

THE “CONCEPT OF THE POLITICAL” IN ITS GENESIS THE UNPOLITICAL SCHMITT OF LEO STRAUSS

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ABSTRACT

My article is based on the hermeneutic hypothesis (formulated in § 1) that in the “Notes on Carl Schmitt” (1932), Leo Strauss’s way of interpreting undergoes a “change” in its method. From the historicistic “orientation” that characterizes the first two sections of the text, Strauss moves in the third section to a phenomenological interpretation aimed at discovering the genesis and moral basis of Schmitt’s “concept of the political”. This hermeneutic hypothesis allows me to explain: (§ 2) the reason why Strauss denies what seems most obvious, namely that Schmitt’s *Bejahung* (“affirmation” or “approval”) of “the political” is itself of a “political” character; (§ 3) what Strauss means, in this context, by “the moral”, which, according to him, is at the root of Schmitt’s conceptualization of “the political”; (§ 4) what the “intention” is of Strauss’s interpretation of Schmitt.

KEYWORDS

Strauss, Schmitt, Husserl, Phenomenology, Moral and Political Philosophy, Liberalism.

1. THE ARGUMENT AND THE ACTION OF STRAUSS’S “NOTES” ON SCHMITT: A HYPOTHESIS ON THE “CHANGE OF ORIENTATION”

There is perhaps no twentieth-century author who wrote with greater strength and incisiveness in favor of “the political” (*das Politische*) than Carl Schmitt. No one, with more conviction, sought to contrast — in theory and in practice — the “tendency toward neutralizations and depoliticizations” which, in Schmitt’s opinion, constitutes “the core of modern European history”.¹ To include Schmitt in the ranks of the ‘unpolitical’ authors seems therefore to be a distortion of the basic

¹ Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, mit einer Rede über das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und Entpolitischierungen, neu herausgegeben von Carl Schmitt (München-Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1932) p. 67; *The Concept of the Political*, transl., introd. and notes by G. Schwab; with “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations” (1929) transl. by M. Konzen and J. P. McCormick ; with Leo Strauss’s notes on Schmitt’s essay, transl. by J. H. Lomax; foreword by T. B. Strong, expanded ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 81. I would like to thank Marco Dozzi and Fred Sengmueller for helping to improve the translation of my text.

sense of his work. And yet, such a paradoxical thesis was, if not openly stated, nevertheless somehow suggested in an interpretation of the *Concept of the Political* that struck Schmitt to the point of inducing him to declare to one of his assistants that he had seen in it his own “X-ray”.² I am referring to the *Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt, Der Begriff des Politischen* (“Notes on Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political”), which the 33-year-old Leo Strauss published in the “Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik” in 1932, shortly after the appearance of the second edition of Schmitt’s treatise.

By using the image of X-rays to describe Strauss’s peculiar hermeneutic acumen, Schmitt incisively portrays the method that governs Strauss’s reading of his work. Strauss’s attempt in the *Anmerkungen* — a sort of prelude to his later “hermeneutics of reticence”³ — is nothing more than the deciphering of the deep struc-

² This was told personally to Heinrich Meier by the jurist Günther Krauss, to whom Schmitt said (referring to Strauss): “He saw through me and X-rayed me as nobody else has” (Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, transl. by H. Lomax [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012], p. xvii). It is not certain, however, that Schmitt used the metaphor of “X-rays”. In the German edition of Meier’s book Schmitt’s words are reported as follows: “Er hat mich wie kein anderer durchschaut und durchleuchtet” (Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss und "Der Begriff des Politischen": Zu einem Dialog unter Abwesenden, Dritte Auflage* [Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2016], p. 158). Very likely, it was the translator of Meier’s book, Harvey Lomax, who excogitated such a telling metaphor, in order to express in English the idea of shining light on the “inside” or “through” contained in the German word *durchleuchten*.

³ It’s true that the “hermeneutics of reticence” *stricto sensu* has to do with the risk of persecution against the author, which seems evidently not to apply in the case of Schmitt’s text. The possibility of reticent writing, however, depends on the existence in principle of a disparity between “surface” and “depth” that is detected by Strauss in any philosophical text. For Strauss, philosophical texts have always two layers of meaning, regardless of whether their author runs the risk of being persecuted. In other words, the difference of communicative levels inherent to philosophical texts is not due to the existence *de facto* of a threat against philosophy, but to the difficulty for non-philosophers to become philosophers. In this regard, it is worth remembering Strauss’s “golden sentence” (as it was called by Seth Benardete, “Leo Strauss’s The City and Man”, *Political Science Reviewer*, VIII [1978]: pp. 1-20 [1]): “The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things” (Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* [Glencoe: The Free Press, 1958], p. 13, italics added). Stanley Rosen, “Leo Strauss and the Problem of the Modern”, in S. B. Smith (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 119-136 (122), considers this precept on the depth-surface ratio, formulated in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, to be “a concise expression of [Strauss’s] version of the phenomenological method” (a separate discussion would warrant the objection which Rosen, in this regard, raises against Straussian hermeneutics, that is, that it is not “entirely adequate to the depths” [*ibid.*]). Daniel Doneson, “Beginning at the Beginning: On the Starting Point of Reflection”, in S. Fleischacker (ed.), *Heidegger’s Jewish Followers. Essays on Arendt, Strauss, Jonas and Levinas* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2008) pp. 106-130 (109), rightly points out that the “golden sentence” somehow depends on the following locus in Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927) (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1967), p. 35; *Being and Time*, transl. by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 59: “What is it that phenomenology is to ‘let us see’? What is it that must be called a ‘phenomenon’ in a distinctive sense? What is it that by its very essence is necessarily the theme whenever we exhibit explicitly? Manifestly, it is something that proximally and for the most part does not show itself at all: it is something that lies hidden, in contrast to that which proximally

ture of sense that lies hidden beneath the “surface” of the text he is interpreting. Strauss seeks, in other words, to uncover the “intention” that drove Schmitt to make “the political” the object of a “concept”: the “intention” underlying the *Begriff des Politischen*. But in doing so, i.e. in inquiring about the ‘practical genesis’ of Schmitt’s theoretical reflection on “the political”, Strauss becomes aware of an emerging contrast of sense between “concept” and “intention” — which equates to a difference between theory and *praxis*. In order to properly understand such a disagreement between theory and *praxis* (and not hastily level it by placing both terms in a relationship of irenic synthesis),⁴ the interpreter must point an X-ray scanner at the text. Correct understanding requires — resorting to another metaphor, not far from the one Schmitt used — that, in observing what in the text is submitted as a theme, one grasps, at the same time, the “horizon” or non-thematical “background”. It is Strauss himself who suggests the metaphor of the “horizon”. Indeed, he writes in the thirty-fifth and final paragraph of the *Anmerkungen*:

(35) We said [par. 14 above] that Schmitt undertakes the critique of liberalism in a liberal world; and we meant by this that his critique of liberalism is performed [*vollziehe sich*] in the horizon [*Horizont*] of liberalism; his unliberal tendency is restrained by the still unvanquished “systematics of liberal thought”. The critique introduced by Schmitt against liberalism can therefore be completed only if one succeeds in gaining a horizon beyond liberalism. In such a horizon Hobbes performed [*vollzogen*] the foundation of liberalism. A radical critique of liberalism is thus possible only on the basis of an adequate understanding of Hobbes. To show what can

and for the most part does show itself; but at the same time it is something that belongs to what thus shows itself, and it belongs to it so essentially as to constitute its meaning and its ground”. However, these statements, like the whole of § 7 of *Sein und Zeit*, should not necessarily be interpreted, as Doneson seems to do, as a critique directed against Husserl. I agree, therefore, with a shrewd remark by Benjamin A. Wurgaft, *Thinking in Public. Strauss, Levinas, Arendt* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), pp. 263 f., according to whom Strauss’s “golden sentence” “owes a fundamental debt to Husserl’s phenomenology”, more particularly, to Husserl’s concept of “natural understanding of the world”, which, is explicitly dealt with in Leo Strauss, “Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy” (1971), in Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 29-37. On the difference between Strauss’s relations with Husserl and Heidegger, see Pierpaolo Ciccarelli, *Leo Strauss tra Husserl e Heidegger. Filosofia pratica e fenomenologia* (Pisa: ETS, 2018).

⁴ In this respect it should be noted that precisely this methodical need to avoid synthesis lies at the basis of the critique Strauss frequently addresses to the concept of synthesis when it is evoked in order to relieve the tension between Athens and Jerusalem, e.g. in the lecture *Reason and Revelation* (1948): “Tertium non datur. The alternative between philosophy and revelation cannot be evaded by any harmonization or ‘synthesis’. [...] In every attempt at harmonization, in every synthesis however impressive, one of the two opposed elements is sacrificed, more or less subtly, but in any event surely, to the other [...]” (Leo Strauss, “Reason and Revelation”, in H. Meier [ed.], *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], pp. 141-179 [149 f.]).

be learned from Schmitt in order to achieve that urgent task was therefore the principal intention of our notes.⁵

As many scholars have often remarked, this paragraph — and especially the expression “radical critique of liberalism” which appears within it — is of crucial importance in order to understand the intention underlying Strauss’s reading of Schmitt. I will return to this point below (see § 4). Now, instead, I want to draw attention to something that, if I am not mistaken, has gone unnoticed in the reception history of Strauss, namely, the self-interpretation contained in the first lines of this paragraph. In fact, Strauss refers here to what he himself said above in the fourteenth paragraph, i.e. at the end of the second of the three sections into which the text is divided (“*We said [par. 14 above] that Schmitt undertakes the critique of liberalism in a liberal world*” [my italics]), and points out how this statement has to be understood now, at the end of the text (“*we meant* therewith that his critique of liberalism is performed [*vollziehe sich*] in the horizon [*Horizon*] of liberalism” [my italics]). Now, it seems clear to me that Strauss is here reexamining the hermeneutic reasoning he has so far carried out on the *Begriff des Politischen* (and on Schmitt’s lecture *Das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und Entpolitisierungen* [1929]). By looking back in this way at what he himself had “said” roughly halfway through the text, Strauss realizes that his hermeneutic reasoning had after this point undergone what can be called — referring to an autobiographical statement he later made concerning the *Anmerkungen* — a “change of orientation”. I am taking this expression from a text that is well known to the scholarly readers of Strauss, the 1962 *Preface* to the American edition of his first book, *Spinozas Religionskritik als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft* (1930), in which Strauss remarks that a “change of orientation” “found its first expression, not entirely by accident”, in the *Anmerkungen*. It was a change that concerned the “premise, sanctioned by powerful prejudice”, on which the 1930 study on Spinoza “was based”, according to which “a return to pre-modern philosophy is impossible”.⁶

Scholars generally suppose that this remark means that the “orientation” guiding Strauss’s interpretation of Schmitt in the *Anmerkungen* had changed, i.e. was an *already* completely different “orientation” from the one that had guided his earlier interpretation of Spinoza. For my part, I think that Strauss’s statement that the change of orientation “found its first expression [...] in” the *Anmerkungen* needs to be taken more literally. That is to say, it does not mean, as is usually assumed,

⁵ Leo Strauss, “Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt, Der Begriff des Politischen” (1932), in Leo Strauss, *Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften – Briefe, Gesammelte Schriften III*, hrsg. von H. Meier (Stuttgart-Weimar: Metzler, 2001), pp. 217-238 (238); “Notes on Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political”, transl. by J. H. Lomax, in Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, pp. 97-122 (122, transl. slightly altered).

