Booknotes

Heinrich Meier's *Political Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion* (Chicago University Press, 2017) contains a fine grained exposition of *Thoughts on Machiavelli,* Leo Strauss's study of Machiavelli, and Meier's own Straussian reading of Rousseau's *Du contrat social*. Strauss is not well known in Anglo-American philosophical circles, at least not directly, though his supposed influence on various political notables in the United States at the end of the twentieth century is often speculated on in supposedly well-informed periodicals and newspapers. Strauss is well-known for his doctrine of exoteric and esoteric interpretations of the philosophical figures he discusses. The exoteric reading is what the uninitiated reader will make of a text, the esoteric is what the thinker behind the text actually thinks, but hides beneath the surface. One difficulty many have in reading Strauss is the extent to which his own supposedly exoteric writings are encumbered with a somewhat esoteric style. In plain English, they are not easy to read, especially not if they are not given close attention.

Meier may help here, because he tells the reader quite a bit of what Strauss believes about philosophy. In this context the superficially unpromising distinction between philosophy and revealed religion may be helpful, philosophy rather than political philosophy because in a broad sense Strauss sees all philosophy as being political. Revealed religion bases its tenets and prescriptions on the authority of their divine source. It is thus, epistemologically speaking, superhuman: we have to submit our reason and intelligence to something higher, and bow down before it. Philosophy, by contrast, is its own vindication; it values human legitimation and sees no possibility of anything higher, but it is itself a high calling, demanding independence and rigour on the part of the thinker. Strauss's exemplar here is Aristotle, and particularly the Aristotelian concept of magnanimity. Magnanimity is very broadly interpreted by Strauss and Meier to suggest the opposite of humility, intellectually and morally speaking. In Strauss's words, quoted by Meier (p 64) 'the virtue opposite to pride or arrogance (is) not humility, but humanity or generosity'. We need no more than philosophy; or to put it more accurately in Straussian terms, philosophers need no more than philosophy, and philosophy pursued in a pure, generous and humane way can get at the truth, or at least at truths.

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Unfortunately rulers, and most of those they rule, will not be content with philosophy, even if they are capable of philosophy, which many are not, nor will they live peacefully without something less uncompromising. For both the authors discussed by Meier, Machiavelli and Rousseau, divine sanctions in the form of revealed religion have come in to fill the gap. For Machiavelli, even when a prince is wise and philosophical enough to know that fear of a virtuous prince among the populace is enough politically, he (the prince) will still have to hide his philosophically inspired decisions and policies behind a divine sanction and divine legitimation of his rule.

There is, of course, a problem here, and not just that of the relationship of his private, esoteric stance to his exoteric claims. It is that the religion in question for Machiavelli, Christianity, through its near-pacificism, leads the world into weakness. The love commandment is destructive. For any functioning state, in Machiavelli's own words, 'good arms are the one thing needful', which Strauss calls the 'anti-Biblical truth par excellence'. Against a prophet such as Savonarola, his contemporary modelled on the Apostle Paul, Machiavelli stands as one of the 'wise of the world', in Strauss's phrase. Machiavelli's own position may be expressed as 'Deus sive fortuna', as opposed to 'Deus sive natura'. The philosophical prince will continue to rule, under the protection of the religious myth, even though he and we, if we are philosophers, will know what the demos does not, that all there really is left to us is luck. Machiavelli – and his prince – thus forego philosophy in appealing to the Christian religion for the sake of ruling, even as they disbelieve it internally.

Rousseau shares some of the Machiavellian analysis, at least as far as the idea that sociability among a people is first instituted by an appeal to and belief in divinity and divine sanctions. For Rousseau, where the god in question is just the god of one people, the effects of this belief may not be wholly negative, but things become despotic when the god in question is seen as universal. In Rousseau's words, this 'new idea of a kingdom of another world' becomes 'under a visible chief the most violent despotism in this world'. In order to avoid what he saw as 'a perpetual conflict of jurisdiction' between church and state, 'which has made any good polity impossible in Christian States', Rousseau himself advocated a new *religion civile*, with a powerful but not omnipotent god. This new religion would underpin morality and the enaction of the general will. This latter Rousseau sees as the working out of a purely human rationality, a rationality beyond the expression of purely self-interested desires and preferences, but one based in purely human capacities, a truly

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philosophical enterprise. The spirit of Christianity, by contrast, blocks the path to any religion of the rational citizen, or to any assertion of philosophical insight as a title to rule.

It is not clear how far Meier is agreeing with Rousseau in any of this, as he confines himself to expounding Rousseau. What is clear, though, is that in terms of the earlier discussion of Machiavelli, Rousseau's general will is not a mere aggregation of the fleeting desires of the demos or even of the collective desires of a majority of the demos. However, one cannot but observe that, if the regimes initiated in the French and subsequent revolutions are anything to go by, the very notion of a general will dissociated from particular wills and all their idiosyncrasies and irrationalities and prejudices has a far more despotic potential than any polity with Christian roots. In distinction to James Madison in *The Federalist Papers,* Rousseau sees idiosyncrasy and factionalism as the enemy, undermining the unanimity of the general will; for Madison factions are an essential consequence of liberty, and also its protector, ensuring the possibility of dissent and disagreement. Rousseau will say that while each citizen wants his own good, each citizen does not know what his good is. One's true good is not what one thinks, but what emerges in the general will. More than two centuries after Rousseau and Madison, there can be little doubt as to which is the friend of liberty, and indeed, of humanity. Further, if the Parisian Pantheon is an example of *religion civile* – its metropolitan cathedral, perhaps, in which Rousseau's body now rests – what we have is a religion likely to stir no heart to deeds either good or bad, or to any emotion of awe or sense of the sacred.

In *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, in a passage quoted by Meier (p 79), Strauss says that 'society would be in a state of perpetual unrest, or else in a state of constant and ubiquitous repression, if men were not made incorrupt by religion, i.e. if they were not both appeased by religious hopes and frightened by religious fears.' It is not clear from the context whether Strauss and Meier intend this a generally true, or as simply a gloss on the thought of Machiavelli. However, either way it does raise a key question, given that Strauss does not appear to believe that the philosopher or philosophy will ever dominate in a political community. Meier says that 'the well-ordered political community is built on identification, on devotion and agreement, whereas the philosophical *eros* is at home nowhere but in its "homelessness."' (p 11) Thus there will be 'an insuperable tension' between philosophy and any political community, which is part of what leads philosophers to write esoterically. Apart from that though, given that in Western liberal democracy at least, religion no longer supports the

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essential sinews of identification and agreement, and philosophy of homelessness cannot, what does, or what can? Do we need another myth, to replace the religious one? And in view of the essential homelessness of philosophers, are philosophers condemned to live, like Plato, on the margins of their society? Or is there a home for philosophers in their community, with an oikophilia they can enjoy without recourse to esoteric evasions?

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