Politics between philosophy and polemics : political thinking and thoughtful politics in the writing of Karl Popper, Leo Strauss, and Hannah Arendt

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CONCLUSION

The better we understand what politics is, the better we will be able to act politically. That is to say, the better we know how to orient ourselves within the political domain, the better we will be able to take adequate political decisions and make sound political judgments. Yet, as we noted at the beginning of this dissertation, at first sight it would seem that political philosophy has little to teach us about the nature of politics in this sense. Not only does it tend to accept a certain conception of politics as given – usually its being restricted to the domain of government in liberal-democratic states – it also tends to interpret politics in its own image, viz. as a kind of rational discussion that is merely not rational enough. Insofar as it does not first raise the question "what is political?", it runs the risk of providing us with an uncritical and perhaps even a distorted picture of political reality, whereby it fails to acquaint us with political reality as a realm of contingent human interaction of which our actions, decisions, and judgments are part.

We also noted that political philosophy is usually understood as a *theoretical* enterprise, that is, as the pursuit of propositional knowledge. As a result, there is a tendency to neglect the fact that it is itself, at least insofar as it expresses itself in speech or writing, also a *practice*. As such, it is part of the same domain as all other human interaction, including politics. Hence, there seems to be no way to determine "from the outside" where the practice of philosophy ends and where the practice of politics begins. In common with all human actions, political-philosophical writings may therefore have a certain impact in reality that is neither expressly intended nor foreseen. The *propositional* content or intention of a certain political-philosophical text may be contradicted by its *performative* implications. These implications may be due to the various *assumptions* that people who are going to *act* on the theory are bound to make, and to the various uses of language which escape from the explicit argumentative reasoning of a text, but which nevertheless fulfill a constitutive role in it, such as *analogical* and *polemical* forms of reasoning. A political philosophy should somehow take this into account if it wishes to contribute to an adequate understanding of politics and if it wishes to teach us how to act politically in a thoughtful way.

Given this condition of political philosophy, we raised the following, tripartite question: (i) how can we philosophize (think) about politics (action) in such way, (ii) that it takes into account the specific characteristics both of politics (as a form of action) and of philosophy (as a form of thinking), and (iii) that it prepares us for the exercise of what may be called 'thoughtful politics', that is, taking adequate political decisions and forming sound political judgments, and choosing the right courses of political action?

Instead of embarking on a systematic, straightforward for / against argument to answer these questions, we embarked on a study of the propositional contents *and* the performative meanings of instances of political-philosophical

writing, thereby aiming to give due consideration to the fact that, generally speaking, texts are not only read and do not only become influential "thanks to themselves", that is, in accordance with the propositions, theories and *arguments* that are put forward in them, but that they are also read and that they also become influential "despite themselves", that is, in accordance with their *action*, with what they "do". Although the actual historical 'influence' achieved by a text may be indicative of its performative meaning, they do not entirely coincide, for the historical circumstances and institutional settings in which a text is received will vary from time to time, while its inner structure remains the same.

The works of Karl Popper, Leo Strauss, and Hannah Arendt have been studied in particular, all of whom aimed to re-think the relationship between philosophy and politics, or between thought and action, and all of whom have proposed and used different strategies to deal with this relationship, especially in discussion with its "Platonic" conception. By digging for the "deeply hidden structural features" (Raymond Geuss) of their writings – hidden assumptions that are "realized" by acting on them, analogies drawn in them, polemics staged by them – our aim has been to contribute to an understanding of the relationship between philosophy and politics, and thereby of the conditions of political understanding – how to *make sense* of politics – and of thoughtful politics – how to *act* politically, how to take decisions and make judgments within the political realm.

In Part I, we saw Karl Popper criticizing the "closed society" and its approach to politics, called "utopian social engineering", for its elimination of our individual freedom and responsibility for decisions. Instead, he proposes to adopt the approach of "piecemeal social engineering", which belongs to the "open society" and prepares legislation by democratic government. We argued, however, that due to Popper's *logical* separation of facts and values, he runs the danger that the *ends* that this social technology (as choice of the most efficient and effective means of solving social problems by institutional reform) is supposed to serve, are ultimately arbitrary. In the end, Popper himself admits that rational political decision-making and judgment rest on an "irrational faith" in reason. To prevent this conclusion, we argued, Popper requires a broader, more all-encompassing conception of rationality, on which he does in fact draw – an attitude of "reasonableness" or "listening to others" – but which he cannot vouch for on the basis of his narrower, falsificationist conception of scientific rationality (Chapter 1).

