

Introduction

“What Is Nature?”

Leo Strauss and Socrates’s Turn to *logoi*

Wir sind natürliche Wesen, die unter unnatürlichen Bedingungen leben und denken—wir müssen uns auf unser natürliches Wesen besinnen, um die unnatürlichen Bedingungen denkend aufzuheben.

[We are natural beings who live and think under unnatural conditions—we must recall our natural being in order to remove the unnatural conditions by thought.]

—GS3, 650¹

Strauss’s thought is characterized by a clear insistence on the concept of *nature*.² Not only in his magnum opus *Natural Right and History*, but also in most if not all of his other works, does nature, whether explicitly or implicitly, play a pivotal conceptual role, its occurrences being numerous.

This distinctive feature of Strauss’s approach becomes easier to understand once due attention is devoted to the fact that, in his account, the discovery (and preservation) of the concept of nature amounts to a *sine qua non* for philosophy.³ It seems no overstatement to claim that in Strauss’s view, at least after his “change of orientation”⁴ at the beginning of the 1930s, nature and philosophy stand or fall together. Such an assumption, as just observed, indeed helps the interpreter justify the many references to nature that are scattered throughout Strauss’s opera given his attempt to revitalize philosophy against its historicistic *reductio ad absurdum*. It forces the same interpreter, on the other hand, to raise the question as to

the meaning of nature in Strauss’s philosophical perspective—a meaning that does not always emerge as entirely clear at first sight.

“What is nature?,” hence, arises as one of the most urgent questions to ask if an adequate understanding of Strauss’s thought, focused as it is on that very concept, is to be gained. Strauss himself, as we will see, explicitly raises this question at least once in his writings. Before analyzing his remarks in that instance, it is however worth explaining, to begin with, how and why such a question comes up in his philosophical path. A suitable manner to do so is to take into account some of the letters Strauss wrote to his lifelong friend Karl Löwith.⁵ Despite ultimately diverging as to the interpretation of what nature (and therefore philosophy) means,⁶ their whole correspondence remarkably shows the importance of such a question in Strauss’s, as well as Löwith’s account. For this reason, while referring the readers to their entire exchange in light of its overall significance and the various important matters it touches upon,⁷ we will here comment, for the sake of our argument, on those letters where the question of nature arises as crucial.

I

The first is an early letter of December 30, 1932,⁸ where Strauss comments on Löwith’s essay *Kierkegaard und Nietzsche*,⁹ which his friend had previously sent him along with another work of his on Karl Jaspers. The reason why Strauss finds the essay particularly interesting is that it shows him, once more, Löwith’s remarkable “resoluteness [*Entschiedenheit*]” when it comes to raising “the question of the *nature* of the human being, of what is *universally* human [*die Frage nach der Natur des Menschen, nach dem Allgemein-Menschlichen*].”¹⁰ This resoluteness, which Strauss evinces from the way Löwith frames his research question at the beginning of the essay, is however neglected, in his view, in its continuation. For despite beginning by asking, “What is the human being, and what has become of him? [*Was ist der Mensch, und was ist aus ihm geworden*],” which for Strauss should lead to interpret the answer to the first question as a “universal, *eternal* standard [*allgemeiner, ewiger Massstab*]” whereby the second question should be gauged, Löwith drops such a genuinely philosophical implication of his questioning. By contrast, he carries out his argument by affirming “the variability of the human nature [*die Wandelbarkeit . . . der menschlichen Natur*].”¹¹ In light of this apparent inconsistency, Strauss asks

his friend: “What do you mean, thus, by your question concerning *the* nature of the human being?” “You understand ‘nature’ in opposition to unnaturality [*Unnatur*], i.e., to the unnaturality of Christianity,” he adds, to observe that “this means that you too—not unlike Nietzsche—understand this concept only ‘polemically and reactively.’”¹²

In fact, despite the similarity with Nietzsche, Löwith’s exposure to Kierkegaard’s existentialism (not to mention Heidegger’s) makes his case even worse: “Admittedly, you now go beyond Nietzsche in that you also consider what is meant by ‘existence,’ so for you the question of human nature [*die Frage nach der Natur des Menschen*] turns into the question of the one human being in whom both ‘life’ and ‘existence’ lie [*die Frage nach dem einen Menschenwesen . . . in dem sowohl ‘Leben’ wie ‘Existenz’ liegt*].” By doing so, Löwith “even widen[s] the polemic” according to Strauss. As a result, he does not “come to an unpolemical, ‘pure and whole’ question [*eine unpolemische, ‘integre’ Frage*],”¹³ as Strauss, instead, aims to.

In Strauss’s account, such an attainment is impossible as long as one follows Löwith who, in his essay, takes his bearings from “the extreme stage of the 19th century.” By contrast, the only available path towards such an “unpolemical, ‘pure and whole’ question” is, in his view, the recovery of an original and genuine way of questioning:

You yourself observe that it is always a matter of *rehabilitations* [*Rehabilitierungen*]: we want to repeat something lost, to unearth something buried. But what is lost is searched for again, is desired from what is presently actual [*Aber das Verlorene wird wiedergesucht, wird desideriert vom Gegenwärtig-Wirklichen her*]. Therefore, one affirms [*bejaht*] that which was negated by Hegel, and generally by modern philosophy [*das von Hegel, allgemein von der modernen Philosophie Negierte*], as it has been understood in that negation [so wie es in dieser Negation verstanden worden ist]: the original dimension [*die ursprüngliche Dimension*] is by no means achieved.¹⁴

