak of "participation in Truth through a Platonic intellectual intuition," since his Plato, rather than teaching the existence of something like "the" Truth, teaches that it is only possible to move in search of it driven by a noble desire, but not one which will find satisfaction because of it. Nor is there a Straussian faith in the Truth of divine revelation. Revelation is Law, and Law does not give an adequate understanding "of the timeless totality of Being," but only a solid foundation on which to base obedience to lead the people. Yet Kojève captures the most problematic character of the German philosopher's thought, namely the impression that philosophy resolves itself into a useless, selfish, self-referential enterprise. An escape into the garden of Epicurus, says Kojève. An escape which, it should be added, does not savor of the peace obtained by freeing oneself from pain and fear, distancing oneself from associated life as a dimension dangerous to a philosophical way of life, but instead is rife with the constant perception of conflict, violence and persecution. Moreover, the Straussian philosopher does not live hidden, but conceals his truth; he abstracts himself from associated life due to the dangerous nature of his philosophical activity, but retains a public face that makes him a good citizen. In essence, for all that Strauss claims the anarchic and asocial nature of philosophy, his philosopher cannot live without a political dimension since, in an admittedly questionable way, he feels duty-bound to be politically responsible.

This theme, namely the relationship between philosophy and power, between theoretical speculation and practical action, constitutes the core of the debate between Kojève and Strauss, starting from the latter's commentary on Xenophon's *Hiero*. Once again, the interpretation of an ancient dialogue becomes an opportunity to reflect on something terribly current: the tyrannies of the first half of the 20th century and the role of philosophy in the crisis that generated them.

Xenophon's dialogue opens with a question posed by the poet Simonides to the tyrant Hiero: Simonides wants to know the difference between the life of the tyrant and that of the private citizen. For no one, in fact, can better say what you lose or gain in pain and pleasure in the transition from private to public life. At this point Hiero can begin the description of the difficult, if not wretched, life of the ruler, forced to suspect everyone and unable to trust anyone, oppressed by the knowledge that the respect accorded him is the child of fear and not of love:

And further, the many offer gifts to those they hate, and what is more, particularly when they fear they may suffer some harm from them. But this, I think, would probably be considered deeds of slavery. Whereas I believe for my part that honors derive from acts the opposite of this. (9) For when human beings, considering a real man able to be their benefactor, and believing that they enjoy his goods, for this reason have him on their lips in praise; when each one sees him as his own private good; when they willingly give way to him in the streets and rise from their chairs out of liking and not fear; when they crown him for his public virtue and beneficence, and willingly bestow gifts on him; these men who serve him in this way, I believe, honor him truly; and the one deemed worthy of these things I believe to be honored in reality. I myself count blessed the one so honored. (10) For I perceive that he is not plotted against, but rather that he causes anxiety lest he suffer harm, and that he lives his life – happy, without fear, without envy, and without danger. But the tyrant, Simonides, knows well, lives night and day as one condemned by all human beings to die for his injustice (Strauss, Kojève, 1961, p. 15)

After this long description of the tyrant's unhappiness, Simonides asks Hiero the most obvious thing of all: If your condition is so terrible, why don't you abandon the tyranny? And why has no tyrant before you ever abandoned it? Hiero, more and more immersed in his role of "victim," answers:

“Because,” he said, “in this too is tyranny most miserable, Simonides: it is not possible to be rid of it either. For how would some tyrant ever be able to repay in full the money of those he has dispossessed, or suffer in turn the chains he has loaded on them, or how supply in requital enough lives to die for those he has put to death? (13) Rather, if it profit any man, Simonides, to hang himself, know,” he said, “that I myself find this most profits the tyrant. He alone, whether he keeps his troubles or lays them aside, gains no advantage (Strauss, Kojève, 1961, p. 15)