Instead, we noted that Popper draws several *analogies* between the formulation of moral and political proposals and that of scientific propositions, thereby bestowing on politics the aura of certainty derived from scientific methodology, most notably in his pointing to the compelling appeal of the elimination of avoidable human suffering. However, we demonstrated that Popper's *propositional* defense of a politics of rational discussion, which finds support in the *analogy* between politics and science, is contradicted by his *performance* of the *polemical* friend-enemy conception of politics, which he

invokes in the name of the urgency to defend the "open society" against the "closed society" (Chapter 2).

We concluded that Popper would seem to require some form of theoretical self-consciousness of his theory also being a *practice*: (i) his theory makes use not merely of *logical* reasoning but also rests on the use of *analogical* reasoning, which in fact appears to be constitutive for the 'validity' of Popper's proposal for piecemeal social engineering, and (ii) his theory is embedded in the performance of a fierce *polemic* against the enemies of the open society, which in fact contradicts that proposal. Moreover, he requires a broader conception of *politics*, which encompasses the phenomenon of the exercise of government power or rule – the presence of which he appeared to self-evidently presuppose as a necessary evil – as well as the apparently inevitable possibility of a friend-enemy struggle between political societies. Finally, he requires a conception of *philosophy* that is not reduced to methodology but allows for the rationality of other forms of language than pure falsificationism, especially for the rationality of value judgments.

In Part II we saw that Strauss seems to meet all three of these demands. He identifies philosophy not with scientific methodology but with philosophical dialectics, which ascends from *opinions* – among which is the *law* of the polis, which is the authoritative opinion par excellence – that turn out to contradict each other, in order to replace them by true *knowledge* of nature. We saw that the philosopher ultimately looks down on the city, because it cannot live up to the demand of truth, the demands of what is right by nature and not merely right by convention. Strauss identifies the political with the sphere of the *law* of a "city" or "civil society", which, as a closed society, commands unconditional obedience from its citizens, at least in case of *war*. This does not mean, though, that we have to choose between philosophic life, the life of reason [*logos*], which amounts to an escape from politics, and political life, the life of "spiritedness" [*thumos*], which then seems to be condemned to a lack of rational standards for political decision-making and judgment. Strauss leaves room for some form of rational guidance for politics. According to his reconstruction of the classical teaching of "natural right", thoughtful politics consists in the "dilution" of what is right by nature by what is right by convention, as in the case of the Platonic philosopher-lawgiver, and in deciding in concrete political situations which end is the most "natural" one, be it the "higher" or the more "urgent" end, as in the case of the Aristotelian statesman. In either case, decisions in practice (i.e. in concrete, "existential" situations) cannot be directly "deduced" from theory (i.e. the knowledge of a hierarchy of ends) (Chapter 3).

We saw that Strauss distinguishes another, "deeper" form of politics, which, he claims, is required for the communication of the philosopher with the political community. He thereby displays a "theoretical self-consciousness" of the political condition of philosophical writing, including his own. As the philosophical search for the truth is at odds with the political community upholding the authoritative opinion of the law, the philosopher is required to use a specific

form of *political* writing, called "the art of writing between the lines" to prevent him from being misunderstood by "the many" and to stimulate "the few" to start philosophizing. We argued, however, that this manner of writing, when *performed*, affirms certain hermeneutical and ontological assumptions that rest on the fiction of being able to completely *master* the political conditions to which the expression of philosophical thought is subject, and thereby to *escape* from them (Chapter 4).

Although Strauss offers both a conception of philosophy and a conception of politics that is broader than Popper's reduction of the first to scientific methodology and the latter to rational discussion with a view to democratic legislation, Strauss's theory and practice, both of "thoughtful" politics and of "political" philosophy, imply an overestimation of the possibilities to control the meaning of language and human interaction, due to a lack of appreciation for the contingency that is inherent to both.

Part III turns to the work of Hannah Arendt, who starts precisely with a recognition of the contingent character of human interaction, or its *freedom*. As we have seen, on the basis of her account of the human conditions of natality and plurality, she criticizes the tradition of philosophy for having attempted to *escape* from politics by substituting it with rule. In her view, the *raison d'être* of the political is public freedom, which is realized by the acting-in-concert of citizens who appear within the public realm. Public freedom is in no way capable of being "guaranteed" by a theoretical justification in terms of either a transcendent absolute (the laws of God or the truth of Nature) or an immanent absolute (the success of History). Instead, she emphasizes that politics continuously requires action and *confidence* in action out of *love* of freedom (Chapter 5).

