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Leo Strauss's "An Epilogue": Political Science as Political Philosophy

Abstract: Leo Strauss's article "An Epilogue" is made up of many different critical arguments about political science. The guiding principles of these arguments are not revealed clearly enough. One can even get the impression that "An Epilogue" is an unfinished article. Only after finding the guiding principles we can understand the Strauss's critique. He emphasized the difference between the philosophical and scientific approach to politics. "An Epilogue" shows that he understood political science as philosophy.

Keywords: Leo Strauss, political philosophy, political science, philosophy of political science

"An Epilogue" by Leo Strauss is one of the most famous critiques of political science (Strauss, 1995). It is hard to engage in a discussion with the ideas presented in the article because one would have to participate in a series of different discussions. Every argument can become a starting point for a different discussion. This kind of phenomenon is rare not only in the discussions between political scientists and philosophers, but also in the work of Strauss. His style of writing is a presentation of one or a few arguments. According to Allan Bloom, in his polemics Strauss did not intend "to make accusations concerning subversive motives" (Bloom, 1974, p. 375). "An Epilogue" is a refutation of this observation. The article exhibits a pointed critique. One must agree with John H. Shaar and Sheldon S. Wolin, who called *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics* "unrelievable hostile and destructive" (Shaar, Wolin, 1963, p. 126). According to Joseph Cropsey, in "An Epilogue" Strauss was a "sharp critic". (Cropsey, 1975, p. 133). Straussians called this collection of articles "the hate book" (Norton, 2004, p. 43).

"An Epilogue" is one of the most important articles that allows us to understand Strauss's position on political science. Even the title of the article is an exception. Strauss was fond of simple titles that would point to the most important argument. "An Epilogue" is an article in which the title does not reveal the most important idea. It is hard to understand to whom Strauss is writing an epilogue

– to the book *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics* or to political science as such. Only a few references are made to the other articles in the book and even these cases can be explained as having to do with academic correctness. This article could easily be a part of any other collection of essays. “An Epilogue” not only fails to provide a conclusion to the book, but itself calls for a careful interpretation. Strauss does not clearly reveal the guiding principles of his critique. One can find these principles only by perusing the text. Philosophy can be compared to climbing the ladder of abstractions. In “An Epilogue” Strauss decided not to climb to the highest level and explain the principles of critique.

A few researchers have already attempted to classify the guiding principles on which Strauss's critique is based. Nasser Behnegar discusses five principles that are to be found in the writings of Strauss: (1) the distinction between philosophy and science, (2) the depreciation of common sense, (3) the neutral perspective, (4) the distinction between facts and values, (5) and the rejection of the common good (Behnegar, 2009, pp. 218–219). In his book *Leo Strauss, Max Weber, and the Scientific Study of Politics*, Behnegar presents a different set of presuppositions: (1) the separation of political science from political philosophy, (2) the dependence on scientific psychology, (3) the use of technical vocabulary, (4) the value free character, and (5) the denial of common good (Behnegar, 2003). Shaar and Wolin indicate five “basic categories of analysis”: (1) the political science does not reveal anything new about politics, (2) it is based on a flawed understanding of empiricism, (3) it does not understand the nature of politics, (4) it reduces political phenomena to non-political ones, (5) it is guided by an inadequate understanding of the relationship between facts and values (Shaar, Wolin, 1963, p. 130). None of these typologies are based on a consistent analysis of “An Epilogue”. The significance of this article remains overlooked. Researchers tend to focus on the most common arguments against political science that are found in Strauss's other publications.

The aim of this paper is to determine the guiding principles of the critique presented in “An Epilogue”. According to Behnegar, Strauss's “rhetoric had apparently disastrous effects” (Behnegar, 2003, p. 142). The most important negative effect is the unwillingness of political scientists to engage in a discussion with the critique that is presented in the article. However, the indifference of philosophers towards “An Epilogue” is surprising. This article is often cited; however, it has not been analysed. Such situation is determined by three circumstances: polemical rhetoric of the article, abundance of critical arguments and obscurity regarding the guiding principles behind these arguments. Researchers tend to discuss separate critical arguments without trying to understand them as a whole. In this article we propose five guiding principles that are to be found in “An Epilogue”: (1) non-political study of politics, (2) political science without concrete individual, (3) scientific romanticism, (4) the loss of the understanding of the whole, (5) elimination of prudence.

