

Strauss' analysis of the Platonic Socrates in the conflict between philosophy, religion, and politics¹

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Abstract

L'obiettivo di questo articolo è analizzare l'interpretazione di Strauss del Socrate platonico, innanzitutto come figura rappresentativa di Atene, opposta al polo religioso di Gerusalemme, e in secondo luogo come figura chiave della relazione tra filosofia e politica. Nel pensiero filosofico di Strauss, Socrate è infatti un simbolo cruciale della relazione tra ragione e rivelazione, filosofia e politica. Analizzerò la prima opposizione attraverso il confronto tra i profeti della tradizione ebraica e la rappresentazione di Socrate presente nell'*Apologia*; mentre l'opposizione tra filosofia e politica si basa sull'interpretazione di Strauss della *Repubblica* di Platone. Considererò principalmente i testi di Strauss *Progresso o Ritorno*, *Gerusalemme e Atene*, *La Città e l'Uomo* e *Il Problema di Socrate* e argomenterò che attraverso la figura di Socrate emergono i conflitti presenti anche in Strauss tra ragione e rivelazione da un lato e filosofia e politica dall'altro.

Parole chiave: Strauss, Socrate, problema teologico-politico, religione, politica.

The aim of this paper is to analyse Strauss' interpretation of the Platonic Socrates, firstly as the representative figure of Athens, opposed to the religious pole of Jerusalem, and second as a key figure of the relation between philosophy and politics. In Strauss' philosophical thought, Socrates is in fact a crucial symbol of the relation between reason and revelation, philosophy and politics. I will analyse the first opposition through the comparison between the prophets of the Jewish tradition and the depiction of Socrates in Plato's *Apology*; while the opposition between philosophy and politics is based on Strauss' interpretation of Plato's *Republic*. I will mainly consider Strauss' texts *Progress or Return*, *Jerusalem and Athens*, *The City and the Man* and *The Problem of Socrates* and I will argue that through the figure of Socrates emerges

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Strauss' inner conflicts between reason and revelation on one hand and philosophy and politics on the other.

Keywords: Strauss, Socrates, theological-political problem, religion, politics.

1. The figure of Socrates as the symbol of Strauss' opposition between Jerusalem and Athens

My thesis is that if one wants to understand the complex and apparently unresolved position of Strauss regarding the relation between *philosophy*, *politics* and *religion*, then, his interpretation of the Platonic Socrates plays a key role, since he embodied a new relation between these three poles. Therefore, the opposition between Jerusalem and Athens and between philosophy and politics, within the city of Athens, must be read through the analysis of the figure of Socrates². First of all, a methodological caveat, it's important to remember that Strauss is opposed to the shared belief of his times which depicted Plato as a betrayer of Socrates, by realizing a closed and dogmatic philosophical system, opposed to the original openness of the Socratic questioning. There is neither opposition or simple overlap between Plato and Socrates, but «We must pass through Plato's thought in order to understand the thought of the Platonic Socrates»³.

The first text I will use to analyse the role of Socrates in the opposition between Athens and Jerusalem is *Progress or Return*⁴. This might seem the wrong text to begin with, since the figure of Socrates is mentioned only once, but as Strauss pointed out in the analysis of the Platonic dialogues, what is not explicitly mentioned can still play an explicative role in the overall structure of the argument: details are crucial. In fact, applying Strauss methodological analysis to Strauss' text *Progress or Return* it's noticeable that many passages can indirectly refer to the figure of Socrates as the implicit counterpart of the Jewish attitude⁵.

² This claim is aligned to one of the most prominent critics of Strauss' work such as H. Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006. Many scholars addressed the conflict between philosophy and revelation in Strauss' thought. *Inter alia* see: L. Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation*, Cambridge University Press, NY 2006; D. Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem, Philosophy, Prophecy and Politics in Leo Strauss's Early Thought*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2008; T. Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2003.

³ L. Strauss, *The Problem of Socrates: Five Lectures*, in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism. An introduction to the thought of Leo Strauss*, selected by T.L. Pangle, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago - London 1989, pp. 103-183: 150.

⁴ Id., *Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization*, in «Modern Judaism», 1, n. 1, 1981, pp. 17-45.