The problem therefore arises how this “original dimension” can be recovered. In this regard, Strauss provides important indications in the continuation of his letter. After underscoring that for Löwith himself the possibility of an “unbiased knowledge [*unbefangene Erkenntnis*] of the human being” is in question, which however implies that such knowledge is currently unavailable for him as well, he observes:

Unbiasedness could not be in question for us if we were not “somehow” aware of it. What is to be done? It seems to me that we must follow, unconditionally follow, the feeble glimmer that the word “unbiasedness” gives us [*wir müssen dem schwachen Schimmer, den das Wort “Unbefangenheit” uns gibt, folgen*]; we must take wholly seriously the suspicion against our bias [*Befangenheit*]. The bias we mean consists in being trapped in the Christian tradition and in the polemic against this tradition [*Die Befangenheit, die wir meinen, ist die Befangenheit in der christlichen Tradition und in der Polemik gegen diese Tradition*]. From this circle of polemic and counter-polemic we can however get out only if we are guided by a positive, concrete view of nature [*positive, konkrete Anschauung von Natur*] that is not immediately construed, once again, in a polemical manner [*die nicht schon wieder gleich polemisch ausgelegt wird*]. Only pre-Christian, i.e., Greek philosophy fulfills this desideratum.¹⁵

Löwith, however, firmly rejects Strauss’s approach: “There are no such things as an *immediate* being and an *immediate* view of man [*es gibt gar nicht ein unmittelbares Sein des Menschen und eine unmittelbare Anschauung vom Menschen*].”¹⁶ In his account, “taking the ‘view’ of the Greeks [*die ‘Anschauung’ der Griechen*] for an absolute standard [*absoluter Massstab*] is unacceptable,”¹⁷ and such an “entirely traditional” belief in the “unbiasedness of the Greek ‘view’”¹⁸ makes Strauss much more historically conditioned than him. The same goes for the attempt to gain a “‘whole and pure’ knowledge [*‘integres’ Wissen*]” by recovering the Greeks that characterizes Strauss’s perspective, whose quest for “integrity [*Integrität*]” he assumes to be motivated by an “extreme ‘moral’ prejudice [*höchst ‘moralisches’ Vorurteil*].”¹⁹

However exaggerated—if nothing else, Strauss was never an “extreme moralist,” nor was he an “Orthodox Jew,” as Löwith temporarily believed²⁰—the latter’s remarks about Strauss’s “historicizing”²¹ of his own philosophical path by promoting the ancient Greeks’ “view” of nature to the role of an “absolute standard” prove to be by no means amiss. Strauss already concedes this in a letter he sent to his friend shortly afterwards where he hints at the legitimacy of doubts concerning his historical approach. In this letter, he begins by claiming that Nietzsche’s immoralism ultimately amounts to a “rediscovery [*wiederentdeckung*] of the *original* ideal of humanity, of the ideal of manliness (courage),”²² which, however,

Nietzsche does not limit himself to acknowledging, but polemically affirms to counteract its negation by “the Enlightenment”—as Strauss “prudently” contends against Nietzsche’s own insistence on the role of Platonism, as well as Christianity, in that respect. Strauss then goes on to explain that, in his account, there is no need to stop at the “*antithesis* between courage and knowledge”²³ that stems from Nietzsche’s polemical reinterpretation of philosophy against its traditional view: “Since I got to know Plato’s *Laws*, it has become clear to me that this is *not* necessary, that if certain Platonic doctrines are remembered, *Nietzsche’s* questions, and thus *our* questions, arise more easily, clearly and originally.”²⁴ Having added that subsequent observations concerning medieval philosophy have also convinced him of the opportunity to “make an attempt” with Plato, Strauss finally points out: “The abstract historical doubts are known to me, but I believe that at the end they will come up differently from the beginning. Long story short: I must see if I ‘get through’ it. Once I have made my emendation of Nietzsche by means of my interpretation of Hobbes plausible to you, my ‘Platonizing’ will no longer appear to you as ‘romantic’ as it now does.”²⁵

Strauss’s attempt to recover a “positive, concrete *view* of nature” through Plato by “historicizing” his own philosophical approach emerges in greater clarity—even when it comes to laying bare its presuppositions—in a *post scriptum* he added to a subsequent letter dated June 23, 1935.²⁶ Commenting on *Philosophy and Law*, whose subject Löwith openly admits to be unfamiliar with, he had written to Strauss:

As foreign as that is to me, I nonetheless admire the single-minded energy and tenacity with which you, in everything you think and do, through a masterful use of polemical alternatives, press your fundamental thought, with compact and strict consistency, to the point where the problem proves to be unsolvable, and as solvable only through transformation of the systematic question into historical analysis; thereby you (like Krüger) presuppose that one can render the modern—Enlightenment—presuppositions inoperable by historical deconstruction [*historische Destruktion*]*—which I do not believe—unless this historical deconstruction is merely a theoretical method of presentation, while in reality the tradition of philosophizing under this tradition’s religious “law” [die Tradition des Philosophierens unter deren religiösem “Gesetz”] (= revelation) is still alive in you yourself; this not in the vague,*

intellectual-historical sense of a *so-called* living tradition, but in the special and determined sense of a still-being-at-home [*Nochzuhausesein*] in orthodox Judaism.²⁷

