CHAPTER 5

On “Classic Natural Right” in Natural Right and History

Devin Stauffer

Although it is only one chapter in a long and wide-ranging work, Chapter Four of Natural Right and History is one of Leo Strauss’ most illuminating statements on classical political philosophy, especially in its Socratic form.1 The chapter, titled “Classic Natural Right,” has three main sections of widely varying length, each of them important both in its own right and in connection with the others. The first and by far the briefest of the three sections is a remarkable statement—the most direct Strauss ever offered—on the Socratic Turn, that is, on Socrates’ turn from his youthful study of natural science to a new philosophic approach that entailed, among other things, a greater emphasis on moral and political questions. The second section presents a memorable—in its own way “classic”—sketch of the most prominent classic natural right teaching as it differed from the classical conventionalist position that denied the existence of natural right. Finally, the third section is a dense and multi-layered consideration of various types of classic natural right teachings, but with special attention given to the teaching that emerged from Socrates’ dialectical approach to the problem of justice. In this essay, I will consider each of these three sections, with an eye also on the connections between them. Doing so will require that I highlight only some of the many twists and turns in Strauss’ difficult text.

Before I turn to my main task some words are in order about the book of which “Classic Natural Right” is a part and especially about the immediately preceding chapter, “The Origin of the Idea of Natural Right,” with which Chapter Four is closely connected. Now, the central question of Natural Right and History, despite what the title suggests, is not the question of natural right so much as it is the question of the possibility of philosophy. These are not two versions of the same question, however much Strauss may sometimes blur the distinction between them. The blurring of the distinction is a result, not only of intentional obfuscation on Strauss’ part, but also of the fact that historicism,

1 This essay was written while I held a Carl Friedrich von Siemens Fellowship in Munich. I would like to thank Heinrich Meier, the Director of the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation, for making this possible.
Strauss’ chief opponent in *Natural Right and History*, denies both the possibility of philosophy and the existence of natural right. In fact, the latter denial is a consequence of the former, according to Strauss. “The historicist contention,” he says, “can be reduced to the assertion that natural right is impossible because philosophy in the full sense of the word is impossible” (35). Still, even if the two questions are linked, they should not be collapsed into one, as Strauss makes clear in the same paragraph by indicating that a vindication of the possibility of philosophy would not yet be a vindication of natural right: “the possibility of philosophy is only the necessary and not the sufficient condition of natural right” (35). If that formulation makes the distinction between the two questions as clear as one could wish, it is not Strauss’ last word on the matter. For there prove to be other important connections between the two questions, besides the one that historicism creates or indicates by denying the existence of natural right on the basis of a denial of the possibility of philosophy. More important even than that connection is that non-historicist philosophy itself—first at the peak of its ancient development, and then again in a different way in its modern resurgence—tried to vindicate the possibility of philosophy through steps that involved developing what may be called (in each case) a “natural right teaching.” Strauss points early in *Natural Right and History* to the modern efforts in this direction by remarking that the crisis of modern natural right could lead—as it did—to a crisis in philosophy as such and thus to historicism “only because in the modern centuries philosophy as such had become thoroughly politicized” (34). Although he suggests that this modern development marked a departure from the original meaning of philosophy as “the humanizing quest for the eternal order” (34), Strauss will go on later in the book to indicate that classical philosophy, too, albeit in a very different way, was led in its own efforts to defend the possibility of philosophy to become, not indeed “thoroughly politicized,” but deeply concerned with politics and with the question of natural right in particular. For these reasons as well, then, the two main questions of *Natural Right and History* prove to be connected. In fact, Strauss’ very blurring of the distinction between them can even be understood as a way of pointing to some of the partially hidden thoughts at the heart of the book.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. The simplest indication that there is a difference between the two questions at issue is conveyed in Chapter Three, “The Origin of the Idea of Natural Right.” For there Strauss shows that classical

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2 All unspecified references in the text are to *Natural Right and History*.

3 On this remark and its significance to the structure and argument of *Natural Right and History*, see Bruell (2011) 89, and the broader context of 88–91.