⁶ Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, tr. by E.M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 31.

that before writing the *Anmerkungen* Strauss had already performed the “change” of orientation”. On the contrary, it means that such a “change of orientation” or shift of perspective took place *in* the text, *during the course of* its development. More precisely, my hypothesis is the following: the change occurs at the point indicated by the self-interpretation Strauss gives at the end of the text: in the transition from the fourteenth paragraph to the following, that is, from the second to the third sections. In other words, my guiding hypothesis in the present study is that Strauss’s late remark on the “change of orientation” in the *Anmerkungen* suggests that something happened to him while he was writing the text, i.e. to his way of thinking or to what he had hitherto taken for granted, such as e.g. the *methodical* “premise, sanctioned by powerful prejudice, that a return to pre-modern philosophy is impossible”. It is — let us repeat — a *methodical* “change of orientation”. This means that it is *not* a change in *what* Strauss was interested in, but rather a change in *how* he was interested in it. In fact, the passage of the 1962 *Preface* continues as follows:

The change of orientation [...] compelled me to engage in a number of studies in the course of which I became ever more attentive to the *manner* in which heterodox thinkers of earlier ages wrote their books. As a consequence of this, I now read the *Theologico-political Treatise* differently than I read it when I was young. I understood Spinoza too literally because I did not read him literally enough.⁷

Thus, what changes as a “consequence” of the “change of orientation” is *not* the *subject* of the study, e.g. Spinoza, but the *manner* of studying him. The remark in the 1962 *Preface* thus concerns, to use the somewhat puzzling words in the title of Strauss’s late book on Plato’s *Nomoi*, “the argument and the action” of the *Anmerkungen*. If my hypothesis on the “change of orientation” is correct, one might ask why Strauss felt the need in 1962 to publish again precisely the *Anmerkungen* (“the only German essay he published in English”,⁸ as has been aptly underscored). More precisely, why did he wish to remember what the “argument and action” was of an essay in which he was still partly under the sway of a “powerful prejudice”? And, more generally, why publish a text that follows two different, even contradictory, “orientations”? I think that the reason lies in a need for self-criticism or self-examination which, according to Strauss’s Socratic stance, is inseparable from the practice of philosophy. In fact, in the first two sections of the *Anmerkungen* comes to light Strauss’s closeness to Schmitt, i.e. to one of those figures — as Strauss remarks in the 1941 lecture *German Nihilism* — “who knowingly or ignorantly paved the way for Hitler (Spengler, Moeller van der Bruck,

⁷ *Ibidem*, italics added.

⁸ Nasser Behnegar, “Carl Schmitt and Strauss’s Return to Premodern Philosophy”, in M.D. Yaffe, R.S. Ruderman (eds.), *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 115-129 (115).

Carl Schmitt, [...] Ernst Jünger, Heidegger)".⁹ The “change of orientation” that occurs during the *Anmerkungen* can therefore be regarded as a kind of ‘reenactment’ of Strauss’s own ‘exit from the cave’ of nihilism, i.e. of “radical historicism”.¹⁰ The “argument and action” of the *Anmerkungen* can be briefly illustrated as follows. Up to a certain point in the text — the fourteenth paragraph that, let us repeat, concludes the second of the three sections into which the *Anmerkungen* are divided — Strauss reads Schmitt’s work as “a critique of liberalism in a liberal world”. This means that, in the first fourteen paragraphs, Strauss’s inquiry proceeds in a ‘historicistic’ way. As a matter of fact, already at the beginning of the first paragraph, Strauss established a relationship of historical conditionality between the epochal *crisis* which the modern State was currently undergoing and Schmitt’s *criticism* of it: the current *Fragwürdigkeit* (“questionability” or “problematicity”) of the State, makes the *Frage* (“question” or “problem”) raised by Schmitt necessary.¹¹ It is therefore the historical present that gives sense to Schmitt’s thinking more than anything: “Schmitt’s basic thesis — as, in fact, we read in the third para-

⁹ Leo Strauss, “German Nihilism”, ed. by D. Janssens and D. Tanguay, *Interpretation*, XXVI/3 (1999): pp. 353-378 (362); but cf. also *ibidem*, p. 361, where Strauss situates Nietzsche at the head of a line ultimately leading to Hitler).

¹⁰ The deeply moral motivation of such a ‘reenactment’ is insightfully grasped by the following “hypothesis” that guides Robert Howse, *Leo Strauss. Man of Peace* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 13: “As the horrific drama of Nazism unfolded, Strauss became and never ceased to be profoundly troubled that he had been tempted by and even subscribed to an outlook that, at least indirectly in the case of Nietzsche himself and much more directly in the case of the political nihilists who followed in his path, contributed to the political movement that led to the destruction of European Jewry. He sought, through writing as he did, to show how his youthful temptation toward fascist thought was motivated by high-minded considerations, no matter how misguided, and to atone before God and the Jewish people, through providing a critique of the kind of thought represented by German nihilism, which would be persuasive to others who might be tempted by similar motives”.

¹¹ On Strauss’s manner of interpreting Schmitt before the “change of orientation”, i.e. in the first two sections of the text, see Pierpaolo Ciccarelli, “Hobbes schmittiano o Schmitt hobbesiano? Sul ‘cambio di orientamento’ nelle ‘Note a Carl Schmitt’ di Leo Strauss”, *Bollettino Telematico di Filosofia Politica*, 2017: pp. 1-16 (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1048232>). As I argued in more detail there, Strauss configures a relationship of historical conditionality between “critique” and “crisis”, when, in the first paragraph of the *Anmerkungen*, he establishes a close correlation between the ‘subjective’ *Frage* raised by Schmitt and the ‘objective’ *Fragwürdigkeit* proper to what the question refers to. In this regard, see the text at the beginning: “The treatise by Schmitt serves the question [*Frage*] of the ‘order of the human things’ (81; 96), that is, the question of the state. In view of the fact that in the present age the state has become more questionable [*fragwürdig*] than it has been for centuries or more (11; 22), understanding the state requires a radical foundation [...]” (Strauss, “*Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt*”, p. 217; English edition p. 99). On the *Kritik-Krise* ratio, see, of course, Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise: Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), as well as Carlo Galli, “Le forme della critica. Epoca, contingenza, emergenza”, *Filosofia politica*, 2016/3: pp. 395-418, and, more specifically on Schmitt, Carlo Galli, *Genealogia della politica. Carl Schmitt e la crisi del pensiero politico moderno* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), *passim*, who insightfully underlines its pivotal role in Schmitt’s thought. It seems however that, while he was reading the *Anmerkungen* (cf. therein pp. 780-785), Galli overlooked that it is precisely the *Kritik-Krise* ratio that is radically called into question in the third section of the text.

graph — is entirely dependent upon his polemic against liberalism; it is to be understood only *qua* polemical, only ‘in terms of concrete political existence’.¹² After the fourteenth paragraph, in the third and last section of the *Anmerkungen*, Strauss — as we have read above — describes the *Vollzug* (“performance” or “accomplishment”) of Schmitt’s criticism of liberalism as being itself “in the horizon of liberalism”.

How is this statement to be interpreted? In what way does this manner of interpreting Schmitt’s criticism of liberalism differ from the other way, the ‘historical’ one, that guides the first two sections of the text? I would here like to test the following working hypothesis. Drawing on the Husserlian metaphor of the “horizon”¹³ and, in the same context, the verb *sich vollziehen* (“to perform” or “to accomplish” — hence *Vollzug*, a technical term of Husserl’s “intentional analysis”), Strauss reveals the fundamentally phenomenological “orientation” of the third section of the *Anmerkungen*. Schmitt’s criticism of liberalism is regarded as an intentional phenomenon, i.e. investigated in an “immanent” way, by adhering exclusively to the “sense-attributions” (*Sinngebungen*) given to it by Schmitt himself. How such phenomenological hermeneutics (intended — as Strauss’s well known maxim prescribes — “to understand the author as he understood himself”) concretely operate, I will try to clarify below by analyzing some passages in the third section of the *Anmerkungen*. What I am going to say in the next sections of my article is therefore closely dependent on the hypothesis about the “change of orientation” I have just outlined. More precisely, between this hypothesis and the following textual analyses there is a kind of “hermeneutic circle”.

¹² Strauss, “Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt”, p. 218; English transl. p. 100.

¹³ The notion of “horizon” already occurs in the first volume of *Ideas*, a book Strauss had certainly read (cf. Leo Strauss, “Das Erkenntnisproblem in der philosophischen Lehre Fr. H. Jacobis”, in Leo Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz – Frühe Schriften, Gesammelte Schriften II*, hrsg. von H. Meier, zweite, durchgesehene und erweiterte Auflage [Stuttgart-Weimar: Metzler, 2013] pp. 237-292 [252]), in the context of the analysis of what Husserl calls the intentional *Grunderlebnis*, namely, the “perception of something in space” (*Dingwahrnehmung*). In *Ideen I* “horizon” means mainly the “margin” of the “perceptual field”, what remains in the “background” when the attention of the consciousness is turned to a specific thing or part of it (cf. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie* [1913], *Hua III/1* [Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976], pp. 59 f., 56 f., 71 f., 91-94; *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, transl. by F. Kersten [Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983], pp. 54 f., 51 f., 69 f., 94-98). However, concepts such as *Sinneshorizont*, *Horizontintentionalität* (“Horizon-Intentionality”), *Horizontbewusstsein* (“Horizon-consciousness”) take on a crucial meaning above all in the so-called “genetic phenomenology” developed by Husserl, e.g., in *Formale und transzendente Logik* (1929), *Méditations Cartésiennes* (1931) and in *Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften* (1934-1937), as well as in several university lecture courses. For an accurate historical-theoretical reconstruction, cf. Fausto Fraisopi, “Genèse et transcendantalisation du concept d’ ‘horizon’ chez Husserl”, *Phänomenologische Forschungen*, 2008: pp. 43-70.