To these remarks (which, apart from the hint at Strauss’s alleged religious belief, prove to be quite insightful), Strauss first replies with a summary of Löwith’s argument, which reinterprets the religious undertones of his friend’s interpretation in a distinctly philosophical perspective: “You contest whether it is possible to bring the systematic question over into historical analysis, *unless* ‘this historical deconstruction is merely an historical method of presentation, while in reality’ the *old* way of thinking is still alive in the analyst.”²⁸ Then, he adds straightforwardly:

This I willingly concede; but I believe you too must concede that this condition is fulfilled with all of us, because all of us indeed—are men, and do not live and breathe and also perform a few other, “higher” functions differently than our—not however “animal-like”—ancestors. We are natural beings [*natürliche Wesen*] who live and think under unnatural conditions [*unnatürliche Bedingungen*]*—we must recall our natural being in order to remove the unnatural conditions by thought* [*wir müssen uns auf unser natürliches Wesen besinnen, um die unnatürlichen Bedingungen denkend aufzuheben*].²⁹

Strauss’s conclusion of his *post scriptum* is also quite revealing regarding his attempt to rediscover, by way of historical deconstruction, a truly original philosophical perspective. In his letter, Löwith had declared his intention to overcome modern nihilism by attempting a recovery of the “Stoic—Epicurean—Skeptic—Cynic”³⁰ schools of thought. Exhorting his friend to be more radical in his approach, Strauss first replies: “But these late-ancient philosophies—even the Skeptics—are much too *dogmatic* for you, especially, to be able to stay with them, and not to have to return to the ancestor of them all, Socrates, who was *no* dogmatic.”³¹ Then, he points out: “The so-called Platonism is only a flight from Plato’s problems”—a comment hinting at his reinterpretation of the Platonic Socrates as a “zetetic sceptic” that will become a key feature of his mature interpretation.³²

The fact remains, at any rate, that the recovery of Plato’s problems by means of a “*historische Destruktion*” that, unlike Heidegger’s, aims to unearth the conditions for a genuinely ahistorical, natural philosophizing, is

indicated by Strauss as the only possible way out of modern nihilism.³³ For this reason, he indeed willingly borrows Löwith's description of Nietzsche's philosophical goal as a "repetition of the ancients at the peak of modernity."³⁴ In doing so, however, he also distances himself from Nietzsche due to the polemical character of his account, as we have already underscored.³⁵ Regardless of Löwith's perplexity concerning the legitimacy of his effort,³⁶ Strauss's return to the ancients—notably to their "positive, concrete *view* of nature"—aims to be an unbiased, detached recognition (*Anerkennung*) rather than a polemical and historically conditioned affirmation (*Bejahung*).³⁷

In their correspondence, Strauss's departure from Nietzsche's "repetition of antiquity at the peak of modernity" comes up, for example, in a late letter of April 2, 1962. In it, taking up Löwith's terms again, he distinguishes Nietzsche's "repetition"—which "constitutes an insoluble difficulty" due to its entanglement in modern presuppositions as is shown by the contradiction between eternal return and freedom—from an "unqualified return to the principles of antiquity," which arguably comes closer to his own unpolemical approach.³⁸ As Strauss famously wrote in the almost coeval introduction to *The City and Man*: "Only we living today can possibly find a solution to the problems of today. But an adequate understanding of the *principles* as elaborated by the classics may be the indispensable starting point for an adequate analysis, to be achieved by us, of present-day society in its peculiar character, and for the wise application, to be achieved by us, of these *principles* to our task."³⁹

The main issue in this regard, thus, boils down to the meaning of those *principles*. By referring to Strauss's letter of December 30, 1932, we have already emphasized that what he aims towards, in order to come, unlike Löwith, to an "unpolemical, 'pure and whole' question," is a "positive, concrete *view* of nature that is not immediately construed, once again, in a polemical manner."⁴⁰ Strauss resumes this key issue in a letter to Löwith of August 15, 1946. Among the various relevant questions he touches upon in it,⁴¹ he once again addresses the problem of nature and its understanding, this time in connection with the opposition between "philosophy and history."⁴²

After reading Strauss's review essay on John Wild's book *Plato's Theory of Man*,⁴³ Löwith had expressed his bewilderment at Strauss's "historicizing" approach to a genuinely philosophical thinking: "Is your differentiation of historical epochs . . . according to their proximity to truth and its form not still, precisely, a historical reflection, so that your tendency to an in principle de-historicization of the question of truth is

still, indeed, a modern approach and you can reach your goal without historical ‘deconstruction’ just as little as Heidegger?”⁴⁴

Replying to this question, Strauss does not only distance himself from Heidegger’s *Destruktion* due to its complete replacement of nature by historicity, as we have already emphasized. Moving from an appraisal of what he and Löwith share regarding the question of historicity, he also observes:

We agree that today we need historical reflection—only I assert that this is neither a progress nor a fate to submit to with resignation, but is an unavoidable means for the overcoming of modernity. One cannot overcome modernity with modern means, but only insofar as we also are still *natural beings with natural understanding* [natürliche Wesen mit natürlichem Verstand]; but the way of thought of natural understanding [*die Denkmittel des natürlichen Verstandes*] has been lost to us, and simple people [*einfache Leute*] such as myself and those like me are not able to regain it through their own resources: we attempt to *learn* from the ancients.⁴⁵

The emphasis on simplicity, despite Löwith’s irony and persistent doubts about the possibility to retrieve an ahistorical paradigm of nature along with its natural understanding,⁴⁶ proves to be no mere rhetorical device. As Strauss points out in a letter of August 20, 1946:

