January 3, 2011

The title for this entry is stolen from the title of an article written by one of the great conservative thinkers of the 20th century, a real aristocrat of the mind if ever there was one, Leo Strauss. Strauss was a witness to the monstrous unreason that shattered the old order of things in Europe and beyond, and spent his life in the effort to understand how it came to be. Given the catastrophic consequences of that unreason, the consequences of which had not played themselves out in his lifetime (and have not played themselves out in ours), he went in search of a reasonable response and, if at all possible, a remedy to which such a response might lead.

What are we to do? Are we to continue with the modern project as it amasses power over nature and over human nature, absent the wisdom to which the power-seeking sciences are blind and indifferent? Do we continue progress along this path, even to destruction on an apocalyptic scale? Is choosing another path even any longer possible? Or has progress become inevitable as the laws of its own mathematics, overcoming us now as a law of history? Is the modern project a sort of global jetliner: mighty, glorious, bearing us all at top speed comfortably through the stratosphere, splendidly equipped with everything we need…except landing-gear?

In any case, Strauss sees reason itself as the best response to the unreason of the modern project. If progress has meant abandonment of the reason that seeks wisdom for the reason that seeks power, then perhaps the return to the reason that seeks wisdom is best.

If I understand him rightly, for Strauss the endless *quest* for the truth that can guide man—reason's quest itself—becomes the best guide to men. That quest can direct the boundless desires of human beings to a boundless pursuit of knowledge rather than power; it directs the infinite longing of the human heart toward the acquisition of the knowledge of what is as it *is*, and as it sets down the way for us, rather than as it may be *changed* by us and altered for us to use as we please. The pursuit of wisdom therefore boundlessly binds, directs and contains human desire, not setting men at odds with nature but rather bringing their own human nature to its highest possible perfection where that perfection is properly found, as Strauss understands it, in knowing rather than in controlling.

One might put it this way and say that while the modern project uses reason to enable men to *b reak*
from the restraints of nature and its essentially cyclical, recurring patterns, Strauss would have men use reason to
return
to the ever-returning sameness of nature, as did the Greeks who first set out on the philosophic path.

It's in his effort to return to classical thought, to the contemplation of the eternal order of things, that we might call Strauss "conservative." He wants to retrieve and conserve the philosophic life as the Greeks first came to teach it to us, and so to conserve our humanity as nature would direct and moderate it.

The argument Strauss makes is very impressive. His analysis of the modern project and of the danger toward which it progresses goes deep and admits of no facile remedies. The careful study he makes of classical thought likewise goes to uncommon depths and opens to us the greatness and power of the classics, and the reverence due to them by those who would learn from them. For those who have felt regret, dismay and even terror at what seem to be the looming consequences of the modern project, a serious alternative such as that offered by Strauss can seem very attractive! Decent and sober-minded people, after all, can feel keenly the desire to protect not only human institutions but the physical order of the world itself, to back off from the project that threatens those things and instead return to the ancient philosophic way, to go back to nature properly understood.

Strauss' was not a religious man, but his theoretical conservatism (which has very little to do with the conservative/liberal distinction of current affairs) can appeal in a special way to those whose religious frame of mind habituates them to keeping faith with what has gone before, to a looking back for authoritative standards to guide their lives. Pope Benedict XVI himself, in his Regensburg Address has urged the West to return to an earlier concern for that form of reason which seeks guidance for human affairs.

Nevertheless, from the point of view of Christian wisdom, Strauss' effort is seriously flawed. There can be no return to Greek wisdom, or rather, Greek wisdom cannot be the point to which a return from the danger of modernity is possible. Greek wisdom, after all, was first replaced as the highest goal for man not by the moderns who rejected it in the name of power, a lower goal, but by the Christian thinkers who replaced or at least radically transformed Greek wisdom with the wisdom that comes to light through *faith*, providing a goal even higher than that of philosophy. Faith brought to light an understanding of man that includes a capacity for a

relationship with the divine, with the Creator of all that is, a capacity which sets the heart and mind of man decisively apart from and *above* nature. From this perspective, man cannot find his goal or meaning by the study of nature, not even by the study of his own nature, because the mind that studies nature is already on a higher order of things than the nature it studies. That is, human existence in nature stands open before that which is not nature but is, as we used to say in the tradition, *supernatural*. The body's activities in the recurring temporal cycles of nature subserve those activities of the embodied mind which can bind that mind to *eternity* in such a way that for the embodied human mind, the passage of time is not only cyclical but also *historical*. The mind maintains its identity *across* time, cutting through the recurring patterns of nature as a prow cuts through waves. Memory fans out as the wake raised up by that mind's passage. While it's true that the mind can recur, again and again, to the contemplation of the recurrent cycles and patterns of nature, such contemplation is not its highest activity, not its highest goal. In itself the mind is already higher than those things.

If we are to speak in terms of recurrence, then the recurrence that does gives a full and complete goal for the human mind is its recurrence to the eternity which raises it altogether beyond the boundaries of cyclical nature, even beyond nature's enduring principles. It is a recurrence to that which renders temporal even whatever permanence nature might possess. It is this recurrence which is in fact a keeping of faith with the Eternity which, or rather *who*, addresses himself to men not in nature but in history.