⁵ Ivi, pp. 35, 37, 38, 42-45.

The only moment in which Socrates is explicitly mentioned in this text is when his attitude is depicted as opposed to Abraham's blind obedience to God⁶. In fact, the latter obeys unhesitatingly to an unintelligible command of God, who ordered him to slaughter his son. In this way Abraham is the symbol of the passive, static and obedient servant of God, unable to critically question or doubt this transcendental and omnipotent entity. The Socratic attitude is completely different: when Socrates received Apollo's response that he was the wisest, he didn't accept passively this truth, but rather tried to question it. Jewish tradition evaluates Abraham's obedience, Socrates valorized the transformation of the unintelligible in the intelligible.

Therefore, Socrates and Abraham can be considered as the two representative figures respectively of Athens and Jerusalem in this text⁷: Abraham embodied the *fear* of God, Socrates the *wonder*⁸ and the will to understand his condition⁹. The Bible, through the figure of Abraham, prescribes a life of obedient love, philosophy, while the example of Socrates, encourages a life of autonomous understanding and theoretical contemplation¹⁰. Both these two figures experienced a paradoxical moment, due to the relation between them and the divine entity. Abraham was promised that «his name would be called through Isaac and in the descendants of Isaac, and now he is asked to slaughter his son¹¹, Socrates is addressed to be the wisest by Apollo, but he knows that he is not wise¹². The solutions of these paradoxical situations are different. Abraham is just a human vehicle of the divine action: God first decided to challenge his faith and then to save Isaac: in the Jewish world, God is and remains the real player of the events and the only source of salvation and resolution¹³.

The text in which Strauss explains the Socratic attitude toward the divine response is *Athens and Jerusalem*¹⁴. Since Socrates in Plato's *Apology* is presented to be in charge of a divine mission, Strauss argues, he is the Greek counterpart of the Jewish

⁶ Ivi, p. 38; Genesis 22, 1-18.

⁷ L. Strauss, *Progress or Return?*, cit.

⁸ Ivi, p. 38.

⁹ According to Drury's interpretation of Strauss, philosophy emerges as a challenge to divine authority. In Strauss's view, this explains why the philosophical discussion in Plato's Republic begins only after the withdrawal of Cephalus, the aged father who departs to take care of the sacred offerings to the gods. S.B. Drury, *Philosophy's Hidden Revolt against God*, in S.B. Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2005, pp. 37-60. Pangle elaborates a Straussian attempt to articulate the relationship between philosophy and revelation understood as incompatible ways of life: T. Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham*, cit.

¹⁰ L. Strauss, *Progress or Return?*, cit., p. 43.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 38.

¹² Plato, *Apol.* 21b (tr. by D. Gallop, in Plato, *Defence of Socrates, Euthyphro, Crito*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008).

¹³ L. Strauss, *Progress or Return?*, cit., p. 18.

¹⁴ Id., *Jerusalem and Athens*, in Id., *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago - London 1983, pp. 147-173.

Prophets¹⁵. Since Socrates was accused of being subversive¹⁶ towards the gods of the city of Athens, he called the god Apollo as the witness¹⁷ and mandator of his divine mission. But as Strauss pointed out, on one hand «Socrates' mission is originated in human initiative, in the initiative of Socrates' companions» and on the other hand «his attempt to refute the oracle turns into a vindication of the oracle. Without intending it, he comes to the assistance of the god, he serves the god; he obeys the god's command»¹⁸. «He doesn't take it for granted that the god's reply is true. [...] In fact, he tries to refute that reply by discovering men who are wiser than he»¹⁹ and, through his investigation within the city of Athens, realizes that the god was right²⁰.