It is astounding that we (although up to a certain point we understand one another very well) above and beyond that understand one another so little—it is astounding considering the importance of the points at which we understand one another. Where do our ways part? I really think that you on the decisive point are not *simple, simple-minded* [einfach, simpel] enough, while I believe that I am. You do not take the simple sense [*einfacher Sinn*] of philosophy literally enough: philosophy is the attempt to replace opinions about the whole with genuine knowledge of the whole. For you, philosophy is nothing but the self-understanding or self-interpretation of man, and, that means, naturally of historically conditioned man, if not of the individual. That is, speaking Platonically, you reduce philosophy to description of the interior decoration of the respective cave,

of the cave (= historical existence) which then can no longer be seen *as* a cave. You remain bogged down in idealism-historicism. And you interpret the history of philosophy in such a way that it confirms the unavoidability of historical relativity, or of the rule of prejudices, asserted by you. You identify philosophy as such with “Weltanschauung”; you therefore make philosophy radically depend on the respective “culture.”⁴⁷

Strauss could hardly have uttered clearer, weightier, and more explicit remarks. In the following chapters, we will try to explain their meaning in greater detail, notably when it comes to the Platonic cave as distinct from a second, unnatural cave.⁴⁸ Here we must limit ourselves to asking: how can we be so “simple [*einfach*]” as to take the original meaning of philosophy literally enough and—we should add—achieve a “positive, concrete *view* [*Anschauung*] of nature that is not immediately construed, once again, in a polemical manner”?⁴⁹ In other words, what can we “attempt to *learn* from the ancients” for that purpose? If we stick to Strauss’s letter to Löwith of August 20, 1946, we can find an answer that, as we will see by referring to some of his published books, proves to be of crucial importance.

Later in this letter Strauss takes up the question of nature again, this time under the heading “return to the natural view [*Rückkehr zur natürlichen Ansicht*].”⁵⁰ In his previous letter of August 18, 1946, Löwith had argued that historicity is too inherent to humanity to allow for a meaningful search for a natural paradigm. In addition, he had pointed out that grasping such a paradigm in natural phenomena is ultimately impossible.⁵¹

By referring, in particular, to the second objection, Strauss observes: “You confuse the Greek man-in-the-street, and as far as I am concerned also the Greek poet, for the Greek *philosopher*. (It does not make things better that Nietzsche often—not always: *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ‘What Is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals?’—made the same mistake).”⁵² “Plato and Aristotle,” Strauss continues borrowing some of the words Löwith had used in his letter, “never believed that ‘stars, heaven, sea, earth, generation, birth, and death give’ them ‘natural answers to their unnatural questions.’” Then, he concludes his comments on this matter with the following remark, whose significance will become clearer in the next paragraphs: “Plato ‘flees,’ as is well known, from these ‘things’ (πράγματα) into the λόγοι, because the πράγματα give no answer *directly*, but are mute riddles.”⁵³

II

With this reference to Socrates’s famous turn from the direct experience of natural phenomena to the *logoi* (discourses) that are made about them—namely, to his *deuteros plous* or “second sailing”⁵⁴—Strauss’s correspondence with Löwith concerning the question of nature, apart from some further sporadic references to it, is virtually finished. We are therefore left with the impression that, if a genuine path towards a “positive, concrete *view* of nature [*positive, konkrete Anschauung von Natur*]” is to be found, and therewith an “unpolemical, ‘pure and whole’ question” is to be restored, there must be a link between the discourses or *logoi* on the one hand, and nature or *physis* on the other. Although arguably implicit in the concept of “*view* [*Anschauung*] of nature,”⁵⁵ this link is never made explicit in the correspondence. Nonetheless, there are some published works of Strauss’s where it is clearly underscored.

An example to consider first, also for chronological reasons, is Strauss’s book *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes. Its Basis and Its Genesis*. As is well known, even if Strauss had already completed its original German manuscript in 1935, the book was published for the first time in English in 1936 and only about three decades later in German.⁵⁶ For our purpose, the eighth and final chapter of this book turns out to be of the utmost importance, since it is there that Strauss establishes an insightful comparison between the new science of politics introduced by Hobbes and the “old” one represented by Plato and Aristotle.

It is also worth observing that in Strauss’s view this conflation of Plato and Aristotle, at least from such an “epistemological” standpoint, can be misleading. For Strauss convincingly explains that in his search for exactness Hobbes ends up agreeing with Plato against Aristotle and his view of political science as valid only *pachylos kai typo*, “roughly and in outline.”⁵⁷ Despite this agreement concerning the need for exactness, which leads him to replace Aristotle with Plato as “the best of the ancient philosophers” in his mature assessment, Hobbes however departs from Plato’s rationalism because the latter becomes untenable if one starts, as Hobbes does, from the premises of the “impotence of reason [*Ohnmacht der Vernunft*]” and the “wrongness of opinions as such [*prinzipielle Verkehrtheit der Meinung als solcher*].”⁵⁸ Hobbes therefore (partially inspired by Descartes in this regard⁵⁹) inaugurates a new kind of rationalism that is centered on the passions and that, if judged from the perspective of Platonic rationalism, can well be described as “irrational” and ultimately

regarded as a form of “sophistry” due to its ruling out of any transcendent objective standard.⁶⁰