Before moving on to the next sections, however, let us return to the thesis that, as I said at the beginning, is suggested by Strauss: namely that Schmitt, the theoretician *par excellence* of “the political”, is to be counted among the ‘unpolitical’ authors. More precisely, Strauss’s thesis actually is the following: Schmitt “poses the political”, or rather, makes it the object of a *Bejahung* (“affirmation” or “approval” — literally: “says yes” to “the political”), because of a need, or a “question”, which is not, in itself, of a political nature. It is instead a question of a “moral” nature. So, if, on the basis of Strauss’s interpretation, it is possible to speak of an ‘unpolitical’ Schmitt, this is to be understood in the sense that his theory of “the political” has a “moral” basis. It is a kind of *apolitia* whose essential feature is called by Strauss *das Moralische* (“the moral”). In order to elucidate Strauss’s quite startling interpretation of Schmitt, I will suggest below that the reader should attempt to accomplish the hermeneutic reasoning accomplished by Strauss again for him or herself. In the limited space of an article, however, I must limit myself only to a few segments of such hermeneutical reasoning. I will therefore refrain from analyzing the first two sections of the *Anmerkungen* (which I have studied elsewhere),¹⁴ and, in accordance with the theme I have chosen, I will try to explain below only: (§ 2) the reason why Strauss *denies* what seems most obvious, namely that Schmitt’s *Bejahung* (“affirmation” or “approval”) of “the political” is itself of a “political” character; (§ 3) what Strauss means, in this context, by “the moral”, which, in his opinion, is at the root of Schmitt’s conceptualization of “the political”; (§ 4) what the “intention” is of Strauss’s interpretation of Schmitt.

2. WHY SCHMITT’S “APPROVAL OF THE POLITICAL” CANNOT ITSELF BE POLITICAL

Let us turn to the third section of the *Anmerkungen*. At the beginning of the twenty-fourth paragraph, Strauss says the following:

[24] The political is threatened insofar as man’s dangerousness is threatened. Therefore, the approval [*Bejahung*] of the political is the approval of man’s dangerousness. How should this approval be understood? If it is to be intended *politically*, it can have “no normative meaning but only an existential meaning” (37; 49), like everything political.¹⁵

Strauss here calls into question the interpretative thesis that Schmitt’s treatise should be considered a “political” plaidoyer in favor of “the political”. Now, it

¹⁴ See my study cited above, footnote 11.

¹⁵ Strauss, “Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt”, p. 229; English edition p. 112, transl. slightly altered. The numbers in brackets in the passages taken from the *Anmerkungen* refer, the former, to the 1932 German edition, the latter, to the 2007 English translation of Schmitt’s text cited above, footnote 1.

must be noted that, at the beginning of the *Anmerkungen*, Strauss had made such an interpretation his own. In fact, in the second paragraph, Strauss had affirmed that the opening statement made by Schmitt in the *Begriff des Politischen* (“the concept of the State presupposes that of the political”)¹⁶ “must be understood in accordance with Schmitt’s own general principles of understanding”.¹⁷ This means that “the sentence ‘the political precedes the State’ can manifest the desire to express not an eternal truth but only a present truth”.¹⁸ It is therefore to be taken as an intrinsically political statement, since “all spirit — as is written in a page of the lecture on the *Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations* where Schmitt openly praises Benedetto Croce’s historicism — is only spirit of the present”.¹⁹ This historicist premise is at the basis of the well known thesis, advanced in the *Begriff des Politischen*, according to which “all political concepts, images, and terms have a polemical meaning, [...] are focused on a specific conflict and are bound to a concrete situation”.²⁰ But the same historicist premise is *also* at the basis of Strauss’s reading of Schmitt’s text during the first two sections of the *Anmerkungen*. Consequently, in the first two sections of the *Anmerkungen*, Strauss depicts Schmitt as an essentially political thinker. Up to this point in Strauss’s hermeneutic reasoning, there is certainly no trace of an “unpolitical” Schmitt.

In the following analysis of the twenty-fourth paragraph, we shall see that Strauss has changed his “orientation” since the early sections of the *Anmerkungen*: he is now preparing to radically criticize precisely the historicist premise that laid at the basis of his own interpretation of Schmitt as an essentially political thinker. Let us see how. In the paragraphs of the third section preceding the twenty-fourth, Strauss emphasizes the relationship that, in Schmitt’s reasoning, closely links the “concept of the political” to the pessimistic anthropology, which is characteristic of the *Schwarzdenker* in early modernity — in particular Machiavelli and Hobbes — according to whom man is an intrinsically “insidious”, “dangerous” being. It follows that Schmitt’s “position” or “approval” of “the political” is equivalent to the “position” or “approval” of “man’s dangerousness”. This explains the presence of the question we just encountered in the lines of the twenty-fourth paragraph concerning whether such a “saying yes to dangerousness” can be “understood politically”. This question will receive a negative answer in the following

¹⁶ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen, mit einer Rede über das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und Entpolitisierungen*, p. 7; English edition p. 19.

¹⁷ Strauss, “Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt”, p. 217; English edition p. 99.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen, mit einer Rede über das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und Entpolitisierungen*, p. 66; English edition p. 80: “That all historical knowledge is knowledge of the present, that such knowledge obtains its light and intensity from the present and in the most profound sense only serves the present, because all spirit is only spirit of the present, has been said by many since Hegel, best of all by Benedetto Croce”.

²⁰ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen, mit einer Rede über das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und Entpolitisierungen*, p. 18; English edition p. 30.

lines. This question will receive a negative answer in the following lines. Now, to adequately grasp the hermeneutical reasoning that Strauss is about to carry out, it is essential not to lose sight of its rigorously ‘immanent’ character. It is, in other words, an exercise in phenomenological reading, aimed at gaining an *Innenansicht*, namely, a “perspective from within” the text. Here already at work is one of the most characteristic principles of Strauss’s hermeneutics, according to which the author must be understood “just as he has understood himself”. This is proved by the fact that, in answering the question of whether or not the “approval of man’s dangerousness” is to be “understood *politically*,” Strauss strictly adheres to the meaning that Schmitt himself attributes to the adjective “political”. This meaning is obtained here from a distinction made in a passage of the fifth section of the *Begriff des Politischen*: namely, between “normative meaning” and “existential meaning”. Since the reference is somewhat elliptical, it is worth reading Schmitt’s passage in its entirety (for clarity, I have italicized the words explicitly mentioned by Strauss):

War, the readiness of combatants to die, the physical killing of human beings who belong on the side of the enemy — *all this has no normative meaning, but an existential meaning only*, and precisely in the reality of an effective conflict situation against an effective enemy, not in some sort of ideals, programs or normativity. There exists no rational purpose, no norm no matter how true, no program no matter how exemplary, no social ideal no matter how beautiful, no legitimacy nor legality which could justify men in killing each other for this reason. If such a physical destruction of human life does not happen for an existential affirmation [*aus der seinsmäßigen Behauptung*] of one’s own form of existence against an equally existential negation [*gegenüber einer ebenso seinsmäßigen Verneinung*] of this form, then it cannot be justified. Just as little can war be justified by ethical and juristic norms.²¹

This passage evidently belongs to the attack, which is infused throughout Schmitt’s treatise, against those who, as pacifists and utopians, attribute a primacy to the moral sphere over the political one. This controversy, as can be clearly seen by the passage above, presupposes an ‘existential-ontological’ conception of conflict. War is conceived by Schmitt as a ‘dialectic’ between *Behauptung* and *Verneinung* (“affirmation” and “negation”). This dialectic is conceived not merely in logical-intellectual terms, but in existential-ontological terms, as well. The properly existential-ontological character of Schmitt’s conception of war is clearly shown by the unusual expressions used in the passage above: the *raison d’être* of the “physical destruction of human life” is the contrast between *seinsmäßige Behauptung*, “existential affirmation”, and *seinsmäßige Verneinung*, “existential negation”, of “forms of existence”. Conflict, since it is conceived in compliance with an existen-

²¹ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, mit einer Rede über das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und Entpolitisierungen, p. 37; English edition pp. 48 f., transl. slightly altered.

tial-ontological criterion, namely as identical with the “existence” itself of the beligerents, appears unjustifiable on the basis of an *ought*, or of some sort of ideal, be it ethical, or religious, juridical, aesthetic, social (or even ‘political’, if the word is used in a non-Schmittian meaning). In more simple terms, then, Schmitt’s reproach to the supporters of the primacy of morality is that they argue abstractly, too far removed from Machiavelli’s *verità effettuale della cosa*. By appealing to “ideals”, “programs”, “normativity” of all kinds, they pass over in silence the harsh reality of political things, which are instead made of “effective conflict situations against an effective enemy”.