In this case, the real player is not merely the god, because his prophetic truth depended on the Socratic investigation within the city, but Socrates is still a *servant* of the God, although in an innovative way. This is a crucial clue of the fact that Socrates symbolizes Strauss' inner conflict within *faith* and *reason*, *Jerusalem* and *Athens*. Socrates is “*atopos*”, an atopic figure in the sense that he is not merely placeable in a specific and static role: he is at the same time a *rebel* and a *servant* of the god, a *rebel* and a *servant* of the city, as well as Strauss is both a *philosopher* faithful to his Jewish heritage, philosophically radical and politically moderate²¹. Both Socrates and Strauss in this way represent the philosopher that is *opposed* but *related* at the same time to the religious and political order²². According to Strauss, within the Jewish religion itself it would be impossible being a *rebel* and a *servant* at the same time²³. The Socratic relation of simultaneous *opposition* and *dedication* to the words of the god indirectly represents the complex relation that Strauss lived towards *revelation* and *reason*²⁴. Both Socrates and Strauss can live and think about these complex relations only because they have already accepted Athens as their motherland. «We are confronted with the incompatible claims of Jerusalem and Athens to our allegiance. We are open to both and willing to listen to each. We ourselves are not wise but we wish to become wise. We are seekers for wisdom, “philo-sophoi.” By saying that we wish to hear first and then to act to decide, we have already decided in favor of Athens against Jerusalem»²⁵.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 168.

¹⁶ Plato, *Apol.* 24c (tr. by D. Gallop, cit.).

¹⁷ Ivi, 21a.

¹⁸ L. Strauss, *Jerusalem and Athens*, cit., p. 171.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Plato, *Apol.* 23b-c (tr. by D. Gallop, cit.).

²¹ In this paragraph the focus of the analysis concerns the opposition between philosophy and religion embodied by Socrates opposed to Jewish prophets.

²² This ambiguity of Strauss' attitude toward religion and philosophy is captured also by D. Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, tr. by C. Nadon, Yale University Press, New Haven - London 2007. He concludes that Strauss ultimately grants to revealed religion “an intrinsic cognitive value” which consists in its ability to call the philosophical life radically into question, thereby forcing philosophy to acknowledge that “it cannot refute Jerusalem's claims to represent the only just way of life” and contributing in this way to augmenting the philosopher's self-knowledge.

²³ L. Strauss, *Progress or Return?*, cit., p. 19.

²⁴ Id., *Reason and Revelation*, in H. Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem*, cit., pp. 141-180.

²⁵ Id., *Jerusalem and Athens*, cit., pp. 149-150.

Open questioning consists in the Socratic attitude, therefore Strauss' open questioning and listening makes him put his feet on the ground of Athens. According to Strauss a philosophical life is characterized by a desire for the "the truth", and skeptical moment of suspension of judgment²⁶.

As I argued, the Socratic relation of *opposition* and *dedication* to the order of the city and to the god's words would be impossible within the Jewish world: Athens is the *polis* of openness, Jerusalem is a closed *desert*²⁷. This is due to the opposite conception of knowledge that Athens and Jerusalem have. For the former, philosophy consists in the research on principles of the first things, it is the replacement of opinions with knowledge²⁸ and therefore it constitutively embodies a critical force against tradition and authority. For Jerusalem, every form of human knowledge which is not subservient to the divine law is a form of unacceptable rebellion²⁹, comparable to the original sinful rebellion of Adam and Eve³⁰.

Moreover, in the Jewish tradition man has understanding only for the sake of understanding God's command³¹; instead, Socrates ultimately understood god's command thanks to his inner questioning and external interrogation within the city. Socratic questioning of god's response³² represents therefore the human emancipation from the god's words. Socrates undertook this emancipation by asking the people of the city that he believed were wiser than him³³ regarding the most important things, moral knowledge. «The philosopher is the man who dedicates his life to the quest for knowledge of the good, of the idea of good; [...] According to the prophets, however, there is no need for the quest for knowledge of the good because what is good has already been revealed to them»³⁴.

Socrates realized that he and his interlocutors lacked that moral knowledge, which is a divine prerogative, but at least he reached the highest form of human knowledge: self-awareness of his own ignorance³⁵. This emancipation from the divine order, led Socrates to open the domain of human knowledge, namely the space of philosophical inquiry. This is revolutionary if compared to the Jewish tradition, because the latter considers human comprehension as subservient to God's

²⁶ L. Strauss, A. Kojève, *On Tyranny: Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, ed. by V. Gourevitch, M.S. Roth, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2000.

²⁷ Id., *Progress or Return?*, cit., p. 38.

²⁸ Id., *Natural Right and History*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago - London 1953, p. 124.