Hobbes, then, ends up rejecting both Plato and Aristotle and thus seeks a new paradigm of exact political science. It is worth insisting, however, on the reason why in his maturity—namely when, by way of his turn to Euclid, he was searching for a new method in order for political science to be exact and wholly implementable—he developed a penchant for Plato as “the best of the ancient philosophers.” In Strauss’s view, this reason consists in Hobbes’s claim that Plato’s political and moral philosophy is a “critique” of opinions along with the passions they rest on, unlike Aristotle’s, which ultimately amounts to a mere “description” of those passions.⁶¹ For Aristotle, according to Hobbes as Strauss interprets him, remains under the spell of what is ordinarily said about things—in the given case about moral and political phenomena—unlike Plato who takes his bearings from “ideas” that are considered to be beyond opinions and, therewith, truly and literally “paradoxical.” This paradoxical character, this going against and beyond the opinions, the passions, as well as sensuality, is what Hobbes feels to have in common with Plato, irrespective of his deeper critique, and rejection, of the latter’s sort of rationalism.⁶²

This interpretation, which for Strauss is Hobbes’s ultimate interpretation, does not stand, however, the test of an “unbiased [*unbefangen*] study of the sources”⁶³—at least not completely. At closer inspection, Plato proves to take his bearings from what the people say about the things—their *speeches*—even more decidedly than Aristotle, who in this regard is only following in his footsteps. For Plato, as he shows in the *Phaedo* by having Socrates recall his turn to the *logoi* when he began his “second sailing,” rejects as insufficient the “cause-effect” explanations sought by *physiologi* like Anaxagoras and “takes refuge,” instead, in human speech:

Against this explanation of nature by the physiologists there is not only the objection that it is an insufficient explanation or no explanation at all; physics of the type of the Anaxagorean, “Epimethean” physics, which as such takes—whether expressly and intentionally or implicitly and unintentionally is of no importance—not the ordering power of reason, but disorder and irrationality as the principle of nature, necessarily leads to the destruction of all certain and independent standards, to finding everything in man’s world very well as it is, and to subjection to “what the Athenians *believe*.” Confronted with this

absurd conclusion, Plato does not without further ado oppose to materialistic-mechanistic physics a spiritualist-teleological physics, but keeps to what can be understood without any far-fetched “tragic” apparatus, to what the “Athenians” *say*.⁶⁴

What the Athenians, or rather, speaking more generally, human beings say is, however, contradictory. This means that if speech is to be the true starting point for any genuine explanation of nature, the art of right argumentation or dialectics becomes paramount. In an entirely meaningful fashion, therefore, does Strauss define *dialectics* as “the art of truth-revealing discussion [*die Kunst des die Wahrheit offenbar machenden Mit-einander-Sprechens*]” that, by showing which of two *endoxa* or “authoritative opinions” must be rejected, and which kept as granting rational coherence, reveals the “paradoxical” truth that—these are Strauss’s precise words—is “hidden [*verborgen*]” in what humans say in their mutually contradictory speeches.⁶⁵ Moreover, by pointing to a pure pattern of what is being discussed by way of abstraction, dialectics is the path towards “ideas.” This, as Strauss explains, comes out most clearly when one speaks of good and virtue. What is meant when people say that they seek good or virtue is that they wish these latter in their purity, “unalloyed” with any evil or vice. By their speech, and “in speech” only, people thus fathom their pure pattern or idea, which essentially transcends what can be found “in deed”:

The virtue which is not found in the works of men is found in speech alone, in the divinatory, “supposing” and “founding” knowledge incorporated in speech. Speech alone, and not the always equivocal deeds, originally reveals to man the standard by which he can order his actions and test himself, takes his bearings in life and nature, in a way completely undistorted and, in principle, independent of the possibility of realization. This is the reason for Plato’s “escape” into speech, and for the theory thereby given of the transcendence of ideas; only by means of speech does man know of the transcendence of virtue.⁶⁶

Plato, hence, on the one hand, contrary to what Hobbes maintains, sticks to the words and to speech as much as, or even more than Aristotle does (who, after all, tried to weaken the close connection Plato had established between words and true being⁶⁷). On the other hand, Strauss points

out that Hobbes's view regarding the difference between the two ancient philosophers is vindicated by the dialectical and therefore "paradoxical" character of Plato's approach: pointing to speech in its contradictoriness, Plato seeks to go beyond what is commonly said or believed—namely, the *endoxa qua endoxa*—thereby expressing that need for exactness that Hobbes is eager to underscore and resume.

The exactness as Hobbes understands it and the exactness as Plato understands it are, however, quite different. Strauss explains that the latter amounts to the "undistorted reliability of the standards"⁶⁸—of those standards that, as we have seen in the wake of his comment, are available in speech and are disclosed to humans by way of dialectics only. The former, by contrast, stems from Hobbes's un-Platonic (and more generally un-Greek) interest in applicability.⁶⁹ It is this interest that leads him from Plato as an "anti-Aristotelian" example of exactness in political philosophy to Euclid as the embodiment of methodological rigor. Euclid here stands for the "resolutive-compositive" method Hobbes takes from Galilei. Thanks to this adoption, his aim as a political scientist becomes not so much to know the essence of the state and raise the "most urgent question," "the truly primary question" of its aim,⁷⁰ as to break down the state into its most basic components and rebuild it so that it can properly function by granting peace and security to its members.⁷¹ What the "resolutive" phase arrives at is indeed "human nature," the natural selfishness and vanity of human beings that can never be forgotten if a stable and well-functioning political mechanism is to be built at the end of the process. But this "nature," unlike the Platonic one that amounts to a standard or paradigm, is conceived of as only the "matter" constituting human beings, i.e., "what falls to man's share before all education."⁷²