The non-political study of politics

The fundamental and unifying guiding principle behind Strauss's critique of political science may be described as a critique of the non-political study of politics. The other four principles are as important as the first one, but without a clear understanding of this principle we could not understand the others. Strauss provides a few different explanations of this principle. First, political science "is no longer based on political experience, but on what is called scientific psychology" (Strauss, 1995, p. 206). Secondly, "the new political science should tend to understand political things in nonpolitical terms" (Strauss, 1995, p. 210). Thirdly, "what is important for us, political scientists, is not the politically important" (Strauss, 1995, p. 215). According to Strauss, political scientists use methods which are borrowed from other sciences. This leads them to use technical language that is foreign to citizens. Political scientists give primacy to their methods and not to political reality. They do not begin their investigations from political phenomena, but from an idealistic assumption about the priority of the method. Strauss rejects modern political science because he sees it as "irrelevant and apolitical, if not anti-political or perniciously based" (Gunnell, 1986, p. 116).

Strauss argues that political scientists are only capable of providing a non-political understanding of politics. The theories of political science do not become politically relevant because they are based on methods. Strauss defends the thesis that the attempt to find a non-political explanation of politics is based on a mistake. Political science aims to understand politics with methods which are foreign to it. Strauss calls this a "total rejection of common sense" and argues for a return to the classical conception of political science as a part of practical philosophy. According to him, political scientists pay too much attention to the problems of methodology and too little to common sense. They look at politics from the perspective of a disinterested observer, just as natural scientists do. However, politics cannot be reduced to non-political factors. By giving the primacy to epistemology, political scientists create explanations that are interesting only to themselves. In this they differ radically from the classical political philosophers who preserve "the perspective of the citizen or statesman" (Strauss, 1978, p. 25). The price of the non-political explanation is the rejection of the perspective of the statesman and citizen.

Strauss notes that modern political science claims to be superior to any other kind of understanding of politics. He argues that this position is based on a flawed philosophical reasoning. However, it is hard to understand how such a flawed understanding of politics could have achieved such a dominant role when compared to the classical understanding of politics. Victor Gourevitch has observed that, "The most basic and most constant assumption of Strauss's historical studies is, therefore, the assumption that classical philosophy is truer than are any of teachings which criticize or reject it" (Gourevitch, 1968, p. 67). If we

are to accept this argument, we have to explain why modern political scientists regard the tradition of classical political philosophy as being inferior. Among arguments that are put in “An Epilogue” we can find one that points towards the answer to the question of how modern political science was able to triumph over classical political philosophy. Strauss hints that the triumph of modern political science would have been impossible without political support. He argues that political science is a part of democracy. In Strauss’ own words, “Modern democracy might seem to stand and fall by the claim that ‘the method of democracy’ and ‘method of intelligence’ are identical” (Strauss, 1947, p. 455). Political science and democracy are founded on the assumptions of value neutrality and moral relativism. In both cases moral, religious, and philosophical convictions of citizens are of no political importance. We can name many arguments shared by democrats and positivism. The most important among them are relativism, value neutrality, the importance of procedures and the stance of the observer.

Political science without concrete individual

The second principle behind the critical arguments of Strauss can be described as an attempt to construct a science of politics without considering ideas about human nature or any given individual’s actual circumstances. Strauss thinks that political scientists look at human beings from the perspective of natural science: “The last step might be thought to be the use by the new political science of observations regarding rats” (Strauss, 1995, p. 216). One of the main actors of “An Epilogue” is “the man from Missouri”. Strauss argues that political scientists live in a world, which is different from the one in which “the man from Missouri” lives. Methods of modern science demand to transform the ordinary understanding of politics into the “functional relations between different series of events” (Strauss, 1995, p. 212). This opens the door for the creation of a political science without concrete individual. Strauss’s explanation of the relationship between modern political science and the human condition reminds us of the problem of the identity of the humanities that were analysed by Michel Foucault. According to him, “Western culture has constituted, under the name of man, a being who, by one and the same interplay of reasons, must be a positive domain of knowledge and cannot be an object of science” (Foucault, 1989, p. 400). The same can be said of modern political science. In their attempts to understand politics, political scientists leave out any considerations about human nature. Strauss argues that the political scientist “must pay due attention to the fact that he himself is a human being and that social science is always a kind of self – knowledge” (Strauss, 1989, p. 6). “An Epilogue” allows us to see that modern political scientists are interested in external conditions of the individual actions.