Let us return to the above quoted passage from the twenty-fourth paragraph of Strauss’s text. We can now clearly understand the distinction between “normative” and “existential” to which Strauss refers when he states that, “if it is to be understood *politically*”, then Schmitt’s *Bejahung* of man’s dangerousness “can have ‘no normative meaning but only an existential meaning, like everything political’”. In other words, Strauss is saying that if Schmitt’s own “saying yes to the political” is to have a political character, then, according to the ‘existential-ontological’ meaning that *Schmitt himself* gives to such an expression, it must itself be *seinsmäßig*; that is, equivalent to an “existential affirmation”, and not to the wish for an *ought*. At this point, Strauss raises a question which he answers — strangely enough — by referring to a classical source. In fact, paragraph twenty-four continues as follows:

One then will have to ask: in a dangerous situation, in the “dire emergency” [*im Ernstfall*], does “a fighting totality of men” approve [*bejaht*] the dangerousness of its enemy? Does it *wish for* dangerous enemies? And one will have to answer “no!”, along the lines of C. Fabricius’s exclamation when he heard that a Greek philosopher had proclaimed pleasure as the greatest good: “If only Pyrrhus and the Samnites shared this philosopher’s opinion as long as we are at war with them!”²²

At first reading, the passage is rather puzzling. Indeed, one does not immediately understand why Strauss is led here to ask: “Does ‘a fighting totality of men’ in a dangerous situation, *im Ernstfall*, approve the dangerousness of its enemy? Does it *wish for* dangerous enemies?”? Even less understandable, *prima facie*, is why Strauss draws on a classical source to reply negatively to the question he has just raised. In Plutarch’s *Vitae parallae*, it is narrated that the future Roman consul Gaius Fabricius, head of a legation sent to Pyrrhus, upon being told how the philosophical doctrine of Epicurus is hostile to any political and religious occupation and dedicated only to the *voluptas* (Plut., *Pyrrh.* 20.3), burst forth in the exclamation Strauss quotes literally: ὦ Ηράκλεις, Πύρρῳ τὰ δόγματα μέλοι ταῦτα καὶ Σαννίταις, ἕως πολεμοῦσι πρὸς ἡμᾶς (Plut., *Pyrrh.* 20.4). Now, both Strauss’s question and his unusual way of answering can be explained only by virtue of the phenomenological “orientation” of Strauss’s way of reading. To become aware of this, we must

²² Strauss, “Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt”, p. 229; English edition p. 112.

first consider the question he raises, or more precisely, what the question highlights. By asking what “a fighting totality of men, *im Ernstfall*, approve[s]”, or what it “wish[es] for”, Strauss draws attention to a basic feature of “conflict”, and hence of “the political” itself, which the intransigent realism that Schmitt polemically opposes against all sorts of “ideals, programs or normativity” risks overlooking. This is the *teleological* feature which, since it pertains to the very nature of human action as such, must also therefore necessarily pertain to the “effective conflict situation against an effective enemy”. This situation, even if it does not have its “reality” in some sort of “ideals, programs or normativity”, cannot but be oriented towards the purpose to which the belligerents engaged in it aspire. The fact that, *im Ernstfall*, “in the dire emergency”, the purpose is reduced to the pure and simple desire to preserve life or — according to one of Hobbes’ formulations which Strauss considers to be extremely important — “to avoid *violent death as supreme evil* by nature”,²³ does not change in any way the fact that the desired, hoped for goal ‘transcends’ or ‘exceeds’, as it were, the immediate “reality” of a “conflict situation”. Putting it in phenomenological terms: to “a fighting totality of men” belongs a specific type of “intentional correlation” or “transcendence” which Strauss is attempting here to bring out so as to be able to establish whether or not the “approval of dangerousness” can fall within it. This means that Strauss is here contemplating the “effective conflict situation against an effective enemy” exclusively as an essential situation or — to put it in Husserl’s terminology — an “eidetic state-of-affairs” (*eidetischer Sachverhalt*). Strauss wants to find out whether dangerousness can constitute, *in principle or by nature*, the purpose of “a fighting totality of men”. By raising this question, Strauss indicates that the interpretative hypothesis, according to which the basic motivation of Schmitt’s treatise is a “political” one, has to be discussed on a plane that is not empirical or factual, but rigorously essential or “eidetic”.

Let us now examine the unusual argument put forward by Strauss to reject this interpretative hypothesis. Contrary to what the mention of a classical source might suggest, the argument is not of a rhetorical nature. The argument with which Strauss responds to the “eidetic” question he just raised itself has an “eidetic” character. The classical *exemplum* seems here to perform a function similar to that performed by the examples in Husserl’s procedure of “eidetic variation”.²⁴

²³ See, in Leo Strauss, “Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft in ihrer Genesis”, in Strauss, *Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften - Briefe*, pp. 3-192 (pp. 21 ff.); *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes. Its Basis and its Genesis*, transl. by Elsa M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 8 ff., the analysis of the “two most certain postulates of human nature” established in the *Epistula dedicatoria* at the beginning of Hobbes’s *De cive*, namely: “*quisque rerum communium usum postulat sibi proprium*” and “*quisque mortem violentam tanquam summum naturae malum studet evitare*” (*ibidem*, p. 28; English edition p. 15, italics added by Strauss [but only in the German edition]).

²⁴ Compare e.g. Edmund Husserl, *Formale und transzendente Logik. Versuch einer Kritik der logischen Vernunft* (1929), Hua XVII (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), § 98.

That is, it is a fictitious starting point to arrive at a grasp of the intentional outline of the specific “reality” in its purely essential features: in this case, that reality is the *Ernstfall*, the “effective conflict situation against an effective enemy” in which, according to Schmitt, “the political” consists. It is useful to bear in mind the characteristics of the figure of Fabricius in the episode narrated by Plutarch. He is an emblematic example of a man of action and, more particularly, of a good warrior. This explains, but only in part, why Strauss evokes him in this context. The features he displays in Plutarch’s tale are the typical moral qualities of a soldier, such as incorruptibility and *sang froid* under pressure. Indeed, on the very first day after his arrival among his enemies he resists Pyrrhus’ attempt to bribe him with an offer of money as a sign of friendship (Plut., *Pyrrh.* 20.2). The next day, Fabricius remains unmoved in the face of the extraordinary weapon of war in his enemy’s arsenal: an elephant, an animal unknown to Fabricius, which suddenly, while trumpeting frightfully, raised its trunk and waved it over his head. He “calmly turned and said to Pyrrhus with a smile: ‘Your gold made no impression on me yesterday, neither does your beast today’” (Plut., *Pyrrh.* 20.3). But the most significant circumstance of the episode narrated in Plutarch’s work, which, not by chance, is also the one explicitly mentioned by Strauss, is the moment in which the upright Roman soldier is informed about Greek philosophy and, more particularly, about Epicurean doctrines. In this regard, what is of note is the striking contrast between Fabricius’s astonished reaction to hearing about philosophy and his imperturbable stance in the face of a gigantic and frightening animal he had never seen before. This implies that he is not only an emblem of the soldier’s moral qualities, but also of a purely pre-philosophical point of view. By portraying him as someone who is so unaware of philosophy as to be astonished just to hear about it, Plutarch makes him an example of a “natural” or “naive” attitude, i.e. of a stance utterly untouched by theory as such. This is precisely the reason why Strauss here evokes this classical source. It explains, more precisely, why Strauss emphasizes the importance of Fabricius’s exclamation so much that he even chooses it as a suitable criterion of judgment to exclude the possibility that the “approval of the dangerousness” can have a “political” sense. In this regard, we must not overlook the affinity between the pre-philosophical point of view of which Fabricius is emblematic, and the point of view that Schmitt takes by criticizing those who, speaking of political things, conceal his bitter reality, bringing it back to “ideality”, “programs” and “normativity”. In fact, there is no doubt that, when criticizing those who present politics as an abstract *ought*, Schmitt wants to give voice to an “existential” concreteness, hence to a “naïve” point of view, i.e. to what at the end of the lecture on *The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations* he calls *integres Wissen* (“intact knowledge”).²⁵

²⁵ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, mit einer Rede über das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und Entpolitisierungen, p. 81; English edition p. 96, transl. altered. Hasso Hofmann, *Legitimität ge-*

At this point, it has certainly become more understandable why in the twenty-fourth paragraph of the *Anmerkungen* Strauss refers to the classical *exemplum* provided by Fabricius and gives it so much argumentative importance. It is — let us repeat it — a *phenomenological* reason: Fabricius’s exclamation gives expression to a kind of political realism which, being “natural” and “naïve”, is even more reliable, because closer to the “things themselves”, less compromised by theoretical “constructs”, than the “learned” and “shrewd” realism openly professed by Schmitt in his polemic against political idealism. Put in more general terms, which also allow us to grasp the overall purpose of Strauss’s return to pre-modern philosophy:²⁶ classical *exempla* provide us who live in late modernity (or post-modernity) with a phenomenal basis that is suitable for serving as a criterion for judging the alleged “naturalness” of what, from modern philosophy onwards, has been repeatedly presented — though each time with different names — as “natural” (i.e., as “physical”, “effective”, “material”, “concrete”, “immediate”, “individual”, “existential”, “intact”, “bodily” etc.). The reference to the classical *exemplum*, and to the “naïve” or “pre-philosophical” perspective of which it is an emblem, allows us to understand something else. It suggests, albeit only *ex contrario*, that the ultimate sense of Schmitt’s *Bejahung* of “the political” is to be found precisely in that *philosophical attitude*, essentially unpolitical and irreligious, which is alien to Plutarch’s personage, i.e. to a genuine political realism. Strauss arrives at this rather unexpected conclusion in paragraphs 27 and 28. Let us examine them briefly.

3. THE ANALOGY BETWEEN SCHMITT’S “POLITICAL” AND THE SOCRATIC WAY OF LIFE

Let us read the conclusion of paragraph twenty-seven of the *Anmerkungen*:

It thus becomes clear why Schmitt rejects the ideal of pacifism (more fundamentally: of civilization), why he approves [*bejahd*] the political: he approves the political

gen Legalität. Der Weg der politischen Philosophie Carl Schmitts (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1992), pp. 85 ff., appropriately characterizes Schmitt’s thought expounded in the writings from the decade 1923-1933 as “politischer Existentialismus”.