The exactness Hobbes seeks is, thus, the exactness by which the new political scientists Hobbes must deal with their most basic matter—namely, the passions characteristic of humans *qua* humans—if they want to fulfill their new task: guaranteeing peace at all costs due to the irresistible character of fear of violent death.⁷³ The novelty of this task is shown by the fact that, as Strauss emphatically points out, Plato never ceased to raise the question of the aim of the state along with the correlative question of the essence of virtue.⁷⁴ What Plato looks for by way of his political philosophy, as we have observed, is exactness understood as the "undistorted reliability of the standards," irrespective of their applicability. "The 'resolutive-compositive' method," Strauss maintains, "thus presupposes nothing less than a systematic renunciation of the question

of what is good and fitting.” Then, with words that do not seem to suit the role of a mere commentator, he adds:

Convinced of the absolutely typical character [*schlechthinnige Vorbildlichkeit*] of mathematical method, according to which one proceeds from self-evident axioms to evident conclusions, “to the end,” Hobbes fails to realize [*verkennt*] that in the “beginning,” in the “evident” presuppositions whether of mathematics or of politics, the real problem [*das eigentliche Problem*], the task of “dialectics,” is hidden [*verborgen*]. “Dialectics” is the discussion and testing of what men *say* of the just and the unjust, of virtue and vice. Hobbes considers superfluous, even dangerous, to take as one’s point of departure what men say about justice and so forth: “the names of Virtues, and Vices . . . can never be true grounds of any ratiocination.” That one can base no reflection on how men usually apply the terms virtues and vices, is not a datum [*Feststellung*] which Hobbes would be justified in pitting against the tradition founded by Socrates-Plato, for the Socratic-Platonic reform of philosophy [*Wendung*] rests precisely on the perception of the unreliability and contradictoriness of ordinary speech [*die Einsicht in die Unzuverlässigkeit, in die Widersprüchlichkeit der gewöhnlichen Rede*]. But it does not follow from this perception that one is to consider “not the words but the things.” For to give up orientation by speech [*Orientierung an der Rede*] means giving up the only possible orientation, which is originally at the disposal of men [*die einzig mögliche Orientierung, die dem Menschen ursprünglich zu Gebote steht*] and therewith giving up the discovery of the standard which is presupposed in any orientation [*der in aller Orientierung vorausgesetzte Massstab*], and even giving up the search for the standard [*die Frage nach dem Massstab*].⁷⁵

Not nature understood as *matter*, hence, must be sought if even the mere search for the standard—which Strauss, with all his might, tried to revitalize throughout his philosophic life—is not to be relinquished. In the wake of the Platonic Socrates, a different meaning of nature as *essence* or *idea* must be looked for with the mind’s eye (by way of dialectics) in its stead. Strauss makes this clear while explaining Hobbes’s faulty perspective:

“He [Hobbes] begins his political philosophy not with the question as to the essence of virtue, or with the question (which to a certain extent is equivalent) as to *the ‘nature’ of man in the sense of the ‘idea’ of man [die Frage nach der ‘Natur’ des Menschen als nach der Idee des Menschen]*, but with the question as to the ‘nature’ of man in the sense of that which falls to all men before education [*die Frage nach der ‘Natur’ des Menschen als nach dem, was allen Menschen vor aller Erziehung zukommt*].”⁷⁶ Due to this defect, which deprives Hobbes of the possibility to raise the question of the standard, he even ends up in a fundamental incoherence. For under those conditions Hobbes cannot fully justify his view of the properly constituted state—namely, the state that grants security and peace to everybody starting from each and everyone’s natural “right” to everything—if not at the price of an exception to his resolute-compositional method, which in itself would not allow for such ultimately moral evaluations. Hobbes’s political philosophy, however morally indulgent compared with Plato’s, is not, after all, a form of pure naturalism like Spinoza’s, as Strauss insightfully underscores.⁷⁷

In any event, what is important for us to underscore is that besides nature understood as matter according to the Hobbesian, modern sense (irrespective of Hobbes’s inconsistencies), there is, at least, another meaning of nature. This meaning is the Platonic one, which proves to be of the utmost importance for Strauss in view of its ability to open up the path towards the standard—even to the mere search thereof. This second and more important meaning is—it is worth repeating—nature in the sense of idea or essence.

Although not explicitly mentioned, we can find an echo of this Platonic perspective at the end of chapter VIII of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* we are currently commenting on. In that context, Strauss discusses the primacy of “internal policy” that distinguishes classical political philosophy from its modern counterpart, which is instead mostly concerned with foreign policy. The reason why Plato and Aristotle agree on that primacy—Strauss informs us—is that in both authors’ view, regardless of their differences, “what lends to a thing its being, its peculiar essence, what limits it—that essence is what we mean when we speak, e.g., of a horse as a horse—takes precedence over all other reasons for the thing in question, and particularly over all external conditions.”⁷⁸ This assumption allows them to favor matters of internal order and justice over those concerning war and defense, which are at most regarded as by-products of the first.