So ends the seventh chapter, and from here begins Simonides' exposition aimed at demonstrating that the life of the tyrant, on the contrary, could be absolutely happy. The teaching of the poet, in essence, will try to convince Hiero that the unhappy tyrant is only the vicious one, while the tyrant can be happy if just, if capable of behaving virtuously. But can a tyrant be just? And can Simonides' action educate the tyrant to exercise a better government? Or should we not rather recognize in this dialogue suspended, as all dialogues are, between truth and fiction, a new chapter in the relationship between philosophy and power? Strauss, as always, proceeds ambiguously: in his view, Xenophon neither declares that even a tyrannical regime could be just, nor rules it out; he poses the problem of legality in a lawless government, yet at the same time argues that a law, in itself, could be more unjust than an arbitrary command. This apparent indecision, however, shifts into the background as soon as we understand that, for the German philosopher, *Hiero* is not a dialogue about the possible salvation of a degenerate form of government, but about the smug sense of superiority with which the poet Simonides views the tyrant:

The peculiar character of the *Hiero* does not disclose itself to cursory reading. It will not disclose itself to the tenth reading, however painstaking, if the reading is not productive of a change of orientation. This change was much easier to achieve for the eighteenth-century reader than for the reader in our century who has been brought up on the brutal and sentimental literature of the last five generations. We are in need of a second education in order to accustom our eyes to the noble reserve and the quiet grandeur of the classics. Xenophon, as it were, limited himself to cultivating exclusively that character of classical writing which is wholly foreign to the modern reader. No wonder that he is today despised or ignored. An unknown ancient critic, who must have been a man of uncommon discernment, called him most bashful. Those modern readers who are so fortunate as to have a natural preference for Jane Austen rather than for Dostoevsky, in particular, have an easier access to Xenophon than others might have; to understand Xenophon, they have only to combine the love of philosophy with their natural preference. In the words of Xenophon, “it is both noble and just, and pious and more pleasant to remember the good things rather than the bad ones.” In the *Hiero*, Xenophon experimented with the pleasure that comes from remembering bad things, with a pleasure that admittedly is of doubtful morality and piety (Strauss, Kojève, 1961, p. 185).

Dostoevsky plunges man into the hell of his soul. Jane Austen, by contrast, reveals restraint, moderation and love for the ennobling aspects of human life. Ironic or not, Strauss often recalls this "natural predilection" of his for the English writer, so much so that he ties this preference to his ability to correctly understand Xenophon. Why? Probably because those who prefer the prim moderation of Jane Austen can better understand the "moderate" revenge of Xenophon/Simonides

on the tyrant Hiero, which is the revenge of the superiority of philosophy over politics. The Socratic dialogue is not a treatise, nor a manifesto declaring all its intentions. It is a power game conducted with art, an art in which Simonides is evidently much more expert than the tyrant. From this point of view, *Hiero* is a contest for power through the only means the wise man has at his disposal: the word. Simonides does not oppose the tyrant or even attempt to show the limits of his conduct. Rather, the poet leverages Hiero's desires and words and moves along the axis of his unhappiness to point out to him how he might be happier. In essence, by nursing his need to feel "loved" by the people, and not merely feared, he seeks to educate him to greater political wisdom:

But I tell you, Hiero, your contest is against others who rule cities; if you make the city you rule the happiest of these, know well that you will be declared by herald the victor in the most noble and magnificent contest among human beings. (8) First, you would at once secure the love of your subjects, which is the very thing you happen to desire. Further, the herald of your victory would not be one, but all human beings would sing of your virtue. (9) Being an object of attention you would be cherished not only by private men, but by many cities; marveled at not only in private, but in public among all as well; (10) it would be possible for you, as far as safety is concerned, to travel wherever you wish, for the sake of viewing the sights; and it would be possible for you to do this remaining here. For there would be a continual festival by you of those wishing to display whatever wise, beautiful, or good thing they had, and of those desiring to serve you as well. (11) Every man present would be your ally, and every man absent would desire to see you. Therefore, you would not only be liked, you would be loved by human beings; as for the fair, you would not have to seduce them, but submit to being seduced by them; as for fear, it would not be your own but others' that you might suffer some harm; (12) you would have willing men obeying you, and you would see them willingly take thought for you; if there should be some danger, you would see not only allies, but also champions, and those eager; being deemed worthy of many gifts, you will not be at a loss for someone well disposed with whom to share them, with all men rejoicing at your good things and all fighting for those which are yours just as if they were their own. (13) For treasuries, furthermore, you would have all the wealth of your friends. "But enrich your friends with confidence, Hiero; for you will enrich yourself. Augment the city, for you will attach power to yourself. Acquire allies for it. (14) Consider the fatherland to be your estate, the citizens your comrades, friends your own children, your sons the same as your life, and try to surpass all these in benefactions. (15) For if you prove superior to your friends in beneficence, your enemies will be utterly unable to resist you. And if you do all these things, know well, of all things you will acquire the most noble and most blessed possession to be met with among human beings, for while being happy, you will not be envied for being happy (Strauss, Kojève, 1961, pp. 20-21)