²⁹ Id., *Progress or Return?*, cit., p. 43.

³⁰ As argued by Wood, Strauss' view leads philosophy and religion to be conceived as disjunctive alternatives, since religion embodies a way of life enshrined in the "authoritative opinion" of the political community. On this model, being religious implies a non-philosophical way of life since their life is guided by authoritative opinion rather than their own freely inquiring reason. See W. Wood, *Leo Strauss on Religion as the Fundamental Alternative to Philosophy*, in «Roczniki Filozoficzne», 71, n. 2, 2023, pp. 289-312.

³¹ L. Strauss, *Jerusalem and Athens*, cit., p. 155.

³² Plato, *Apol.* 21b-d (tr. by D. Gallop, cit.).

³³ Ivi, 22a-23a.

³⁴ L. Strauss, *Jerusalem and Athens*, cit., p. 172.

³⁵ Plato, *Apol.* 23a-c (tr. by D. Gallop, cit.).

knowledge: since man has understanding only to the extent that is necessary to follow and respect God's words³⁶, there is no specific and autonomous domain for philosophical inquiry. Nevertheless, Athens and Jerusalem share the common ground of the centrality of morality: they both aim to solve the theological-political problem and the question of the right life³⁷. The theological-political problem consists in the confrontation between the theological and political alternative to philosophy as the best way of life. They both find the solution by considering morality as justice, namely as obedience to the law: Jerusalem is faithful to divine law, while Athens is the place in which natural law is considered the place of natural morality³⁸. While according to Strauss there are no Jewish word and idea for "nature"³⁹, philosophy was born when "nature" was discovered⁴⁰ and considered for the first time as the fundamental framework of fundamental questions: a personal God is replaced with natural order⁴¹. Moreover, as argued by Wood, Strauss argues that the nature of reason is such that knowledge about fundamental problems can be acquired only through a dialectical critique of tradition⁴². Accordingly, he contrasts "independently acquired knowledge"

³⁶ L. Strauss, *Jerusalem and Athens*, cit., p. 155.

³⁷ As noted by Wood, the inherent ambiguities in Strauss' thought on this point led to differing approaches on the part of his sympathetic interpreters. See W. Wood, *Leo Strauss on Religion*, cit., Meier emphasizes the decisive importance of the confrontation with revelation. See H. Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem*, cit. Velkley de-emphasizes the importance of revelation relative to the more general problem of the conflict between free questioning and submission to authoritative opinion. See R. Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss and the Premises of Philosophy: On Original Forgetting*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2015.

³⁸ L. Strauss, *Progress or Return?*, cit., p. 42.

³⁹ Id., *Natural Right and History*, cit., p. 81. Rémi Brague has proposed the idea that Strauss tacitly accepts what Brague labels as "the Islamic conception of revelation". See R. Brague, *Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca: Leo Strauss "Muslim" Understanding of Greek Philosophy*, in «Poetics Today», 19, n. 2, 1998, pp. 247-248. This because the radically voluntarist and anti-philosophical position which Strauss assumes is implied in "the very idea of revelation" (L. Strauss, *Reason and Revelation*, cit., p. 142). This perspective held prominence in classical Islamic tradition and arguably finds substantial support in the Qur'an. Conversely, this position was less prevalent in Christianity, particularly before the Reformation. See R. Brague, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2007, pp. 146-156. Brague even raises the possibility that Strauss might have unintentionally interpreted Jewish scriptures through a "Muslim" lens. Regardless of whether Brague's assertion is accurate, Meier notes that, for Strauss himself, the central concern doesn't fundamentally revolve around interpreting a specific tradition correctly. While Strauss often appears to consider Jewish tradition, particularly the Hebrew Bible, as normative in defining "revelation", his primary focus lies in exploring "the very idea of revelation" as a transcendent concept that, in theory, even figures like Plato and Aristotle could have contemplated (and perhaps did), with Jewish tradition serving as a consistent exemplification of this idea. See H. Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem*, cit.

⁴⁰ L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, cit., pp. 81-120.

⁴¹ Id., *Progress or Return?*, cit., p. 42.

⁴² W. Wood, *Leo Strauss on Religion*, cit., p. 305.

with “inherited knowledge”⁴³, claiming that the latter isn’t knowledge at all strictly speaking⁴⁴.