Another relevant instance of such an “essentialist” approach occurs shortly afterwards when Strauss compares, once again, the “paradoxical”

character of Plato’s and Hobbes’s political philosophies. “The antithesis between classical and modern political philosophy,” he begins to observe, “more accurately between Platonic political philosophy and that of Hobbes, reduced to principle, is that the former orientates itself by speech [*sich an der Rede orientiert*] and the latter from the outset refuses to do so.”⁷⁹ “This refusal arises originally from insight into the problematic nature of ordinary speech [*Fragwürdigkeit der gewöhnlichen Rede*], that is, of popular valuations [*‘vulgäre’ Wertschätzungen*], which one may with a certain justification call natural valuations [*natürliche Wertschätzungen*],” Strauss adds by making reference, in an attached note, to his close friend Jacob Klein and thereby, arguably, to Husserl’s concept of “*natürliche Einstellung*” (natural attitude).⁸⁰ Then, he observes:

This insight leads Hobbes, just as did Plato, first to the ideal [*Desiderat*] of an exact political science. But while Plato goes back to the truth hidden in the natural valuations and therefore seeks to teach nothing new and unheard-of, but to recall what is known to all but not understood [*das von allen Gewusste aber nicht Verstandene*], Hobbes, rejecting the natural valuations in principle, goes beyond them, goes forward to a new *a priori* political philosophy, which is of the future and freely projected [*eine neue, zukünftige, frei zu entwerfende, “apriorische” Politik*]. Measured by Aristotle’s classical explanation of natural morals, Platonic moral philosophy is paradoxical, as is Hobbes’s. But whereas the paradoxical nature of Platonic moral philosophy is as irreversible as the “cave” existence of men bound to the body, Hobbes’s moral philosophy is destined sooner or later to change from paradox to an accepted part of public opinion.⁸¹

The paradoxical character of Plato’s approach, then, amounts to “the paradox of the unpretentious old and eternal [*Paradoxie des unscheinbaren Alten, Ewigen*],”⁸² of the “undistorted reliability of the standards” that can never be found, in their purity, “in deed” but only “in speech,” as we have seen before. The paradoxical character of Hobbes’s approach, by contrast, consists in “the paradox of the surprising new, unheard-of venture [*Paradoxie des überraschenden Neuen, des unerhörten Wagnisses*],”⁸³ that, if eventually successful, becomes the backbone of a new worldview. This intrinsically relativistic trait of Hobbes’s approach is duly underscored by Strauss when, shortly afterwards, he observes that “whereas Plato retraces

natural morals [*natürliche Moral*] and the orientation [*Orientierung*] provided by them to their origin [*Ursprung*], Hobbes must attempt in sovereignty [*wahrhaft souverän*], and without this orientation, to discover the principle of morals,” thereby traveling “the path which leads to formal ethics and finally to relativist scepticism.”⁸⁴

Such a radical shift concerning morals becomes clear, for instance, in the case of courage, which we have already dealt with while commenting on Strauss’s correspondence with Löwith (recall Strauss’s comments on Nietzsche’s “rediscovery of the original ideal of humanity,” which is however “polemically” affirmed by him to counteract its negation by “the Enlightenment”). Resorting to some of the terms he had used in his exchange,⁸⁵ Strauss now explains that “Plato does not question the virtue-character of courage, to which speech bears witness, but simply opposes the over-estimation [*Überschätzung*] of courage which underlies the popular opinion [*vulgäre Meinung*] about courage.”⁸⁶ By contrast “Hobbes, because he renounced all orientation by speech [*kraft seines Verzichtes auf die Orientierung an der Rede*], goes so far as systematically to deny the virtue-character of courage.”⁸⁷ The consequence to this denial, here as in Strauss’s letter, could not be more decidedly underscored: “And just as disdain of speech [*Verachtung der Rede*] finally leads to relativist scepticism, the negation of courage leads to the controversial position [*polemische Position*] of courage which becomes more and more acute on the way from Rousseau by Hegel to Nietzsche and is completed by the reabsorption of wisdom by courage, in the view that the ideal is not the object of wisdom [*Gegenstand der Einsicht*], but the hazardous venture of the will [*Wagnis des Willens*].”⁸⁸

Strauss concludes his remarks, in this connection, by observing that Hobbes’s skepticism leads him not to abandon the question of the standard altogether—as we have already noted—but to raise it only surreptitiously and improperly, as one can see by comparing his perspective with Plato’s. For, due to his “disdain of speech,” Hobbes must find his bearings only in what he regards as “necessary” (the irresistible passion of fear of violent death and the natural “right” resulting from it) and not also in what is “dialectically” fathomed as “good” or virtuous starting from the *endoxa*. This exclusive reliance on necessity is for Strauss the result of Hobbes’s “denial of the existence of a natural law, that is, of a natural standard [*natürlicher Massstab*].”⁸⁹ In its turn, such a denial is “the result of relinquishing orientation by speech,”⁹⁰ as Strauss prudently limits himself to “asserting [*behaupten*]”⁹¹ despite having previously shown, as has been

emphasized, that this is his own view (no matter how “tentative”) not only as a commentator.

III

At the beginning of this introduction, we pointed out that at least in one instance Strauss explicitly raises the fundamental philosophical question, “What is nature?” Bearing in mind what has been observed so far, it is now time to focus on this context.