However, this does not mean there is no role for thought in Arendt's case. On the contrary, against the traditional reduction of thought to contemplation (or cognition) and against contemporary forms of thoughtlessness, Arendt recovers three types of the activity of thinking. The first of these, "dialectical thinking", or the inner dialogue between me and myself, is politically unreliable, since by itself it cannot establish the plural "we" of the political, or at best only in emergency situations, when its inner two-in-one becomes an example of plurality, despite itself, and however limited, within the outer world. The second type, "representative thinking", is political in the normal sense that it prepares for political decision-making and judgment by "representing" within the mind the various perspectives on a specific public matter. The third type, "poetic thinking", is political at a remove, for, by taking into account the inherently metaphorical character of language, it is able to criticize common political-philosophical language for its lack of correspondence to actual phenomenal reality. By diving for forgotten phenomena and experiences that lie hidden in our language, or by developing new conceptual vocabularies, it enables us to make ourselves at home again in the political world (Chapter 6).

Although Arendt's work *could* be interpreted as if she performatively invokes the impossibility of politics against which she propositionally advocates its

possibility, her manner of writing somehow resists this reading. Rather than offering a "solution" or establishing a "hierarchy', it *performs* the plurality and perspectivity – the "in-between" – of human interaction, whereby we, Arendt's readers, are invited to examine our own worldly position and test our own confidence in politics.

On the basis of our reading of the writing of these three authors, we are able to argue the following in answer to the question we raised in the introduction, which we recalled at the beginning of this conclusion, viz. how to philosophize about politics in such a way, while taking into account the specific character both of philosophy and politics, that we may be able to act politically in a thoughtful manner.

In the first place, we argue that a political philosophy should possess or develop a realistic or adequate understanding both of politics (as a form of action) and philosophy (as a form of thinking), for which it is at least required that it should not accept uncritically what is generally called "political" (as that which is restricted to the government or the state) and towards what is generally called "philosophical" (as the rational justification of propositions in terms of their truth value or legitimacy).

We saw that Popper adheres to a fairly common sense picture of politics. His term "political" self-evidently refers to the exercise of "power of man over man" as embodied by the state or the government in liberal democracies. Normal politics appeared to consist in the "solving" of social "problems" in a manner that is as "rational" – i.e. "scientific" – as possible. We also saw that exceptional politics – the polemical defense of "the open society" against its enemies or of democracy against dictatorship actually *practiced* by Popper – tends to fall outside his conception of politics, or is at least not accounted for in his conception of "piecemeal social engineering". Strauss, on the other hand, includes the element of "closure" in his conception of the political when he refers to the "fact" that a political order is held together by the law of a regime that is "authoritative" and demands obedience from its individual citizens, and to the "fact" that every political society, being a "closed society', stands in potentially inimical relations with other "closed societies". In his case, politics seems to consist in the self-preservation (or existence) and, if possible, self-improvement (or excellence) of such a society. We may say that Popper somehow *presupposes* the unity or order of a political community within which the "piecemeal social engineering" takes place (the reform of *society* by means of *state* policy and legislation), whereas Strauss explicitly tries to *understand* the *raison d'être* of the unity or order of a political community, of a "city" or "civil society" [*polis*] in the first place. He does so in terms of the "natural" end of human excellence or virtue [*aretē*] in answer to the question of the right way of life, the highest virtue – the philosophical pursuit of knowledge – being trans-political, the political virtues *par excellence* being "freedom" (i.e. independence from other cities) and "empire" (i.e. the exercise of

hegemony over other cities). From Arendt's perspective, finally, one may note that Popper and Strauss identify politics with "government" or "rule" [*Herrschaft*], whereas she identifies politics with the performance of "public freedom", that is, with citizens acting together in a public realm constituted by contingent human interactions, i.e. by unique "events" which might as well not have occurred, but which, once they have become part of the realm of human affairs, can no longer be "wished away". She argues not so much that it is possible to establish within this realm a politics completely purified of "rule", i.e. of the "vertical" relation of command and obedience, or completely purified of polemics, i.e. of the formation of groupings which are merely for or against each other. Rather, she wishes to prevent the understanding of politics and of related terms such as "power" and "authority" in terms of rule or in terms of polemics, rather than in terms of the acting-in-concert of political "equals", from undermining our love of freedom, our faith in the possibility of "horizontally" establishing and maintaining a realm of public freedom together.