To conclude, according to Strauss⁴⁵ there are several differences between Socrates and prophets’ divine missions: he never claimed to hear God’s words, he didn’t take for granted the divine response, he knows nothing about the most important things and he possesses only a human wisdom. Nevertheless, both Socrates and prophets tried to solve the theological-political problem, namely the definition of the right way of life within a community, since their divine missions are concerned with justice and righteousness: the prophets applied the divine law, Socrates founded political philosophy⁴⁶.

2. Socratic dialectic and the birth of political philosophy

The crucial difference between the Socratic and the prophetic attitude consists in the different form of *faith* they embodied. Prophets believed in “*what*” God told them, in a content, while Socrates believed in a method, a way “*how*” to understand Apollo’s response, a way “*how*” to pose the questions for reaching answers: *dialectics*. While the prophets passively listened to answers, Socrates actively asked questions. His methodological knowledge is what allowed him to ask “*what is*” questions, which needed a way “*how*” to pose these questions: dialectical interrogation is Socrates’ distinctive trait. According to Strauss, the act of birth of political philosophy consists exactly in the raising of “what is questions” such as “what is the political?” “What is the polis?»: «This question, and all the questions of this kind, were raised by Socrates who for this reason became the founder of political philosophy»⁴⁷.

Strauss states that the idea of “nature” is absent from the Hebrew Bible: «The Old Testament, whose basic premise may be said to be the implicit rejection of philosophy, does not know “nature”»⁴⁸. In opposition, Strauss argues that philosophy was born when *nature* was discovered, but the discovery of nature was a necessary but insufficient condition for the birth of *political philosophy*: «It was only when Socrates

⁴³ L. Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*, The Free Press, Glencoe (IL) 1959, p. 76.

⁴⁴ For a critical reading of Strauss’ interpretation of revelation, see: M. Shiffman, *The Limits of Strauss*. https://www.academia.edu/5175979/The_Limits_of_Strauss. He argues that Strauss takes for granted a «purely dianoetic (or discursive) construal of the nature of reason». He thereby dogmatically excludes the possibility of revelation, which must be understood as a noetic gift available to all, not an experience of the divine uniquely accessible to the founder or prophet and incommunicable to others except in the form of an arbitrary demand for unquestioning obedience, or conversely as a dialectical achievement of the questioning philosopher.

⁴⁵ L. Strauss, *Jerusalem and Athens*, cit., pp. 168-173.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 171.

⁴⁷ Id., *The City and The Man*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago - London 1964, p. 19.

⁴⁸ Id., *Natural Right and History*, cit., p. 81. For a contrasting view of “nature” as an idea integral to the teaching of the Old Testament, see M. Levering, *Biblical Natural Law: A Theocentric and Teleological Approach*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010.

applied the idea of nature to the study of the human and political world that political philosophy proper was born»⁴⁹. Although Socrates started his philosophical inquiry concerned with naturalistic research, he decided to abandon research on nature, since it lacked a meaningful ground for its explanations⁵⁰. This turning point in Socrates' research consisted in the crucial shift from what is *proton kata phusin*, first by nature, to what is *proton pros hēmas*, first for us⁵¹, giving birth to political philosophy⁵². As Strauss argued: «according to Socrates things that are “first in themselves” are somehow “first for us”»⁵³. These “what is” questions started in the domain of opinions, but aimed to reach essences, therefore it became «necessary to transcend the authoritative opinions as such in the direction of what is no longer opinion but knowledge»⁵⁴.

The shift from nature to speeches allowed Socrates to create an intermediate reign of inquiry that is neither in the domain of human opinion nor of divine knowledge⁵⁵: it is the reign of nature of human things, the reign of what is just, noble and right by nature⁵⁶. This philosophical interreign between man and God, politics and religion is the place in which dialectic is exerted with its ascending and disruptive critical power⁵⁷.