God reveals himself in history. "I Am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, your fathers." And correlatively, human beings become who they truly are, *are revealed* as who they truly are, by receiving that divine and creative self-revelation given to them in the concrete story of their lives. It is not the contemplation of nature that perfects the human soul, but the mutual gaze of God and man, where man is revealed to himself as the living image and likeness of God in the world across time.

A human being does not become perfect by abandoning his concrete particularity for some perfectly abstracted contemplation or idea. A human being becomes perfect as his concrete and historical particularity is raised up into the likeness of God. Christianity does not teach the immortality of the soul so much as the resurrection of the body. The irreplaceable uniqueness of each single person is saved; that's what endures, not merely some pantheistic spirit of life or

world soul or the nature-bound “thought thinking itself,” as Aristotle put it.

The return to nature, to nature properly understood, cannot save us. If the Greeks are the discoverers of the idea of nature, it is the Christians, and the Jews already before them, who discover the *insufficiency* of nature as source for either the goal or the guidance for man. Even when Christians would come to speak of “natural law,” the lawfulness of the natural law is derived not from nature itself but from the commanding will of God for man expressed in part through the created instrumentality of man’s nature. It is man’s relation to God that is prescriptive, not his relation to nature. On the contrary, man is to rule nature.

A look at the creation as it appears in the first chapter of Genesis establishes for us immediately its radical dissimilarity to nature or the cosmos as imagined by the Greeks --or by anybody else in the pagan world! The Greeks see the cosmos as existing forever and by necessity, possessing a permanence of form and cycle that is identical with its order or intelligibility. It always is, and always is as it is *necessarily*, and because this is so, the *knowledge* of what necessarily is “always and everywhere the same” is taken as the truth itself. But none of this is the case for Genesis.

For Genesis, the world is not necessary. It comes to be only when the divinely created light, suddenly and without explanation, shines into its nothingness, and God calls into it lawful boundaries and separations: light from darkness; waters above from waters below; the boundaries of sea and land; the plants in their various and separate kinds; distinct lights in the sky marking out distinct seasons and times; things that swim or fly or swarm; animals that walk on the earth; and at last the man who stands over all the creation, to whom it is given for his rule, to be subdued by him, subordinated to him, as he his lifted up upon it as God’s image within it, reflecting the face of God, responding to the self-revealing word of God addressed uniquely to him.

The world is not necessary but comes about in an action of God’s sovereign freedom. It is ultimately intelligible not because it is always and everywhere the same, or because it is patterned after eternal and necessary ideas. Rather, the world is perfectly intelligible when it is the infinitely compliant instrument serving the purpose of God’s communication of Himself to the man. It is the eternal *oneness of God* giving himself, his living and self-revealing personal *onen ess* ,
that makes creation intelligible. His Word expressing his oneness binding everything together makes the creation one, whole and intelligible, in time and across history, as it expresses itself to man and as man receives it. The highest capacity of reason is not the ability to contemplate abstract ideas or intellectual objects—this natural capacity itself is instrumental, capable of

being drawn up by what is still higher into the service of the self-revealing and creative communication of God to man and of man to God and of human beings with each other.

It is after all a matter of the plainest common experience that the first use of reason, of speech, is self-revelatory communication, the making of oneself and one's identity and inner conditions known to others. At one with this is the use of reason, of speech, to receive the self-revelation directed to us by those who mean to reveal themselves to us. A child does not rise into speech by the contemplation of the objects that come before his senses and mind. He comes to speech in his relationship with his parents who speak their hearts to him even as from his inner urgency he cries out to them. Words, syntax, the capacity to form objective ideas and classify…these things are the tools of speech whose first use is this life of mutual communication. Ideas, what the medievals called "universals," do not establish the highest truth; they are instrumental to the relationship of speaking persons and serve that purpose only to the degree the persons are first of all themselves true.

"Being in good faith" is the expression we have for this truth that comes of being true. Every other kind of truth stands in service to this. The faithful relationship of man with God is the highest truth of man and the meaning of creation.

If modern progress is bringing us to the brink of self-destruction in mutual violence and disorder, the problem at its root is not that we have been mistaken about some abstract/objective truth. The problem is that we have become manifestly untrue ourselves. The return required of us then is of a different character than that suggested by Strauss, that most gnomic of men. Strauss grew up as a Jew and knew his Hebrew. He refers us to the Hebrew word for "return," *t eshuva*
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Teshuva
means return as
repentance
. It does not mean a recovery of abstract truth. It means becoming once again true after one has fallen away into unfaithfulness.

The reason that returns in this way is the reason that is one with faith. It does not come to rest in some supposed objective contemplation of the whole or of universals; it comes to life and rest, rather, when embodied in the particular human being who directs it into mutual recognition with the God who is One, *this* One, this most surpassingly unique and utterly unobjectifiable One. Here progress and return are one and the same.