Political scientists cannot understand what makes man a "political animal". Modern political scientists speak about politics without having any clear conception of the true nature of politics. Strauss argues that there are several factors which cause this situation. First, all attempts to delimit the political from the non-political imply a valuation. Political scientists want to stay methodologically pure and claim to make no value judgements. Secondly, the theories of political scientists are separated from the common sense of citizens. In the words of Strauss, "new political science lacks orientation regarding political things; it has no protection whatever except by surreptitious recourse to common sense against losing itself in the study of irrelevancies" (Strauss, 1995, p. 215). In their attempts to get rid of common-sense scientists are unable to understand the "man from Missouri". They do not speak about goodness, nobility, honour, or even decency. The reason behind this situation is that they do not consider the possibility that moral factors might be of more importance than any other factors. Concrete persons disappear behind the veil of methodology, concepts, and data.

Scientific romanticism

The third guiding principle, which unifies the arguments that Strauss put forward in "An Epilogue" can be described by using Carl Schmitt's conception of political romanticism. The relationship of scientists with politics is akin to what Schmitt analysed as political romanticism (Schmitt, 1986). Strauss does not provide an appropriate term to name this aspect. There are at least three positions that allow us to speak about the close relationship between science and romanticism. First, scientists have created a world of theoretical models which has no relation to the everyday experience of citizens. In the words of Strauss, "the logic on which the new science is based may provide sufficient criteria of exactness; it does not provide objective criteria of relevance" (Strauss, 1995, p. 214). Secondly, political scientists are more worried about the novelty of their theories than about the reality which they are meant to explain. In their pursuit of novelty, they are ready to look for connections between the most unexpected phenomena. Thirdly, they use hypothetical statements and everything becomes provisional: "The language of new political science claims to be perfectly clear and distinct and at the same time entirely provisional; its terms are meant to imply hypotheses about political life" (Strauss, 1995, pp. 217–218). This leads to a situation where the logic of research defeats the logic of politics.

According to Schmitt, political romantics transform every phenomenon into an occasion which becomes a starting point for a play of unbridled phantasy.¹

¹ Schmitt understood romanticism as a form of occasionalism. Nicolas Malebranche and Arnold Geulincx described God as being the only active cause and explained everything else as an

The God of the classic occasionalism is substituted by man and this leads to what Schmitt called a 'subjectified occasionalism': "the romantic subject treats the world as an occasion and opportunity for his romantic productivity" (Schmitt, 1986, p. 17). Strauss criticizes political scientists because for them politics is just an *occasio*, around which the creation of new theories turns. In their research, scientists lose sight of the difference between thought and reality. They become strangers to the common sense and start looking for occasions to challenge accepted opinions. Political scientists want to see everything in an original way, and this leads them to disregard the norms of daily life. For them politics becomes only a material with which an individual can play in showing off his creativity. In the words of Schmitt, "if anything provides a complete definition of romanticism, it is the lack of any relationship to a *causa*" (Schmitt, 1986, p. 82). Political scientists talk about causal relations, but behind their narratives there is a more pressing issue – the need to find an unexpected perspective. Any aspect of political life can become the beginning of an endless novel, just as the term 'romanticism' itself suggests.

The critical arguments put forward by Strauss suggest that the world of political science is akin to what Schmitt described as the romantic relationship with the world. Schmitt argues that the world as experienced by romantics is "a world without substance and functional cohesion, without a fixed direction, without a final court of appeal, continuing into infinity and led only by the magic hand of chance" (Schmitt, 1986, p. 19). These characteristics of romanticism can be seen in the activity of modern political scientists. For them politics is only an occasion to show their creativity. The fascination with the questions of method shows how closely scientists are related to the ideas of the Enlightenment. However, their investigations are also remarkably like some of the main characteristics of Romanticism. By trying to achieve methodologically purified body of knowledge, political scientists become romantically disengaged from political reality.