Socrates is therefore an atopic figure, a *respectful rebel* towards the words of the god and he was condemned for undermining Athens' religious order and the political order of the city. In Socratic respectful rebellion is reflected Strauss' philosophical inquiry, willing not to forget his Jewish origins. On one hand he has no doctrine and never pretended to know what is accessible only to the god and this is the proof of Socrates' piety⁵⁸. Strauss considers Socrates as a pious man that doesn't investigate the divine things, but only the human things: «his wisdom is because it is pious and it is pious because it is knowledge of ignorance»⁵⁹. But on the other hand, he is compelled to transcend the opinions towards the direction of knowledge, ascending from law to nature and this is the act of birth of political philosophy. Political philosophy is inherently a critical dangerous inquiry for the established authority, since it challenges the unexamined opinions on which authority grounds his power⁶⁰.

⁴⁹ S.B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago - London 2006, p. 28.

⁵⁰ Plato, *Phaed.* 96a-100a (tr. by D. Gallop, cit.).

⁵¹ D. Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, cit., pp. 184-185.

⁵² L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, cit., p. 120.

⁵³ Id., *The City and The Man*, cit., p. 19.

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 20.

⁵⁵ D. Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, cit., p. 193.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*. Cf. Plato, *Resp.* 501b2, 597 b-e; *Phaedrus* 254b5-6.

⁵⁷ L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, cit., p. 85: «If we take Socrates as the representative of the quest for natural right, we may illustrate the relation of that quest to authority as follows: in a community governed by divine laws, it is strictly forbidden to subject these laws to genuine discussion, to theoretical examination, in the presence of the young [...]».

⁵⁸ Id., *The City and The Man*, cit.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 20; Plato, *Apol.* 19b4-c8, 20d8-e3, 23a5-b4 (tr. by D. Gallop, cit.).

⁶⁰ L. Strauss, *The City and The Man*, cit., p. 20. This is the reason of Socrates' trial.

Socrates and Strauss are philosophically radical and politically moderate: they recognize the logical priority of philosophy on the political order, since the political order derives its dignity from something superior⁶¹, but political order keeps a chronological priority, because there would be no philosophy without a polis⁶². For this reason, Socrates respected his conviction, since he wanted to respect the laws of the city that allowed him to live his philosophical life⁶³. Strauss follows the same path, conscious of the tension between philosophy and politics. The first results in the contemplative and happy life, without disturbing the second.

The insolubility of the conflict between philosophy and politics embodied by Socrates is the reflection of the inner conflict within the two souls of Western tradition and of Strauss' intellectual sensibility. Both Strauss and Socrates are sons of the philosophical Athens, opposed to religious Jerusalem, but within the city of Athens they live the inner conflict between philosophy and politics. Socratic dialectic is simultaneously in direct opposition with both *political* and *religious* authority. Although Socratic-Platonic philosophy can't offer a positive solution to the *theological-political* and philosophical-political problems, in Strauss' perspective it is a critique against any form of authority, dogmatism and political idealism⁶⁴.

3. *The insolubility of the theological-political and philosophical-political problems*

It's now clear that both Socrates and the Prophets represent the key figures of Athens and Jerusalem who tried to solve the theological-political problem. In fact, Strauss never considered the question of revelation as a subjective matter, as an interior faith

⁶¹ Id., *The Problem of Socrates*, cit., p. 161: «Political life derives its dignity from something which transcends political life».

⁶² Kraynak compares Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss as examples of “philosophical radicals and political conservatives”. In Strauss's view, a fundamental clash exists between the political necessity for a solid foundation of law, rooted in divine law, and the philosopher's yearning for ultimate rational understanding drives him to question all established beliefs. This conflict arises from the city's necessity to adopt a “closed” stance, endorsing a specific religion and governance as the sole true or authoritative law, while the philosopher strives to remain “open”, constantly questioning established beliefs to progress from opinion to knowledge or from convention to nature. See R.P. Kraynak, *Philosophical Radicals and Political Conservatives: The Political Views and Legacies of Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss*, APSA Panel, *Roundtable on Strauss and Voegelin*. Washington, D. C. September 4, 2010. Similarly, Voegelin identifies a permanent tension between the “truth of the individual soul” and the “truth of society”. Just as with Strauss, he observes a struggle between two essential needs. The soul craves an endless connection to the divine essence of existence, a yearning for a transcendent order beyond this world, experienced through symbols and direct encounters with reality. Yet, civil society, by its very nature, tends towards closure, requiring a shared “civil theology” to establish authority and maintain order.