There is a double bind between the tyrant and his people, a bond based on their being the two endpoints of the same world, namely the political one, that of the life of the city.

While it is impossible for this potentially destructive relationship to reach from within a positive resolution – relatively positive, since tyranny is, in any case, a degenerate form of government – the philosopher, acting from outside as a free element of the political framework, can suggest to power how to be better or, at least, how to be more useful to the people in order not to harm itself. Here the sage, as Strauss had pointed out when reflecting on classical political philosophy, merely arbitrates events, although perhaps it seems more appropriate to say that, at least in this case, the sage in the mask of the poet Simonides "whispers" to power what to be and how to behave.

Now, the German philosopher opens his *Introduction* to the essay on *Hiero* by stating that modern political science, the evaluative and, indeed, "scientific" one, has proved incapable of understanding the most important and tragic political facts: "when we have found ourselves faced with tyranny – with a type of tyranny that has surpassed the boldest imagination of the most powerful thinkers of the past – our political science has not been able to recognize it." In order to redress this terrible weakness, it is necessary to return to ancient wisdom by overcoming the fundamental error of modern political thought, namely the departure of philosophy from its protected space "outside" the city to become, on the contrary, an integral part of politics, ideology in service to power, and technology in service to the transformation of the world that helps power function. Yet, as mentioned, even Simonides "speaks" to the tyrant to try to influence his actions. Strauss seems to be aware of this aspect when, taking up his battle against the "master of evil" Machiavelli, he writes:

Instead one should concentrate on the only mirror of princes to which he emphatically refers and which is, as one would expect, the classic and the fountainhead of this whole genre: Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus*.³ This work has never been studied by modern historians with even a small fraction of the care and concentration it merits and which is needed if it is to disclose its meaning. The *Education of Cyrus* may be said to be devoted to the perfect king in contradistinction to the tyrant, whereas the *Prince* is characterized by the deliberate disregard of the difference between king and tyrant. There is only one earlier work on tyranny to which Machiavelli emphatically refers: Xenophon's *Hiero*.⁴ The analysis of the *Hiero* leads to the conclusion that the teaching of that dialogue comes as near to the teaching of the *Prince* as the teaching of any Socratic could possibly come. By confronting the teaching of *The Prince* with that transmitted through the *Hiero*, one can grasp most clearly the subtlest and indeed the decisive difference between Socratic political science and Machiavellian political science. If it is true that all premodern political science rests on the foundations laid by Socrates, whereas all specifically modern political science rests on the foundations laid by Machiavelli, one may also say that the *Hiero* marks the point of closest contact between premodern and modern political science (Strauss, Kojève, 1961, pp. 24-25).

A point of contact which does not mean identity; and, to prove this, it is sufficient to say that Simonides does not try in any way to teach Hiero how to become a tyrant or how to preserve power by any means. Simonides is faced with a *fait accompli*, with the fact of political life as it presents itself at that moment, and on this he acts, as best he can, in partial harmony with the principle recognized by Strauss as the guiding one of classical political philosophy: to follow political facts in their warp and weft in order to understand them; to be vigilant, but at the same time flexible, in judging them. In other words: classical political philosophy, by renouncing active participation in political life, retains the ability to focus on the good and the right beyond opinion and momentary regimes so that it can thereby contribute much more effectively to the education, albeit indirect, of citizens and rulers. Paradoxical as it may be, the Straussian point of view really seems to be this. As long as the philosopher continues to be a philosopher, that is, as long as he consecrates his life to contemplation and the search for truth, then his gaze toward the sun can, in some way, be of help even to those who have remained in the cave. If at the philosophical level one asks the question about good and right sooner or later, Strauss seems to say, this question begins to be heard even by those who will never be able to join in the search. But if the philosopher makes the opposite journey, if the philosopher returns to the cave to enlighten, to change, to impose, then his zetetic essence (i.e. skeptical, though in a way Strauss doesn't want to confuse with modern skepticism, hence his retention of this rarer term) will turn into dogmatism and his best hopes will turn into a condemnation both of himself and of the city.