The loss of the whole

The fourth guiding principle behind Strauss's critique of political science is the loss of the whole: "The 'highest' is that through which society is a 'whole', a distinct whole with a character of its own" (Strauss, 1995, p. 214). In "An Epilogue" we can find three arguments that show the nature of the relationship between political science and the whole. First, modern political scientists are confronted with the problem of the hermeneutic circle. By denying the possibility of any

occasio for His activity. According to Schmitt, "the romantic subject occupies the central position and makes the world and everything that occurs in it into a mere occasion" (Schmitt, 1986, p. 18).

kind of access to the whole, they cannot know whether their knowledge about parts is well founded. Secondly, by strictly delimiting their investigations to the knowledge of parts, scientists cannot be certain about the truth of their knowledge. Thirdly, scientists are unable to create a consistent understanding of political life. The faster the evolution of scientific research becomes, the harder it is to grasp political life. The experience of politics is shattered into many fragments.

Strauss claims that modern political science is not capable of making a distinction between the political and the non-political. He understands this problem as an effect of the loss of the whole. According to Strauss, political scientists get lost in a "chaotic mass of data into which it must bring an order alien to those data" (Strauss, 1995, p. 215). The concepts used by scientists do not help in understanding politics. Political scientists necessarily must reduce politics to non-political phenomena. Strauss argues that the higher things are explained in terms of the lower: "the human in terms of the subhuman, the rational in terms of subrational, the political in terms of the subpolitical" (Strauss, 1995, p. 207). In "An Epilogue" he writes not only about the relationship between science and liberal democracy, but also about the relationship between science and atheism. In his words, "The new science rests on a dogmatic atheism which presents itself as merely methodological and hypothetical" (Strauss, 1995, p. 213).

The reduction of politics to non-political phenomena is inseparable from the fear of the whole which can also be described as a fear of openly philosophical speculations. The loss of a unified perspective has political effects – "it implies that there cannot be a common good" (Strauss, 1995, p. 219). This point of Strauss's critique can be explained by a reference to the thesis, put forward by Roberto Mangabeira Unger: "Because the social world cannot be understood as a whole, it is also impossible to imagine how it might be changed as a whole" (Unger, 1984, p. 48). Unger's argument about the social world help us in understanding Strauss's critique of political science. By neglecting the whole scientists are unable to speak about the common good. In the words of Strauss, "old political science was concerned with political improvement by political means as distinguished from social engineering" (Strauss, 1995, p. 213). Modern political scientists think like technicians. They produce so much research that new rationalizing projects of politics become contradictory with the earlier ones. This in turn demands a new project from a political engineer and so *ad infinitum*. Every scientist thinks that he is investigating an important problem and is certain that other scientists should study his investigations. However, no political scientist can study all investigations.

The elimination of prudence

We could not gain an adequate understanding of Strauss's critique of political science without seeing that it is based on a distinction of practical and theoretical sciences. Strauss argued that human behaviour has principles which are independent from the principles of science. If we want to understand politics, we do not have to study contemporary political science – simple prudence may be enough: “The sphere governed by prudence is then in principle self-sufficient or closed” (Strauss, 1995, p. 216). The idea that scientific understanding of politics is the only true understanding is one which leads to the notion that practical experience must be superseded by technical knowledge.² The entrenchment of science is followed by the understanding which sees politics as analogous with that of a well-functioning mechanism. From the perspective of science, the problems of politics have the same status as those of ‘building bridges’ (Strauss, 1995, p. 216).