⁶³ Plato, *Crit.* 50b-53b (tr. by D. Gallop, cit.).

⁶⁴ D.R. Villa, *Politics, Philosophy and Terror: Essays on The Thought of Hannah Arendt*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1999; L. Strauss, A. Kojève, *On Tyranny*, cit.

or as a psychological belief, but rather as an objective truth that belongs to the domain of political philosophy⁶⁵.

According to Strauss, in line with Maimonides'⁶⁶ perspective, the Prophets must be considered not merely as religious founders, but as lawgivers and statesmen: prophecy has primarily a political aim, the reception of the divine truth enables the foundation of law and of a well-ordered society.

The solution of the Bible to the theological-political problem and to the question of the right life consists in the establishment of a unidirectional technical relation between *revelation*, which is the religious form of *theoria*, and *praxis*. The divine truth of revelation guides and commands human praxis, through the establishment of a divine law. Moses' commandments received on Mount Sinai perfectly realized this unidirectional imposition of divine *theoria* on human *praxis*. Therefore, the Jewish religion firstly established a political order and promised the definitive solution of the perfect society, the coming of the messianic Age.

An immediate and superficial interpretation of Plato's *Republic* might induce one to believe that there is no radical difference between the Socratic-Platonic solution and the Jewish one. The *Republic* might be interpreted as the establishment of "technical relation" between theory and practice: a deduction of just political action from theoretical premises⁶⁷. In fact, Socrates argues in favor of the perfectly just city as the result of the coincidence of philosophy and political power. Although there is no need for divine intervention in the Socratic solution, there is fundamental agreement between Socratic and prophetic mission: the establishment of the just city and the right way of life⁶⁸.

But Strauss' interpretation of the *Republic* consists in the exact opposite⁶⁹: according to Strauss this dialogue is an ironic warning of what is politically impossible to establish, and this impossibility lies in the inner conflict between *philosophy* and *politics*. Since prophets don't know nature, they overestimate the possibility of modification of the human and social condition, while Plato is deeply aware of human nature and of what is politically impossible⁷⁰. According to Strauss, the *Republic* is the implicit manifest of this impossibility.

As I have said, for Strauss Socrates is the founder of political philosophy, the domain of inquiry which transcend both mythological religious tradition and generally accepted custom, establishing what is right *by nature*⁷¹. This is possible only by the use of dialectics, which allows one to find in speech the notion of justice as «the habit of

⁶⁵ C. Altini, *Leo Strauss between Politics Philosophy and Judaism*, in «History of European Ideas», 40, n. 3, 2014, pp. 437-449.

⁶⁶ M. Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, tr. by S. Pines, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1963.

⁶⁷ D.R. Villa, *Politics, Philosophy and Terror*, cit., p. 173.

⁶⁸ L. Strauss, *Jerusalem and Athens*, cit., p. 172.

⁶⁹ Id., *The Problem of Socrates*, cit.

⁷⁰ Id., *Jerusalem and Athens*, cit., p. 167.

⁷¹ Id., *The Problem of Socrates*, cit., p. 157.

giving to everyone what is good for him»⁷². But then, in order to realize in practice (*praxis*) the notion of justice found in speech (*theoria*), it becomes necessary to use of rhetoric, fundamental untruth and noble deception⁷³. Socrates necessarily needs the help of the rhetorician Thrasimachus to establish the kingdom of the philosophers. As long as Socrates is simply a philosopher, he «converses only with people who are not common people, who in one way or another belong to an elite»⁷⁴, but when he, like the prophets, needs to establish political order, talks directly to the masses imparting them the divine law. Rhetoric is necessary for persuasion of the people.

This is due to the antidemocratic nature of dialectic and the subsequent tension between *theoria* and *praxis*, philosophy and politics.

Philosophy consists, therefore, in the ascent from opinions to knowledge or truth, in an ascent that may be said to be guided by opinions. It is this ascent which Socrates had primarily in mind when he called philosophy “dialectics.” [...] Recognizing the contradiction, one is forced to go beyond opinions toward the consistent view of nature of the thing concerned⁷⁵.