Here is Strauss's Epicurean garden, the garden Kojève cannot accept. Whereas the German philosopher posits some kind of otherness between philosophy and power, a fundamental conflict that cannot be resolved – as there is complete otherness, for Strauss, between philosophy and theology –, Kojève posits the duty to intervene and, above all, the need for recognition, and the struggle for recognition (and let's say that in his Hegelian view, the Wise Man and the Napoleon of one particular time should recognize themselves and work together in order to create a more rational world or to come to that strange moment that is the "end of history", the end of continuous changing).

Strauss, on the contrary, removes the philosopher from the world and philosophy from history, rooting its purest essence in an ultra-historical reflection, and lets the continuous cyclical becoming of things, that oscillation between stillness and movement that does not seem to find resolution, dominate political life in its true nature, Kojève, on the contrary, in Hegelian fashion conceives history as a subsequent development of the dialectic between Master and Slave, a development which will necessarily lead, both from the historical and the political point of view, to the full satisfaction of man as a recognized citizen of the universal homogeneous state, that is to say of a classless, a resolved, society. An end of history in which even the task of philosophy and of the philosopher proves to be essentially finished.

Obviously nothing could be further from Strauss's position, especially from the elitism that leads him to sanction the separation between philosophers and non-philosophers. For Strauss, history remains the terrain on which the human problem continually recurs, the field from which contradictions, resistance, and injustice cannot be eliminated. While the common man remains immersed in this tragic fullness of life, the wise man has the possibility to elude change by seeking, through time, traces of a dialogue between superior minds. In the middle, between individuals and philosophers, between opinion and the search for truth, there remain the new yet unchanging forms of associated life. Forms destined to preserve themselves through moderation, or else to destroy themselves through arrogance in, as we've said, an unresolvable cyclicity.

In this respect, there is little point in continuing to wonder whether Strauss was a sincere enemy of liberal democracy or its secret friend: the only regime the German philosopher approves of is one that guarantees order. If, in a world impossible for him, human beings learned to live in a fully liberal society without turning the demand for, and granting of, individual rights into a danger or weakness for the overall order, then many of his resistances would fall away. But, given the hopelessly irrational, selfish, and loveless character of most individuals, the various forms of modern Western democracy appear, in his eyes, equally corrupt. Moreover, as Thucydides taught him, there is no political power that does not, sooner or later, exhaust its vital force, its phase of progress, to return to barbarism (which can, of course, have many faces). Therefore: nothing in human world history is resolved or can be resolved forever. Only philosophy, if understood in its original meaning, can escape the alternation between stillness and movement because the great spirits, for Strauss, know how to communicate through time and know how to understand each other beyond time.

Even the debate over Xenophon's dialogue and the dense epistolary exchange with Kojève doesn't change, nor will it change, his attitude. The German philosopher not only rejects the militancy of philosophy alongside society or for society. He rejects, more fundamentally, the very notion that even the philosopher needs to be "recognized," because the truth, or what is hidden under its name, is a matter reserved for a few, and the wise man, if he is truly wise, escapes the desires in which other human beings remain trapped. However, a wisdom that never proves its efficacy cannot be called wise. If the philosopher, for Strauss, must always behave in public like Simonides, like the poet who approaches power to console it and, in the process, strike it with his subtle irony, then it is hard to see how any of this can be not only useful but, at bottom, not dangerous to society. Is a philosophy that counsels devotion to the people and moderation to the politician really the beginning of a return capable of overcoming the modern by resolving its errors?

Or, rather, shouldn't we believe that a philosophy of this kind is destined to wear out quickly while it also, in parallel, exhausts the possibility that collective existence can become more rational and therefore, in a Spinozian way, more free? And, finally, if the philosopher remains locked in his garden, against what will he prove to be true, against what prove that his quest makes sense?