Regarding philosophy, we saw that Popper identifies philosophy with the *methodology* of science, which provides *logically* valid criteria by which to distinguish scientific from pseudo-scientific propositions. He also draws on a broader conception of philosophy, viz. the Socratic "reasonableness" of "listening to each other". This conception permits a restricted form of rationality for value statements – viz. of arbitration or compromise – whereby it oversteps the boundaries of strictly falsificationist scientific reasoning. In addition, Popper makes ample use of *analogical* reasoning – explaining the "rationality" of moral and political reasoning by way of analogy with scientific reasoning – but the "rational" status of this way of reasoning remains unaccounted for in his work. By contrast, Strauss explicitly recovers the Socratic form of philosophical dialectics *against* the deductive method of science. Philosophical dialectics "ascends" to the truth by "speaking through" mutually contradictory opinions about the "what", that is, the "nature" or "essence" of things, especially the human things, such as "virtues", which, as they are "in speech" rather than "in deed", cannot be "deduced" from any factual account of human nature. Finally, Arendt criticizes the tendency to identify philosophy with contemplation, or, more generally, to identify thinking with cognition, to which both Popper and Strauss in fact adhere. According to Arendt, cognition strives for *truth* – i.e. to know "what" something is and whether it exists at all – whereas thinking strives for *meaning* – to "ponder" or to "think through" what it *means* for something to exist. Moreover, she claims that the activity of thinking always remains "out of order" in the sense that the mind can never "reach" the actual realness of the things and events that make up the external world. Of the several motifs of thinking that can be traced throughout her oeuvre, her own way of thinking is best captured by her notion of "poetic thinking", which acknowledges that all conceptual language is metaphorical, that is, all words we use to refer to the invisible 'concepts' of the mind – such as the concepts 'politics' and 'idea' – are derived from sense-experience, from our experience of the visible, phenomenal world. Thus, it is precisely the *metaphorical*

character of thought that allows us to "reconcile" ourselves with the external world of appearances. As such, Arendt's conception of speech or language is richer than that of Popper and Strauss. While Popper acknowledges the rationality of propositional language only and tends to believe that it is possible to eliminate or at least greatly reduce the influence of the meaning of metaphorical or "poetic" language, Strauss allows for the existence of the "poetic" use of language, but he tends to presuppose that the meaning of this type of language can be *mastered* entirely by the speaker or writer in question and made "ministerial" for the philosophical pursuit of truth.

In the second place, we claim that a political philosophy should possess or develop some degree of theoretical self-consciousness that it is also a practice, at least insofar as it expresses itself in speech or writing, and of the implications thereof for (i) the validity or status of its propositions or theory, and for (ii) the influence of its "deeply hidden structural features" on actual politics.

In the case of Popper, we noted a lack of such awareness. We demonstrated that, despite himself, his proposal for a "rational" politics of piecemeal social engineering rests on analogical reasoning, that is to say, on the analogy of politics with science, and that his proposal is even contradicted by his performance of a polemical conception of politics. Only on *two* occasions in his work does he seem to acknowledge that thought – especially spoken or written thought – is a *practice*: when he characterizes the decision to adopt an attitude of rationalism as an "*act* of faith" and when he praises, for once, the "*manner* of writing" of Plato's earlier dialogues for being the embodiment of rational argumentation. By contrast, Strauss's oeuvre may be considered a persistent attempt to think through and remedy the repercussions of the fact that philosophical writing is not only a form of theory but also of practice. We saw that he presupposes that the political predicament of philosophy can be *overcome* by employing a cunning art of writing. However, the underlying conception of a "natural" opposition between philosophy and politics, between "the few" and "the many", implies a *binary* picture of human interaction that is simply unrealistic: in practice, readers cannot be so neatly divided into two classes that any "misunderstanding" that was not foreseen by the writer can be forestalled. Finally, Arendt displays a theoretical self-consciousness of writing insofar as she acknowledges that any ontological assumption about political reality, i.e. any statement of fact about the nature of the political that is claimed to be "objectively" true in theory, such as an account of the nature of politics in terms of "rule", will be "proved true", will be *realized* in practice, as soon and as long as people *act* on that assumption. In that sense, even the theoretical proposition that human beings are born to be free may be understood in practice to imply that we are *doomed* to be free. In order to provide an antidote to this ineradicable interpretative option, Arendt chooses to speak of the human "condition" rather than human "nature", whereby she aims to keep the "end" of human beings to a certain degree *open*, i.e. "undecidable" in theory. She provides a *phenomenology* of the political which at the same time embodies a *praise* of the

continuous possibility of political freedom: she writes about political phenomena and experiences in such a manner that the capacity of human beings spontaneously to start something new is not merely described but also invoked.

In the third place, a political philosophy that fulfills these two demands of taking into account the specific nature of philosophy (as a form of thinking) and politics (as a form of acting), and of possessing some kind of theoretical self-consciousness of its own performative condition, should be able to assist us in understanding what we are doing when we wish to act politically in a "thoughtful" way, i.e. when we wish to make adequate decisions and issue sound judgments within the political realm.