To conclude, considering the opposition between politics and philosophy it is useful to compare⁷⁶ Strauss’ interpretation of Socratic dialectic to the one offered by another important philosopher of the XX century: Hannah Arendt⁷⁷. While she considered Socrates as the one that made each *doxa* more truthful, since truth emerges from the intersection of many perspectives and appearances, Strauss considered the domain of politics, action, *doxa* and opinion as still within the cave⁷⁸ and therefore not truthful⁷⁹. For Strauss, in line with his Platonic Socrates, the only truthful and therefore just man is and remains the philosopher, dedicated to the contemplative life, the right life. «Justice is said to consist in minding one’s business [...] Justice is self-sufficiency and hence is philosophy»⁸⁰. In opposition, Arendt in *The Human Condition* argues that it was an error of the platonic tradition of the political philosophy to place the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* in a hierarchical relation⁸¹. Strauss believes that when the philosopher goes out from the cave to reach the truth, any attempt of return would be hopeless, since the irrational and corporal nature of men is unchangeable and therefore the perfect just city can’t be established. Trying to make citizens more philosophical and *doxai* more truthful is an oxymoron. For

⁷² *Ibidem*.

⁷³ Ivi, pp. 158-160.

⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 154.

⁷⁵ L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, cit., p. 124.

⁷⁶ D.R. Villa, *Politics, Philosophy and Terror*, cit., pp. 128-155.

⁷⁷ H. Arendt, *Socrates*, in *The Promise of Politics*, The Literary Trust of Hannah Arendt and Jerome Kohn, Schocken Books, NY 2005, pp. 5-39; H. Arendt, *The human condition*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1958.

⁷⁸ D. Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, cit., p. 100.

⁷⁹ C. Widmaier, *Fin de la philosophie politique? Hannah Arendt contre Leo Strauss*, CNRS, Paris 2012.

⁸⁰ L. Strauss, *The Problem of Socrates*, cit., p. 161.

⁸¹ R. Beiner, *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: The Uncommenced Dialogue*, in «Political Theory», 18, n. 2, 1990, pp. 238-254.

Strauss, once the philosophical inquiry and the theoretical life have begun, any form of *return* is impossible: it is impossible to *return* to the Jewish tradition and it's impossible to rescue the citizens of the polis who lives in the cave.

Conclusion

In Strauss' perspective, the philosopher is the opposite but analogous figure of the prophet: they are both transpolitical elitist figures of truth, a truth that transcends the status of human opinions. The prophet thanks to his divine election has passively received this truth from a top-down revelation, the philosopher, thanks to his good nature, has undertaken a bottom-up never-ending investigation⁸². Strauss' Socratic philosophy is atopic: it has no space in the public sphere, therefore it must remain concealed and isolated. Strauss' Socratic philosophy is also open and skeptical: Strauss, following his teacher⁸³, acknowledges that philosophy is awareness of human ignorance and the discovery of nature turns out to be a challenge to every dogmatism and political idealism⁸⁴. Since nature turns out to be a "regulative ideal", philosophy in relation to the city results in a *destruens* activity, rather than a *costruens* one.

The philosopher of Athens is opposed to Jerusalem, but within the *polis* he lives in opposition to both political and religious authority, therefore he can't really live his citizenship: the emancipation from the religious revelation brings philosophy also to challenge the political order. Therefore, the philosopher must remain politically moderate: since the philosophical activity is inherently subversive, the philosopher must be cautious towards the political authority and open to the voice of revelation. Strauss follows in this way Socrates' path and Socratic atopy is the symbol of the atopy of philosophy, an activity which transcends human's opinions and an act of rebellion towards both the divine and political authority. The figure of Socrates is the mirror in which one glimpses Strauss' inner conflict between Athens and Jerusalem, reason and revelation, philosophy and politics.

⁸² L. Strauss, *The Problem of Socrates*, cit., pp. 161-162.

⁸³ Although Socrates affirms that he has never been a teacher since has nothing to teach, Strauss considers him a teacher, not a "citizen philosopher". L. Strauss, *The Problem of Socrates*, cit., pp. 139, 150-154.

⁸⁴ D.R. Villa, *Politics, Philosophy and Terror*, cit., p. 172.