Strauss argues that modern political science has no connection with prudence. According to the tradition of classical political philosophy, theoretical understanding is different from practical wisdom, which is inconceivable without a close relation with morality. Political scientists are only interested in understanding political facts and claim to be neutral towards the task of the moral education of citizens. Scientific proofs have no connection with practical wisdom. The reason behind this is that prudence demands virtues. The concept of virtue is completely alien to modern political science. A prudent individual must be more than just a researcher of facts. He must have moral character. Political scientists are only concerned with the scientific validity of their arguments. Specialization is one of the factors which separates them from the pursuit of prudence. Classical philosophers thought that philosophy is a necessary requisite for the education of citizens. Modern political science refuses to do anything about the formation of prudence. According to Strauss, political science fosters a nihilistic attitude: “The more serious we are as social scientists, the more completely we develop within ourselves a state of indifference to any goal, or of aimlessness and drifting, a state which may be called nihilism” (Strauss, 1995, pp. 18–19). By becoming disengaged from prudence, science also becomes unaware of the weaknesses of democracy. In the words of Strauss, “while the new political science becomes ever less able to see democracy or to hold a mirror to democracy, it ever more reflects the most dangerous proclivities of democracy. It even strengthens those proclivities” (Strauss, 1995, p. 222).

² There is a deep similarity between Strauss and Michael Oakeshott. According to Oakeshott, “Rationalism is the assertion that what I have called practical knowledge is not knowledge at all, the assertion that, properly speaking, there is no knowledge which is not technical knowledge” (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 15).

A hidden philosophy

The guiding principles behind Strauss's critique constitute the basis of a crypto-philosophy, which forms the fundamental presuppositions of modern political science. Political scientists are not concerned about these principles. They hold them to be self-evident and see no need to defend themselves from Strauss's critique. Strauss has managed to reveal a philosophy behind what political scientists consider to be the true scientific method. He argues that political scientists reject the everyday understanding of politics and hold two self-contradictory positions. They declare themselves neutral to values and at the same time show sympathy for liberal democracy. Political scientists talk about the science of man, though they seek to understand only the external determinants.

Strauss is not trying to understand the intentions of political scientists. They have not provided any serious refutations to his critique. This is especially the case with the first principle – the non-political explanation of politics. Scientists cannot say that they are creating a political science which seeks to explain actual politics. Their attitude of value neutrality is well known. Political scientists are not concerned with proving that they are able to acquire some knowledge about man rather than about merely his external determinations. They are even less worried by the critique of their inability to grasp the whole and the loss of the importance of prudence. Strauss's critique could only do with an 'all or nothing' answer. There are only two ways for political scientists to go about answering this critique: to admit that modern political science is a failed philosophy or not to react at all. An outcome of any intermediary position would be fruitless. Strauss was right in his estimation of their reactions: "they never for a single moment meet the sole issue to which the whole Epilogue is devoted" (Strauss, 1995, p. 154).

Strauss's "An Epilogue" is an exceptional critique of political science. Authors of other critiques usually limit themselves to the critique of scientism. Friedrich Hayek thinks that we should criticize only the scientism of modern political science and he believes there is room for a legitimate use of scientific method in trying to understand politics (Hayek, 1955, p. 102). Bernard Crick defends a similar position: "Here is defense of politics against 'scientism', not science, against technology, as a doctrine, not as practical activity" (Crick, 1962, p. 88). Strauss does not use the distinction between science and scientism. He thinks that political science has more serious problems than scientism. Political scientists are creating a distorted picture of politics. By focusing only on the critique of scientism we would lose sight of the most problematic aspects of the relationship between politics and political science. The opposition to scientism does not reach deep enough. According to Hayek and Crick, political science is a good tool, though sometimes it is used in bad ways. Strauss argues that even by staying within the confines of the methodology, science creates a distorted picture.

Strauss's critical remarks in "An Epilogue" have to be seen as a polemic between two different philosophies. He tries to raise the discussion with political scientists to the level of philosophy. Strauss presents the disagreement between two philosophies and not one between political science and political philosophy. Modern political science came into being by avoiding the discussion of its philosophical questions, which are the target of Strauss's critique. Political scientists have their own philosophy, which usually goes by the name of "positivism". Strauss not only talks about the collision of two different philosophies, he takes a stance and defends the classical political philosophy. Precisely this fact allows us to understand the sharpness of "An Epilogue" which managed to unite some political philosophers. However, political scientists continue their research without paying any attention to Strauss's critique.

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