²⁶ On the importance of “the information that classical philosophy supplies about its origins”, in order “to grasp the natural world as a world that is radically prescientific or prephilosophic”, see Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 79 f. On Strauss’s critique of the modern claim to “naturalness”, see the footnote 2 to the *Einleitung* of *Philosophie und Gesetz* (s. Leo Strauss, “Philosophie und Gesetz. Beiträge zum Verständnis Maimunis und seiner Vorläufer”, in Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz - Frühe Schriften*, pp. 3-123 [13 f.]; *Philosophy and Law. Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and his Predecessors*, transl. by E. Adler [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995], pp. 135 f.) See also Leo Strauss, “Die Geistige Lage der Gegenwart” (1932), in Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz - Frühe Schriften*, pp. 441-464 (454 ff.); “The Intellectual Situation of the Present”, transl. by A. Schmidt and M.D. Yaffe, in Yaffe, Ruderman (eds.), *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, pp. 236-253 (247 ff.).

because he sees in the threatened status of the political a threat to the seriousness of human life. *The approval [Bejahung] of the political is ultimately nothing other than the approval of the moral.*²⁷

The conclusion of the following paragraph is no different, but it also contains a further explanation of crucial importance in order to understand the meaning which Strauss attributes here to the adjective-noun *das Moralische*, “the moral”. After having analyzed Schmitt’s criticism of the alleged neutrality of technology (“technology — as we can read in a passage from the lecture on *The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations* — is always only an instrument and weapon; precisely because it serves all, it is not neutral”)²⁸ Strauss again speaks about morality in the following way:

The speciousness of this neutrality reveals the absurdity of the attempt to find an “absolutely and definitively neutral ground,” to reach agreement at all costs. Agreement at all costs is possible only as agreement at the cost of the meaning [*Sinn*] of human life; for agreement at all costs is possible only if man has relinquished asking the question of what is right; and if man relinquishes that question, he relinquishes being a man. But if he seriously asks the question of what is right, the quarrel will be ignited (in view of “the inextricable problems” [76; 91] this question entails), the life-and-death quarrel: the political — the grouping of humanity into friends and enemies — owes its legitimizing basis [*Rechtsgrund*] to the seriousness of the question of what is right.²⁹

In reading this final passage of the twenty-eighth paragraph, one detects a sort of Socratic-Platonic ‘atmosphere’. Indeed, without expressly mentioning it, Strauss evokes here the very famous passage in the *Apology* in which Socrates states that, since “the greatest good to man is to talk every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking and examining myself and others”, ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπων, “for a human being the unexamined life is not worth living” (Plat., *Apol.* 38a). It thus becomes clear, what Strauss properly means by the expression “the moral” when, at the aforementioned end of the twenty-seventh paragraph, he states: “*The approval [Bejahung] of the political is ultimately nothing other than the approval of the moral*”. *Das Moralische*: with this adjective-noun he is referring, not to a given conception of virtue or to a particular ethical code,³⁰ but to the “philosophical-moral question”, to the ‘zetetic’ vo-

²⁷ Strauss, “Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt”, p. 233; English edition p. 116; transl. slightly altered, italics added.

²⁸ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen, mit einer Rede über das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und Entpolitisierungen*, p. 77; English edition p. 91.

²⁹ Strauss, “Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt”, pp. 234 f.; English edition p. 118.

³⁰ That by the expression “das Moralische” Strauss does not mean a specific moral view, is confirmed by the fact that previously in the text he formulates, discusses and finally excludes the hypothesis that the legitimizing basis of Schmitt’s “approval of the political” could be the “warlike morals” (cf. footnote 37 below).

cation proper to the philosophical life emblemized by Socrates. That is, by “the moral” Strauss refers to a human life lived in the name of examination — which is always necessarily self-examination — of the given ethical code, i.e. of the shared way of life. For Strauss, therefore, the *Rechtsgrund* (“legitimizing basis”) of “the political” as it is conceived by Schmitt is none other than philosophy or, more precisely, *philosophy as a way of life*.³¹ We will return shortly to the meaning of this strange expression, *Rechtsgrund*, (“legitimizing basis”). Now, instead, let us pause to reflect on the important theme that emerges in Strauss’s youthful “radiography” of Schmitt’s text. It is the theme upon which Strauss himself would subsequently never cease to reflect: a life, like that of those who practice philosophy — namely of those who are dedicated to the “question on the order of human things” — is bound to have a “political” character in the specific conflictual sense that Schmitt gives to this expression. Philosophical questioning is by its very nature conflictual, antagonistic (or, to use a term current in today’s journalistic jargon, “divisive”, “causing disagreement”). In the middle of the paragraph I am analyzing, Strauss traces this ‘polemogenic’ character which is inherent in every philosophical investigation, back to Platonic sources. This time, however, Strauss mentions them expressly in brackets making the Platonic-Socratic ‘atmosphere’ permeating the entire paragraph almost palpable:

In principle, however, it is always possible to reach agreement regarding the means to an end that is already fixed, whereas there is always quarreling over the ends themselves: we are always quarreling with each other and with ourselves only over the just and the good (Plato, *Euthyphro* 7b-d and *Phaedrus* 263a).³²

³¹ I cannot therefore entirely agree with the reading of the Anmerkungen — albeit in many respects very insightful — by Meier, Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: *The Hidden Dialogue*, passim, who, interpreting Schmitt as a political theologian, maintains that Strauss wanted to oppose to him his own point of view as a Platonic political philosopher. As I will show below (§ 4), Strauss regards Schmitt’s thought as an emblematic example of what he elsewhere calls the “counter-movement” proper to modernity, which began with “Jean Jacques Rousseau’s passionate and still unforgettable protest” (Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” [1954-1959], in Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959], pp. 9-55 [50]). It is a “counter-movement” which, despite its intention to return “from the world of modernity to pre-modern ways of thinking”, actually “led, consciously or unconsciously, to a much more radical form of modernity — to a form of modernity which was still more alien to classical thought than the thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had been (ibid.). I therefore agree with the following shrewd remark by Behnegar, “Carl Schmitt and Strauss’s Return to Premodern Philosophy”, p. 116: “When one frames the encounter between Schmitt and Strauss as that between a political theologian and a political philosopher, the theme of the critique of modernity is apt to disappear, and so it does in Meier’s reading”.

³² Strauss, “Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt”, p. 234; English edition pp. 117 f. Regarding the paragraph 28 of the Anmerkungen, it should be analyzed the important remarks in a letter dated August 19th, 1932 in response to the “misgivings” raised by Krüger concerning Strauss’s reference to Plato (cf. Leo Strauss, Gerhard Krüger, “Korrespondenz Leo Strauss – Gerhard Krüger” [1928-1962], in Strauss, *Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften – Briefe*, pp. 377-454 [399]; Susan M. Shell [ed.], *The Strauss-Krüger Correspondence. Returning to Plato through Kant*,

Let us take a brief look at these Platonic references. In both places cited, Socrates draws the attention of his interlocutor to something that is said to be “to all people manifest” (παντί δῆλον): namely that, with regard to some things, we behave “in a concordant way” (ὁμονοητικῶς), while, with regard to others, “in a conflictual way” (στασιωτικῶς: Plat., *Phaedrus* 263a). With regard to the latter — i.e. to the “controversial things” (ἀμφισβητήσιμα) — Socrates makes an important remark in the cited passage of *Euthyphro*. Not everything that “produces διαφορά” (Plat., *Euthyphr.* 7b) — in the specific meaning, here, of “divergence of opinion”, “dissent” — is of the same nature. Some disagreements, for example those concerning “number”, “size”, “weight”, do not make “enemies” (ἐχθροί) those who disagree, nor do they lead them “to become angry with each other” (ὀργίζεσθαι ἀλλήλοις: *ibid.*). Actually, in such cases it is always possible to reach “quickly” (ταχύ: Plat., *Euthyphr.* 7c) an agreement, by calculating, measuring or weighing what one disagrees about. A widely trusted practical knowledge comes to the rescue here (the so-called λογιστική τέχνη). It is such knowledge that, by allowing dissent to be resolved, prevents the danger that disagreements will lead to “enmity and ire” (ἐχθρα καὶ ὀργάς: Plat., *Euthyphr.* 7b). This is what Strauss calls in the passage mentioned above “the means to an end that is already fixed”, about which “it is always possible to reach agreement”. Socrates, however, also points to another kind of “controversial thing”. Strauss alludes to it, evidently, by talking, in the same passage, about “the ends themselves” over which “we are always quarreling”. It is the dissent concerning “the right and the wrong, and noble and disgraceful, and good and bad” (τό τε δίκαιον καὶ τὸ ἄδικον καὶ καλὸν καὶ αἰσχρὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν καὶ κακόν: Plat., *Euthyphr.* 7d). These are the cases in which, since there is no shared and thus politically effective knowledge that allows us to achieve an “competent judgment” (ικανὴ κρίσις: *ibid.*), we become each other’s enemies; that is, “we disagree with each other and — as Socrates adds in the passage of the *Phaedrus* recalled by Strauss — even with ourselves” (ἀμφισβητοῦμεν ἀλλήλοις τε καὶ ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς: Plat., *Phaedrus* 263a).

We cannot help but ask ourselves why Strauss brings up these Platonic sources here. It doesn’t look like he wants to indicate classical texts that would have exerted a more or less conscious influence on Schmitt’s texts. Nor does he seem to want to limit himself to evoking, in what is a distinctly modern and contemporary cultural setting, the ancient voice of a classic he loves and therefore perceives as akin to his “own voice”.³³ The rapprochement between Schmitt and Plato in these

transl. by J. Veith, A. Schmidt, and S. M. Shell [Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018], p. 33). The importance of this letter is stressed, although from a different perspective than mine, by Aberto Ghibellini, “Leo Strauss, Carl Schmitt and the Search for the ‘Order of Human Things’”, *History of Political Thought*, XL/1 (2019): pp. 138-157 (153 f.).

³³ David Janssens, “A Change of Orientation: Leo Strauss’s ‘Comments’ on Carl Schmitt Revisited”, *Interpretation*, XXXIII/1 (2005): pp. 93-103 (98), maintains that here Strauss lets a voice resound that is “unmistakably his own”.

pages of the *Anmerkungen* suggests something much more precise and, it must be admitted, quite surprising. Actually, Strauss suggests an analogy between “the political”, as Schmitt understood it, and what in the present context he calls “the moral”: an analogy, more precisely, between what Schmitt elevates to the role of “criterion of the political”, i.e. the “opposition” friend/enemy, and the conflictual situation described by Socrates which inevitably befalls those who, like himself, raise such insidious questions concerning what is good or what is right. We might say, in recalling another celebrated passage from Plato, that the skeletal frame of Schmitt’s *Begriff des Politischen* as revealed by Strauss’s X-ray scan is none other than the tragic experience of the protagonist of the myth of the cave. I am referring especially to the final moment of the story, when the prisoner freed from the chains returns to the cave after learning the truth of the noetic world and falls victim to the deadly hostility of those still living in thrall to the doxastical illusion (cf. Plat., *Rep.* 7.516a-517e). Therefore, it is in this experience, in whose narration Plato emblemized the execution of his own master, that “the political — as we have read in the last lines of the twenty-eighth paragraph of Strauss’s text — has its own legitimizing basis [*Rechtsgrund*]”.³⁴ But what does Strauss mean by the expression *Rechtsgrund* (“legitimizing basis”)? The term, as has been correctly observed,³⁵ is used mainly in the legal sense: actually, *Rechtsgrund* translates *iusta causa*, a technical term in Roman private law.³⁶ It may well be that Strauss used it for rhetorical purposes, namely, that he considered it particularly appropriate to draw the attention of a lawyer like Schmitt. However, it is clear that both in the twenty-eighth and twenty-fourth paragraphs³⁷ — where it also occurs — *Rechtsgrund* is used in a wider, not strictly juridical sense. Just as obvious is that Strauss’s reading of Schmitt’s text is anything but a lawyer’s reading. It is thoroughly philosophical, guided by a specific hermeneutical “orientation”.