In the case of all three authors, the form of "rational" or "thoughtful" political action they offer is developed against the background of the traditional model of Socratic dialectics or "true politics". We saw that Popper proposes an approach to political decision-making and judgment called "piecemeal social engineering". We argued that piecemeal social engineering in itself presupposes a narrow conception of rationality in terms of the choice of the most effective and efficient means to realize already chosen ends. Popper's strict dualism of facts and values implies that there is no way rationally to establish the legitimacy or illegitimacy of ends. In order to avoid the inevitable result that decisions and judgments are merely "personal", "*ad hominem*", or "arbitrary", Popper adopts the stance of negative utilitarianism, that is, the need to relieve human beings of avoidable suffering as the only urgent and hence universally valid goal for public policy. Furthermore, the framework into which Popper's form of "rational" politics fits is from the very start that of the "open society", within which the sphere of the government or the state as the *normal* political realm has already been established. Only in case of *emergency*, i.e. when the open society's existence and form of government are threatened by its enemies, may one have recourse to violence instead of reason.

However, what remains out of sight is the possibility of a rational choice of *positive* values in case the elimination of avoidable suffering has already been realized. We saw that Popper's broader notion of Socratic rationality, in the sense of "reasonableness" or "listening to each other", embodies a form of "impartiality" in decision-making and judgment that is more promising in this respect than the *deductive* choice of one single criterion only – viz. negative utilitarianism – for all politics. Popper nevertheless suggests that Socrates himself was more interested in the character formation of persons than in institutional reform. Be that as it may, this form of rational discussion would seem to be the only alternative Popper has to offer for scientific reasoning and its technological application (in case of normal circumstances) on the one hand, and polemical struggle (in case of emergency) on the other.

In contradistinction to Popper, Strauss does not exclusively identify politics with the sphere of what we could call "normal" politics, for he is constantly aware of the fact that a political society lives potentially at war with other political

societies. Moreover, he rejects Popper's separation of facts and values, instead acknowledging the possibility of rational discussion of values – or of "virtues" – as embodied by Socratic dialectics, the outcome of which may be the establishment of a specific "hierarchy of ends". These two elements together result in the suggestion of forms of "thoughtful" politics that move between philosophy (or the *escape* from politics) and polemics (or a total *immersion* in the urgent struggle for the survival of a political community or "city"). Especially Strauss's account of the "Aristotelian" form of practical wisdom or *phronèsis* of the statesman offers an answer here. In "normal" circumstances the "city" should strive for "normal" justice, that is, distributive and commutative justice. In "exceptional" circumstances, however, the city should strive to protect its own existence against the enemies of the city, be they internal or external. Although the existence of a hierarchy of ends – that is, of the ends of justice – is acknowledged, Strauss adds that there is no way to universally determine beforehand what constitutes a "normal" situation and an "exceptional" situation. This is to be decided by the statesman on the spot, the moral education of whose character is therefore to a certain extent decisive.

What is problematic, however, is Strauss's claim that there is a "natural" decision in every situation – based on "a full consideration of all the circumstances" – which can afterwards be "objectively" established by the competent judgment of the historian. We may doubt whether this is right, though, due to the finite character of human knowledge (recognized by Popper) and the contingent character of human interaction (recognized by Arendt).

Finally, Arendt's notion of what we have called "thoughtful" politics is informed by her account of the public realm. She claims that the public realm or the world common to us all is perspectival in character, which is due to the human conditions of natality – being capable of beginning something new by virtue of being born into the world – and plurality – appearing as distinct and unique individuals by virtue of the fact that not man, but men inhabit the world. Hence, we saw her reject Socratic thinking – the soundless and inner dialogue between me and myself – for its lack of plurality in the political sense. Rather, thinking becomes truly "political" to the extent that it is capable of "representing" within the mind the various perspectives that the people involved may have on an actual public affair. Thereby, she argues, a citizen-actor or statesman may arrive at an "impartial" decision regarding a specific course of political action – Arendt also uses the concept of *phronèsis* here – just as a citizen-spectator or a historian may arrive at an "impartial" judgment about past political events. In contradistinction to Strauss, Arendt identifies the Greek phenomenon of *phronèsis* with this form of "representative" thinking, and she claims that the more perspectives on a common affair that are taken into account, the more "valid" the actual decision or judgment of that affair will be.

This concluding summary is not intended as a definite "answer" to the question of what political philosophy is or should be like, let alone a practical "proposal" for actual political decision-making and judgment. Rather, the aim has

been to demonstrate what can be learned from the political-philosophical writings of Popper, Strauss, and Arendt and the manners of political thinking that they embody, should we be interested in acting politically in a thoughtful manner.