The question occurs in the introduction Strauss wrote for the *History of Political Philosophy* he edited with Joseph Cropsey in 1963.⁹² After pointing out that political philosophy presupposes philosophy, which in turn presupposes the discovery of “nature” as its “primary theme,” Strauss asks: “What is nature?” Then, to begin to answer this question, he recalls the story of Odysseus, Hermes, and the herb called *moly*, which Homer tells in the tenth book of the *Odyssey*.⁹³ There—Strauss informs us—we can find the first occurrence ever in Greek (and the only one in Homer) of the word *physis*, an occurrence that, despite being in an epic poem, “gives us a most important hint to what the Greek philosophers understood by ‘nature.’”⁹⁴

In the Homeric context Strauss refers to, the “nature of the herb,” which is not made but only known by the gods, amounts to “its looks and its power.” “‘Nature’ means here,” Strauss continues, “the character of a thing or of a kind of thing, the way in which a thing or a kind of thing looks and acts, and the thing, or the kind of thing, is taken not to have been made by gods or men.”⁹⁵ Shortly afterwards, coming to a more straightforwardly philosophical context, he adds: “It seems that the Greek word for nature (*physis*) means primarily ‘growth’ and therefore also that into which a thing grows, the term of the growth, the character a thing has when its growth is completed, when it can do what only the fully grown thing of the kind in question can do or do well.”⁹⁶ These observations allow him to note that there are things “by nature” and things “by convention” (which do not grow because they are made), and that among the former some are “‘by nature’ without having ‘grown’ and even without having come into being in any way.”⁹⁷ These are, of course, the “first things, out of which or through which all other natural things have come into being,” like, for instance, Democritus’s atoms.⁹⁸

Having reached this point, and having underscored that nature had to be discovered, as is shown by the fact that the Hebrew Bible has no equivalent word for *physis*, its closest concepts being “way” or “custom,” Strauss points out that “the discovery of nature led to the splitting up of ‘way’ and ‘custom’ into ‘nature’ (*physis*) on the one hand and ‘convention’ or ‘law’ (*nomos*) on the other,” a distinction that “implies that the natural is prior to the conventional.”⁹⁹

Here is where political philosophy comes in, and therewith Socrates as its founder.¹⁰⁰ For the splitting up of way and custom into *physis* and *nomos* necessarily leads to the question as to whether the law, or more generally what is regarded to be right, is by nature or by convention: “The precise question therefore concerns the relation of what is by nature good for man, on the one hand, to justice or right on the other. The simple alternative is this: all right is conventional or there is some natural right.”¹⁰¹

Strauss informs us that apparently “Socrates was induced to turn away from the study of the divine or natural things”—i.e., “the first things” we have previously mentioned in his footsteps—“by his piety.”¹⁰² In light of the distinction between esoteric and exoteric teaching that became increasingly relevant in Strauss’s approach since the end of the 1930s,¹⁰³ this information would lead us, to begin with, to grow suspicious towards Socrates’s turn to the “human things” and his pursuing of his investigations “by means of conversations,” as Strauss explains shortly afterwards. We are also told, however, that even the “pious” Socrates was compelled to raise, in his conversations, the question “of nature”—which essentially exceeds the limits of piety—and that he raised that question by asking “‘what is . . . ?’ regarding everything,” thereby originating “a new kind of the study of the natural things.”¹⁰⁴ This being the case, Strauss’s description of Socrates’s dialectical procedure, which, as will immediately become clear, follows along the lines of his previous discussion of the same matter in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, can be received with less hesitation.

We have already observed that “Socrates pursued his investigations by means of conversations.” Strauss now explains that “this means he started from generally held opinions,” the most authoritative among which are “those sanctioned by the city and its laws, by the most solemn convention.”¹⁰⁵ Due to the fact that opinions, including the most authoritative ones, the *endoxa*, contradict one another, it “becomes necessary to transcend the whole sphere of the generally held opinions, or of opinion as such, in the direction of knowledge”:

Since even the most authoritative opinions are only opinions, even Socrates was compelled to go the way from convention or law to nature, to ascend from law to nature. But now it appears more clearly than ever before that opinion, convention, or law, contains truth, or is not arbitrary, or is in a sense natural. One may say that the law, the human law, thus proves to point to a divine or natural law as its origin. This implies, however, that the human law, precisely because it is not identical with the divine or natural law, is not unqualifiedly true or just: only natural right, justice itself, the “idea” or “form” of justice, is unqualifiedly just.¹⁰⁶

In light of what we have already observed while dealing with *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, we cannot help but notice some important similarities to this presentation and vocabulary. The first similarity consists in the view that opinion contains truth. As has been previously underscored, in his 1936 book Strauss speaks of “truth hidden [*verborgen*] in what [men] say” or “truth hidden [*verborgen*] in the natural valuations [*natürliche Wertschätzungen*].”¹⁰⁷ Even the “in a sense” only “natural” character of opinion reflects what Strauss maintains in his previous book, where he, by way of Klein, refers to “popular valuations [*vulgäre Wertschätzungen*], which one may *with a certain justification call natural* valuations [*natürliche Wertschätzungen*].”¹⁰⁸ Analogous considerations can be made regarding the second half of the quotation above. For the themes Strauss touches upon in it find an almost exact correspondence in his previous remarks about the “natural law” or “natural standard” denied by Hobbes¹⁰⁹ (unlike Plato who “retraces natural morals and the orientation provided by them to their origin [*Ursprung*]”¹¹⁰) and in the view—which Strauss also puts forward in his 1936 book—that it is “speech alone,” by grasping the “essence” or “idea,” that “originally reveals to man the standard by which he can order his actions,”¹¹¹ and which, therefore, is unqualifiedly just.

It is, however, what Strauss adds in the following paragraph that should now catch our attention, notably because he there reiterates, and expands on, his previous remarks concerning the meaning of nature as idea or essence. He begins by pointing out that to understand why Socrates is regarded as the founder of political philosophy one must consider “the character of the questions with which he dealt in his conversations.”¹¹² Socrates, Strauss continues, “raised the question ‘What is . . . ?’ regarding