³⁴ Strauss, “Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt”, p. 235; English edition p. 118.

³⁵ By Janssens, “A Change of Orientation: Leo Strauss’s ‘Comments’ on Carl Schmitt Revisited”, p. 98, who seems, however, to assume that Strauss uses this term only for a rhetorical reason (“expression with particular resonance for an eminent legal scholar like Schmitt”).

³⁶ For a discussion of the philosophical background of this legal concept, cf. Okko Behrends, “Iusta Causa Traditionis”. La trasmissione della proprietà secondo il ‘ius gentium’ del diritto classico, in Okko Behrends, *Scritti “italiani”*, ed. by C. Cascione (Napoli: Jovene, 2009), pp. 27-78.

³⁷ See Strauss, “Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt”, pp. 229 f.; English edition pp. 112 f., transl. slightly altered, italics added: “Thus warlike morals seem to be the ultimate legitimizing basis [*Rechtsgrund*] for Schmitt’s approval [*Bejahung*] of the political, and the opposition between the negation and the position of the political seems to coincide with the opposition between pacifist internationalism and bellicose nationalism”. Regarding this passage, it is important to note that here Strauss is only making a conjecture about the sense of Schmitt’s “approval of the political”. This conjecture will be rejected later in the text. In fact, as will become clear in the following paragraphs, the “legitimizing basis” of Schmitt’s *Bejahung* of the political is not a “kriegerische Moral” as it would still “seem” to be in this paragraph. Consequently, Schmitt’s nationalist and bellicose opinions are not sufficient, as here is hypothesized, to explain why he “approves the political”.

In order to grasp the specific meaning of the term *Rechtsgrund* in this context, we need to carefully discern the phenomenological character of the hermeneutic reasoning Strauss develops in the third section of his text. As in the case referred to above of the term *Horizont* used in the thirty-fifth paragraph, it is very likely that Strauss took over the concept *Rechtsgrund* from Husserl. By using it, Strauss conveys the exact aim of his interpretation of the *Begriff des Politischen*: to lay open the experience that grounds or justifies the “claim” inherent in Schmitt’s “approval of the political”. This is a phenomenological issue *par excellence*. In this regard, it is sufficient to refer to the first definition of the *Principle of All Principles* in § 24 of Husserl’s *Ideen I*: “every originary presentative intuition is a legitimizing source [Rechtsquelle] of cognition”.³⁸ One may also refer to § 136 of the same work, which describes the connection between the “position” (*Setzung*) of an object in a judgment and the “originally presentative seeing” (originär gebendes Sehen) by virtue of which a thing can appear “in person” (*leibhaft*).³⁹ Here Husserl uses the same legal expression employed by Strauss: “the position has its original legitimizing basis [ursprünglichen Rechtsgrund] in originary givenness”.⁴⁰

Let us review the results of my reading of the *Anmerkungen* up to this point. According to the phenomenological analysis accomplished by Strauss in the twenty-fourth paragraph, Schmitt can be considered an ‘unpolitical’ author. More precisely: he appears ‘unpolitical’ if the antonym of the adjective ‘unpolitical’ — that is, ‘political’ — is understood in the strictly “existential” and “non-normative meaning” that Schmitt himself gives to this expression. As the classical *exemplum* provided by Plutarch shows, “to say yes to the political” cannot be an “existential affirmation” (*seinsmäßige Behauptung*) of one’s form of existence against a corresponding “existential negation” (*seinsmäßige Verneinung*) of this form. Indeed, if that were the case, the “approval of the political” would be an absurdity — just like the real soldier, Fabricius, who, instead of hoping for a harmless enemy, desires a dangerous one, namely one who is capable of killing him (see above § 2). In this way, however, the question “why does Schmitt say yes to the political?” has not yet been answered. In the twenty-fourth paragraph Strauss reaches only a provisional result. Actually, the answer to the question comes only in paragraphs 27 and 28: the “legitimizing basis” (or “original experience”) that gives sense to Schmitt’s “approval of the political” is “the moral”, namely, the philosophical inquiry into jus-

³⁸ “[J]ede originär gebende Anschauung [ist] eine Rechtsquelle der Erkenntnis” (Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, p. 51; English edition p. 44, italics of Husserl).

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 314 ff.; English edition pp. 326 ff.

⁴⁰ “[D]ie Setzung hat in der originären Gegebenheit ihren ursprünglichen Rechtsgrund” (*ibidem*, p. 316; English edition p. 328, italics of Husserl). The meaning of the word *Rechtsgrund* is obviously linked to that of “primordial experiences [ursprüngliche Erfahrungen] in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being” (Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 22; English edition p. 44), which Heidegger’s *Destruktion* aims to lay bare.

tice. In brief: Schmitt's fundamental attitude is not that of Plutarch's Fabricius (par. 24), but that of Plato's Socrates (par. 28).

Consequently, Schmitt's *apolitia* appears now (in paragraph 28) in a different light from the one in which it appeared before (in paragraph 24). By uncovering the philosophical disposition that motivates the "approval of the political," Strauss suggests Schmitt's "trans-political" (as well as "trans-moral" and "trans-religious") intention, which, as Strauss will state later, characterizes philosophy as such.⁴¹ At the same time, however, the analogy between Schmitt's "political" and the Socratic way of life outlined in paragraph 28 suggests something else. It suggests — to use words Strauss uses in an another later writing — that "philosophy, being an attempt to rise from opinion to science, is necessarily related to the sphere of opinion as its essential starting point, and hence to the political sphere".⁴² The paradoxical *apolitia* of the most passionate supporter of "the political" can therefore be read as an argument in favor of what Strauss calls "political philosophy". Stated in Husserlian fashion: in the *Anmerkungen*, Strauss accomplishes a "backwards reflection" (*Rückbesinnung*) on the "original motivation" (*Ursprungsmotivation*) of Schmitt's "approval of the political", in order to "reactivate" the political philosophy.⁴³

4. THE INTENTION OF STRAUSS'S "RADICAL CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM": THE "REACTIVATION" OF THE "POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY"

The Husserlian "orientation", which — as I believe I have sufficiently shown — guides the hermeneutic reasoning in the third section of the *Anmerkungen*, gives me the opportunity for a further concluding remark. Among the many things contained in this short essay by Strauss, one in particular has drawn the attention of some readers who are particularly interested in highlighting the text's political overtones. I am once again referring to the last paragraph I quoted in full at the beginning (§ 1). As we have read there, Strauss argues that Schmitt has only "in-

⁴¹ Leo Strauss, Jacob Klein, *A Giving of Accounts* (1970), in K.H. Green (ed.), *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) pp. 457-466 (463).

⁴² Leo Strauss, "On Classical Political Philosophy" (1945), in Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*, pp. 78-94 (92).

⁴³ *Rückbesinnung*, *Ursprungsmotivation* and *Reaktivierung* are technical terms in Husserl's genetic phenomenology (cf., respectively: Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, ed. W. Biemel, *Husserliana VI* [The Hague: Nijhoff, 1954], p. 16; *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology. An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. by David Carr [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970], p. 17; *ibidem*, p. 58; English edition p. 57; *ibidem*, p. 376; English edition p. 367).

roduced” a “critique against liberalism”. Having been “restrained by the still unvanquished ‘systematics of liberal thought’”, he was unable to “complete” such a critique.⁴⁴ In Strauss’s opinion, therefore, Schmitt’s critique is not critical enough. More precisely, it is not a “*radical* critique of liberalism”.⁴⁵

Some interpreters have identified in this statement a clear and unequivocal sign of Strauss’s deeply anti-liberal and ultra-conservative political convictions, that is, his intention to place himself ‘to the right’ of Schmitt.⁴⁶ In other words, according to these interpreters, in 1932 Strauss judged Schmitt’s political hostility to liberal institutions — which his swift adherence to Nazism shortly thereafter made completely manifest — as being still too weak. The intention that motivated Strauss to write the *Anmerkungen* may therefore have been, in their view, to encourage the *coup de grace* to the already tottering institutions of the *Weimarer Republik*. In short, to express it in terms of the famous, or infamous chiasm by Marx in *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*: Strauss, by calling for a “radical critique of liberalism”, was suggesting ‘between the lines’ to Schmitt to decide to turn the “weapons of critique” into the “critique of weapons”.⁴⁷

The subject has aroused special interest, of course, because of the well-known controversy about the alleged influence Strauss’s teaching had on “American imperialism”. This is too vague and generic a subject to be properly addressed here. However, the text of the *Anmerkungen* presents the careful reader with a problem of interpretation that concerns this topic. We are referring to the question of whether Strauss intended, by the expression “radical critique of liberalism,” to en-

⁴⁴ Strauss, “Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt”, p. 238; English edition p.122.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, italics added.

⁴⁶ Among the several scholars who support this thesis, see for example Stephen Holmes, *Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge [MA]: Harvard University Press, 1993); John P. McCormick, *Carl Schmitt’s Critique of Liberalism. Against Politics as Technology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 258 ff.; William H.F. Altman, *The German Stranger. Leo Strauss and National Socialism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), pp. 195 ff.; Andreas Kellner, *Politik im Posthistoire: Die politische Philosophie von Leo Strauss* (Spiegelberg: beingoo Wissenschaft, 2016). Elsewhere (s. Pierpaolo Ciccarelli, “Politische Philosophie versus Geschichtsphilosophie. Leo Strauss’s Interpretation von Husserls Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft”, *Jahrbuch Politisches Denken* 2016, XXVI [2017]: pp. 136-155 [135-141]) I argued against the interpretation that Strauss belongs to the so-called “conservative revolution”. An insightful historical-critical analysis of the “legend” of the influence of Schmitt and Strauss on American conservatism may be found in Andrea Mossa, *Il nemico ritrovato. Carl Schmitt e gli Stati Uniti* (Torino: Accademia University Press, 2017), pp. 228 ff.