As Kojève writes in his response to Strauss's *Hiero*:

One must keep in mind that philosophy is by definition a different thing from wisdom: it necessarily implies "subjective certainties" which are not Truth but rather are "prejudices." The duty of the philosopher is to move away from these prejudices as quickly and as radically as possible. Well, any society closed in on itself that adopts a doctrine, like any "elite" selected according to the teaching of a doctrine, tends to consolidate the prejudices that this doctrine implies (Strauss, Kojève, 1961, p. 155).

Strauss, a restless interpreter of ancient thought as an ever relevant thought, certainly tried to cultivate wisdom in the certainty that in it lies philosophy. But, in his obsession with the esoteric face hidden behind every public mask, he also cultivated the suspicion and the idea that there exists, by nature, a circle of individuals, divided from other individuals, called to understand and bear the burden of truths that the world could not understand and bear. A typical spirit of the citizens of "gardens" and "Republics of letters," replies Kojève, who continues:

One cannot be a philosopher without at the same time wanting to be a philosophical pedagogue. And if the philosopher does not want artificially or unduly to restrict the scope of his pedagogical activity (and thereby risk being subject to the prejudices of the "sect"), he will necessarily be strongly inclined to participate, in one way or another, in government as a whole, so that the State might be organized and governed in a way that makes his philosophical pedagogy both possible and effective (Strauss, Kojève, 1961, p. 163).

So – and I'm about to finish –, with this opposition we come to the heart of the difference between Strauss and Kojève and to the heart of Strauss's interest in this dialogue of Xenophon's: "What good can philosophy do for society?" "Can it really teach, with its slow but restless movement from the realm of opinions to the realm of truth (or of the quest for truth), smash all those bonds that make non-philosophers so tied – by interests, *Eros*, lack of independence, need for recognition – one to another, or, at the end of the day, this kind of philosophical pedagogy can just destroy society because the philosopher, if he or she's a true philosopher, cannot help but speak the truth. And, in order not to reveal the truth to everyone – or what the philosopher thinks to be the truth – he or she can just write between lines and walk side by side with the city without participating directly in the political life and without telling too clearly his or her truth?

And, above all, can the philosopher be understood by the common people, or does he or she lack the necessary erotic qualities to seduce the ears of common people? Well, those are questions that would characterize Strauss's entire philosophical journey. And also, toward the end of his life, he would go back to the conflict between philosophy and the city starting from the enmity between Socrates and Aristophanes. I will summarize Strauss's position, although his interpretation of Aristophanes' comedies would deserve more attention, with this remark:

This is also why the *poet* and the *philosopher* are engaged in a contest inside the city. They both hold a truth (or some truth), but the philosophical one has no constructive power inside the city. Reflecting on Aristophanes' *Clouds*, Strauss writes: «The philosopher is necessarily ridiculous in the eyes of the multitude and therefore a natural

subject for comedy. »¹ The philosopher, unlike the poet, speaks a language that cannot be understood or that can be understood only in the wrong way. The philosopher, contrary to the politician, pursues an ideal of good and justice that fatally leads out of the city's boundaries. Whereas the philosophical *Eros* has a vertical movement, that of the city is horizontal. The first drives to the expansion of thought and to the quest for its universality, the second drives toward the expansion of the borders and the submission of other cities, a type of expansion doomed to failure and regression, but also to periods of progress (Strauss, 1966, p. 5).

Those two different movements shape the tragedy of the human condition. A tragic condition which the true philosopher should never, for Strauss, try to resolve permanently, but simply question over and over again. Philosophy is an act of desire, a declaration of lack where the question is always superior to the answer. And History is not the scene of the revelation of an Absolute Spirit leading toward a final, homogenous, universal state. Especially since, if that state should ever come – and maybe we are not too far off from it – then, for Strauss, Nietzsche's "last man" will have won. And so, in conclusion, I will read what Nietzsche wrote in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, quoting a passage from the *Prologue* dear to Strauss:

One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one is careful lest the entertainment be too harrowing. One no longer becomes poor or rich: both require too much exertion. Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion. No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 10).

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