⁴⁷ Although I cannot go into detail on this point here, a careful reading of paragraphs 32-33 of the *Anmerkungen* reveals that the very opposite is true. In fact, Strauss makes a point there of drawing on expressions taken from military jargon such as “Begleitaktion”, “Vorbereitungsaktion”, “das Feld freimachen” and “Entscheidungskampf” (cf. Strauss, “Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt”, p. 237; English edition p. 121). Far from urging Schmitt to a decision, Strauss shows that the decision to take action, especially *armed* action, is precisely the conclusion that one is finally forced to draw after one has approved “the political by abstracting from the moral” (*ibidem*, p. 236; English edition p. 120, transl. slightly altered), i.e. from philosophy.

visage a *practical-political* task, as the interpretation mentioned above seems to take for granted. If the analysis of the text we have carried out thus far is correct, it is clear that this cannot be the case. This cannot be the case, first of all, for a reason that should be immediately obvious to anyone who carefully reads the entire text in which the expression “radical critique of liberalism” occurs. Let us turn once again to the crucial final paragraph of the *Anmerkungen*:

The critique introduced by Schmitt against liberalism can therefore be completed only if one succeeds in gaining a horizon beyond liberalism. In such a horizon Hobbes performed the foundation of liberalism. A radical critique of liberalism is thus possible only on the basis of an adequate understanding of Hobbes. To show what can be learned from Schmitt in order to achieve that urgent task was therefore the principal intention of our notes.⁴⁸

What, properly speaking, is the “urgent task” Strauss outlines here? The text leaves no doubt that it is not a practical-political task. It is rather a *hermeneutic* task: to achieve an “adequate understanding” of Hobbes. Indeed, as we have just noted, it is only “on the basis” of such an “understanding” that it becomes “possible” to “complete” the “critique of liberalism introduced by Schmitt”, namely, to perform a “radical” critique of liberalism. In order to properly grasp what Strauss means here by the expression “radical critique”, it is necessary to first clarify what he means by “adequate understanding”.

According to what we have just read, for an understanding of Hobbes to be “adequate”, it has to grasp the “horizon” within which Hobbes “performed the foundation of liberalism”. Now, it is very important to pay attention to this definition of Hobbes as the “founder of liberalism” which already occurs in the thirteenth paragraph of the *Anmerkungen*: “Hobbes [...] is the author of the ideal of civilization. By this very fact he is the founder of liberalism”.⁴⁹ That Hobbes is the “founder of liberalism”, or the “author” of modern civilization, means that he is at the beginning of modernity. He is its “initiator” (“author”, from Latin *auctor*, *augere*). This implies that, precisely because of his role as “founder” or “initiator” of liberalism, Hobbes is necessarily referring to “a horizon beyond liberalism”. It is indeed clear that he would not have been able to initiate liberalism if he had been living in an already liberal “horizon”. It is precisely this state of ‘being in between’,⁵⁰ as it were, that accounts for Strauss’s interest in the English thinker. For this reason, according to Strauss (in the 1930s), Hobbes provides the only gateway

⁴⁸ Strauss, “Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt”, p. 238; English edition p. 122, transl. slightly altered.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 224; English edition p.107. See, however, the later retraction of this thesis in the Vorwort to the German edition of the book on Hobbes (Strauss, “Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft in ihrer Genesis”, pp. 9 f.).

⁵⁰ From this point of view, Strauss’s Hobbes seems to play a similar methodical role as Husserl’s Galileo in *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie* (1934-37), §§ 8-11.

for modern people such as ourselves to return to antiquity, allowing us to perform a “backwards movement” (*Rückgang*) in such a way that antiquity does not become inadvertently distorted by modern prejudices.

In this regard, it is worth looking at two other texts by Strauss contemporary with the *Anmerkungen*. The expression “backwards movement” that I have just used occurs in a posthumous text from 1932 — *Die geistige Lage der Gegenwart* (“The Intellectual Situation of the Present”) — where Strauss remarks that even those modern philosophers who were

the fiercest opponents of the Greeks believed themselves able to put into effect the progress they had in mind only after they had laid the foundation for it by a *backwards movement* [Rückgang], namely, by a backwards movement to *nature*.⁵¹

A tendency similar to the one described here — namely, going “backwards” — is called “counter-movement” in a later text and traced back to “Jean Jacques Rousseau’s passionate and still unforgettable protest”.⁵² The aporia undermining such a “counter-movement” is clearly highlighted in a letter to Karl Löwith dated December 30th, 1932. Referring to post-Hegelian philosophy, to its need to “rehabilitate” what Hegel had “sublated” (*aufgehoben*) — such as “passions” (Kierkegaard), “sensible intuition” (Feuerbach), *praxis* (Marx) —, Strauss says to Löwith:

You yourself (48) notice that these are always *rehabilitations*: one wants to repeat something lost, to dig up something buried. But what is lost is always desired from the perspective of the present and its own proper reality — thus one says ‘yes’ [*bejah!*] to what Hegel, and modern philosophy in general, has said ‘no’ to, [*scilicet*: but one understands what one is saying ‘yes’ to — *ed.*] *in the same way that it was understood* [*scilicet*: by Hegel and modern philosophy in general — *ed.*] *in that saying no*: the original dimension is not reached at all. If the philosophy of the nineteenth century is fundamentally polemical and *therefore* not radical [*unradical*], then one cannot, by means of the orientation given by the philosophy of the nineteenth century, reach the radical question [*radikalen Frage*].⁵³

⁵¹ Strauss, “Die Geistige Lage der Gegenwart”, p. 454; English edition p. 247, transl. slightly altered, italics of Strauss.

⁵² Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?”, pp. 50 f.: see the passage cited above, footnote 31.

⁵³ “Sie bemerken selbst (48), dass es sich da immer um Rehabilitierungen handelt: man will et was Verlorenes wiederholen, etwas Verschüttetes ausgraben. Aber das Verlorene wird wiedergesucht, wird desideriert vom Gegenwärtig-Wirklichen her — es wird also das von Hegel, allgemein von der modernen Philosophie Negierte, so wie es in dieser Negation verstanden worden ist, bejaht: die ursprüngliche Dimension wird gar nicht erreicht. Wenn die Philosophie des 19. Jhts. durch und durch polemisch und also unradikal ist, so kann man in Orientierung an der Philosophie des 19. Jhts. gar nicht zur radikalen Frage gelangen”: Leo Strauss, Karl Löwith, “Korrespondenz Leo Strauss – Karl Löwith” (1932-1971), in Strauss, *Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften – Briefe*, pp. 607-697 (613), italics of Strauss. The number in brackets refers to a page of the first edition of Karl Löwith, “Kierkegaard und Nietzsche” (1933), now in Karl Löwith, *Nietzsche, Sämtliche Schriften VI* (Stuttgart: Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1987), pp. 53-74.

The lexical proximity of this letter to the *Anmerkungen* is evident. The verb *bejahen* and the adjectives *radikal* and *unradikal* signal that the aporia envisaged here is the same as the one that the third section is concerned with. As a matter of fact, these critical remarks about post-Hegelian philosophy (and ultimately about Löwith himself) aptly summarize the theoretical core of the critique directed at Schmitt in the *Anmerkungen*: they let us better understand why Strauss states that Schmitt's critique against liberalism is "performed within the horizon of liberalism" and, to make it truly "radical", an "adequate understanding" of Hobbes is required.

Let us restate the critique directed at Schmitt with the words used in this letter: Schmitt says 'yes' (*bejaht*) to what the *auctor* of modern philosophy – Hobbes – had said 'no', but he *understands what he approves* – i.e. the *status naturalis* – *in the same way in which Hobbes had understood it in his denial*. This is precisely what is meant by Strauss's statement that Schmitt's "critique of liberalism is performed in the horizon [*Horizont*] of liberalism". It means, namely, that Schmitt succeeds in grasping the *status naturalis* only against the "background" provided by Hobbes's denial of the *status naturalis*. Therefore, in order to "complete" the critique of liberalism which Schmitt has only "introduced", it is necessary to go back to that 'original denial'. It is necessary to go back, more precisely, not only to what Hobbes denied, but rather to the *motive* why Hobbes denied what he denied.

The lack of radicality which Strauss finds in Schmitt (and, in his coeval letter to Löwith, in the post-Hegelian philosophy) is nothing more than the lack of a philosophical inquiry into the motives for what Schmitt (and post-Hegelian philosophy) is polemically opposed to. This is the way in which Strauss's remark in the 1932 letter on the lack of radicality undermining the polemical attitude must be understood. The polemical attitude is intrinsically "non-radical" (*unradikal*) – and therefore not sufficiently philosophical – because, being unable to account for the opposite position of the opponent, it does not succeed in really freeing itself from it.

The remark about the "polemical attitude" contained in the letter to Löwith also echoes the *Anmerkungen*. In fact, in the second-to-last paragraph of the *Anmerkungen*, Strauss writes (referring to Virgil's words "magno ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo" partially quoted at the end of the lecture on the *Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations*):

[A]n integral knowledge [*integres Wissen*] is never, unless by accident, polemical; and an integral knowledge cannot be gained "from concrete political existence," from the situation of the age, but only by means of a backwards movement [*Rückgang*] to the origin [*Ursprung*], to "pure, uncorrupted nature" (80; 94).⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Strauss, "Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt", p. 238; English edition p. 122, transl. slightly altered.

It is once again a passage of the *Anmerkungen* frequently cited by readers of Strauss who accuse him of being an ultraconservative thinker. In fact, Strauss here mentions and appropriates some expressions by Schmitt – such as “integral knowledge” (*integres Wissen*) and “pure, uncorrupted Natur” (*unversehrte, nicht korrupte Natur*) – which seem clearly to belong to the lexicon of the so called “conservative revolution”. The essential point of these lines, however, does not lie so much in the ‘nostalgic’ call to an “integral knowledge” or to an “uncorrupted nature”: it is rather to indicate *how* all this can be achieved. By saying that “an integral knowledge can never [...] be polemical”, Strauss raises a problem concerning *method*.

The meaning of this statement becomes clearer when seen in light of the 1932 letter to Löwith. Any polemical attitude, precisely due to its aims to confute the opponent, is not interested in accounting for the reasons for which the opponent adopts his position. In this sense, it is said by Strauss to be “non radical”: it does not reach the “origin” (Latin: *radix*, German: *Ursprung*) of what it is opposed to. Namely, the method inscribed in the polemical attitude makes it incapable of reaching what Strauss calls (in the letter to Löwith) “original dimension” and (in the second-to-last paragraph of the *Anmerkungen*) “origin” or – using Schmitt’s words – “pure, uncorrupted nature” It is because of this problem of method that it cannot help but, as it were, ‘repeat’ or ‘mime’ the opponent “with the opposite polarity”.⁵⁵

In other words, according to Strauss, the polemical attitude jeopardizes the correct accomplishment of what he calls (in the posthumous text from 1932 mentioned above – *The Intellectual Situation of the Present*) the “backwards movement [*Rückgang*] towards *nature*”. These are the same expressions used in the second-to-last paragraph of the *Anmerkungen*. In this regard, it is very important to notice that such a “backwards movement”, according to Strauss, does not characterize only a specific tendency of modern culture, namely, the ‘romantic’ or ‘conservative’ one. In fact, in the *The Intellectual Situation of the Present* he makes a point of stressing that “Rousseau’s call to *return* [*zurückzukehren*] to nature, which has become part of our collective memory, is only one example of that [backwards movement] and not even the best one”.⁵⁶ Strauss instead considers the “backwards movement” as a keynote of *all* modern philosophy. Indeed, the text continues as follows:

The reversionary character [*Rückgangscharakter*] of modern philosophy shows itself much more fundamentally in the fact that is decisive for the whole span of the 17th and 18th centuries: in the *fight against prejudices* that fills these centuries. The word “prejudice” is indeed the Enlightenment’s polemical keyword – it is met with,

⁵⁵ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 236; English edition p. 120, transl. slightly altered: “[Schmitt’s] approval of the political as such proves to be a liberalism with the opposite polarity”.

⁵⁶ Strauss, “Die Geistige Lage der Gegenwart”, p. 454; English edition p. 247, italics of Strauss.

so to speak, on every page of every writing of the Enlightenment. One must *free* oneself from prejudices, and this freeing is accomplished by *retreating* to a plane, or even point, from which one can finally progress free of prejudice once and for all.⁵⁷

It is thus clear that, by speaking of the necessity of a “backwards movement” in the second-to-last paragraph of the *Anmerkungen*, Strauss is pointing out nothing more than the *conditio sine qua non* of an “integral knowledge”, namely – using Husserl’s expression – the “radical absence of prejudice” (*radikale Vorurteilslosigkeit*).⁵⁸ I am here evoking Husserl because his name is mentioned by Strauss himself in another posthumous document which seems very interesting to me as a means of understanding the critique directed at Schmitt in the *Anmerkungen*. I am referring to a letter to Voegelin dated February 13th, 1943. Strauss makes a critical remark here about the typically modern “movement of opposition to modern thinking” which is somehow similar to the critique of the post-Hegelian philosophy exposed in the letter to Löwith eleven years earlier: it is a movement which, “even when in opposition to modern thinking”, remains “always concentrated on itself”.⁵⁹ There is, however, a modern thinker who Strauss here considers to be an exception to this rule: Husserl, who was “[t]he only [one] who really sought a new beginning, *integre ab integro*, the essay on the crisis in modern science is the clearest signpost – and it points to the beginning, or to the social sciences”.⁶⁰

Granted, this passage refers to a book by Husserl (*Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*) which at the time of the *Anmerkungen* had not yet been published. However, it contains expressions – *integre ab integro* and “new beginning” – that strangely echo precisely the Schmittian themes mentioned in the second-to-last paragraph of the *Anmerkungen*: the “integral knowledge” (*integres Wissen*) and the “backwards movement to the origin”. Thus, eleven years after the *Anmerkungen*, Strauss sees in Husserl the only thinker who has succeeded in accomplishing what Schmitt and, more generally, modern thought has tried to accomplish without success: the search for a “new beginning, *integre ab integro*”. All this suggests that both the “integral knowledge” and the “backwards movement to the origin” of which Strauss speaks in the second-to-last paragraph of the *Anmerkungen* are to be understood as *phenomenological* tasks. In other words, the “radicality” which Strauss urges by proclaiming the need for a “radical critique of liberalism” is the radicality required by phenomenological investigation. On closer inspection, therefore, also the ad-

⁵⁷ Ibidem.

⁵⁸ S. footnote n. 63 below.

⁵⁹ Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, Faith and Political Philosophy. The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1964, P. Emberley, B. Cooper (eds.) (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), p. 12.

⁶⁰ Ibidem.

jective “radical” occurring in the last paragraph of the *Anmerkungen* has been very likely borrowed from Husserl. To recognize this, we need only read the second-to-last page of a famous essay by Husserl, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, to which Strauss makes a point to dedicate one of his last essays.⁶¹ I am referring to the point where Husserl, after having given an “Empedoclean” definition of philosophy (“science of true beginnings, of origins, of *the roots of all things*” [“Wissenschaft von den wahren Anfängen, von den Ursprüngen, von den ριζώματα πάντων”]), expresses the same need for a *methodical radicality* urged by Strauss: “*the science concerned with the radical must be radical itself in its procedure [...]*” (“*Die Wissenschaft vom Radikalen muß auch in ihrem Verfahren radikal sein [...]*”).⁶² In the following lines, Husserl warns “*never to abandon*” the attitude that consists in the “radical absence of prejudice” (*radikale Vorurteilslosigkeit*).

However, let us turn our attention to what kind of “prejudice”, according to Husserl, is incompatible with the “radical absence of prejudice”. The prejudice Husserl speaks about here consists in mistaking the “things” (*Sachen*) that philosophy is concerned with — hence the “origins”, the ριζώματα πάντων, “the radical” — for mere “empirical facts” (*empirische Tatsachen*). Thus, the prejudice that is contrary to Husserl’s *radikale Vorurteilslosigkeit* is not just any prejudice. It is rather a very specific and, actually, universally prevalent attitude, that is to say, “to stand like a blind man before ideas, so many of which are actually absolutely given in immediate vision” (“sich gegenüber den Ideen blind [zu] stellen, die doch in so großem Umfang in unmittelbarer Anschauung absolut gegeben sind”).⁶³ This sort of ‘Platonism of the roots’ by Husserl — namely, his admonishment to see the lat-

⁶¹ Cf. Strauss, “Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy” and Ciccarelli, Leo Strauss tra Husserl e Heidegger. *Filosofia pratica e fenomenologia*, pp. 13-127.

⁶² Edmund Husserl, “Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft” (1911), in Edmund Husserl, *Aufsätze und Vorträge (1911-1921)*, Hua XXV (Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster: Kluwer, 1987), pp. 3-62 (61); “Philosophy as Rigorous Science,” in Q. Lauer (ed.), *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 71-147 (146) italics added, transl. slightly altered. Regarding the fact that Husserl prefers “the (Empedoclean) term ριζώματα πάντων, rather than the traditional ἀρχή”, the following comment by Strauss’s close friend Jacob Klein should be considered, which, although it was published after the *Anmerkungen*, seems to have had some influence on Strauss’s ‘radical’ hermeneutic method: a “‘root’ is something out of which things grow until they reach their perfect shape. The ἀρχή of a thing — at least in the traditional ‘classical’ sense of the term — is more directly related to that perfect shape, and somehow indirectly to the actual beginning of the growth. The ‘radical’ aspect of phenomenology is more important to Husserl than its perfection. This is the attitude of a true historian. But it is obvious that the phenomenological approach to the true beginnings requires a quite special kind of history. Its name is ‘intentional history’” (Jacob Klein, “Phenomenology and History of Science”, in M. Farber [ed.], *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940] pp. 143-163 [147]).

⁶³ Husserl, “Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft”, p. 61; English edition p. 146, italics added, transl. slightly altered.

ter as “ideas” and to not reduce them to “empirical facts” — left visible traces on Strauss’s ‘radical’ hermeneutic method, and — a topic that warrants closer study⁶⁴ — on his own Platonism. And it is precisely such a ‘Platonism of the roots’ that explains the “principal intention” guiding Strauss’s paradoxical portrayal of Schmitt as an ‘unpolitical’ author.

And so it is clear what Strauss means by “radical critique of liberalism” in the last paragraph of the *Anmerkungen*. In using this expression, Strauss is far from suggesting turning the “weapons of critique” into the “critique of weapons”; or, leaving metaphors aside, he has no thought of fomenting the overthrow of liberal institutions. Rather, he is merely referring to the task of understanding the origin of modernity unencumbered by modern prejudices. It was just this task that Strauss was diligently awaiting when he published the *Anmerkungen*: to subject Hobbes’s texts to the same phenomenological investigation to which he subjected Schmitt’s *Begriff des Politischen*, in order to uncover their “moral basis” or “genesis”. Significantly, the book he was writing in those years would be entitled, in German: *Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft in ihrer Genesis* (in English: *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*).

What “can be learned from Schmitt”⁶⁵ (if, of course, we read him in the way Strauss reads him) is that “political philosophy”, unlike mere “political thought”,⁶⁶ stands or falls on an “unpolitical”, “moral” *Rechtsgrund*, i.e., according to the equivalence previously highlighted (compare above § 3), on the *philosophic way of life*, namely, it stands or falls on the question of justice, which is insidious because it is in itself ‘polemogenic’. So, what appeared to Strauss in 1932 as an “urgent task” is ultimately the task to which he would later dedicate his entire scholarly career: to “reactivate”, as it were, Platonic political philosophy, i.e. to acquire a new awareness of political philosophy, or — more precisely — the same awareness Plato had of this insidiousness of philosophy.

⁶⁴ A working hypothesis in this direction might be that the ‘Platonism of the roots’ outlined by Husserl at the end of *Philosophy as Rigorous Science* and then developed with genetic phenomenology represents for Strauss the alternative to what he calls “radical historicism” (e.g. in Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 22 ff.; but cf. also, although the expression “radical historicism” does not appear in it, Strauss, “Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy”, pp. 30-34). “Radical historicism”, if my hypothesis is correct, should then be understood as “historicism of the roots” and as a ‘counter-concept’, as it were, to Husserl’s ‘Platonism of the roots’.

⁶⁵ Strauss, “Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt”, p. 238; English edition p. 122.

⁶⁶ On the distinction between “political thought” (“the reflection on, or exposition of, political ideas”, i.e. on “politically significant ‘phantasms, notions, species, or whatever it is about which the mind can be employed in thinking’ concerning the political fundamentals”) and “political philosophy” (“the conscious, coherent and relentless effort to replace opinions about the political fundamentals by knowledge regarding them”), cf. Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?”, pp. 12 ff. Cf. also Leo Strauss, “What Can We Learn from Political Theory?” (1942), in J.A. Colen, Svetozar Minkov (eds.), *Toward Natural Right and History. Lectures and Essays by Leo Strauss, 1937-1946* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), pp. 33-51 (34).