

Leo Strauss's Theory of Tyranny: Ancient and Modern

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I deal with the theory of tyranny by Leo Strauss (1899-1973), the German-American scholar who was one of the leading political philosophers of the 20th century. His disciples are called the Straussians, and they are influential not only in America but all over the world. Through a close reading of *On Tyranny*, I would like to examine the modes of existence of tyranny through the discussions of Xenophon, Strauss and Kojève that tried to determine the essence of tyranny. After clarifying the forms of tyranny both in ancient and in modern times, I would like to consider whether Strauss's arguments are still valid in light of the problems of science and technology.

KEYWORDS: Strauss, Kojève, tyranny, science, technology

Introduction

In this article, I discuss the theory of tyranny by Leo Strauss (1899-1973), one of the leading political philosophers of the 20th century. Strauss was born and raised in a Jewish family near Marburg, Germany, and studied at universities in Hamburg and Freiburg. He subsequently pursued Jewish studies in Berlin. In 1938, he fled to the United States due to the rise of the Nazi regime. After becoming a professor at New York's New School for Social Research, he taught political philosophy at the University of Chicago.

Strauss is known for his numerous commentaries on the writings of classical political philosophers. Strauss's disciples are called the Straussians, and they are influential not only in America but worldwide. Some of his most notable disciples include philosophers such as Allan Bloom and Stanley Rosen.

Strauss is also known for arguing with Alexandre Kojève about a short work of the ancient Greek philosopher Xenophon, "Hiero or Tyrannicus," with a disproportionately long commentary. This work by Xenophon is structured as a dialogue between the tyrant Hiero and the wise Simonides. While Hiero expresses how painful it is to be a tyrant, Simonides refutes Hiero, emphasizing how blessed the tyrant is. Ultimately, Simonides proposes the way to be an ideal tyrant.

Strauss and Kojève's respective interpretations of the work of Xenophon, a contemporary of Plato and a disciple of Socrates, should be studied even today, not merely because Xenophon is less well-known than Plato, or because it is necessary

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to clear up the misunderstandings that have arisen about Xenophon. Because of the significance of the issues addressed in Strauss's article on Xenophon's work "On Tyranny" (1948), Kojève's article "Tyranny and Wisdom" (1954), and Strauss's subsequent "Restatement on Xenophon's Hiero" (1954), as well as the Strauss-Kojève correspondence in the book "On Tyranny," their interpretations merit thorough examination.¹

"On Tyranny" has been extensively researched, mostly by those interested in Kojève and Strauss. It is not necessary to introduce all the results of these studies here, but a representative study is the book *Philosophy, History, and Tyranny* (2016, not yet translated into Japanese) that has been recently published in the United States.² In this book, ten scholars take up the debate between Kojève and Strauss from their own points of view, more than 60 years after the first publication of the edition of *On Tyranny* containing the treatises "Tyranny and Wisdom" and "Restatement." The publication of this book dealing with the theories developed in *On Tyranny* indicates that is a topic of interest to many researchers even today.

Brian-Paul Frost's article, "Who Won the Strauss-Kojève Debate?" is a noteworthy contribution to *Philosophy, History, and Tyranny*. Although Strauss had two opportunities to write his treatises and Kojève had only one, Frost argues that Kojève was far from losing the debate. In his article "Tyranny and Wisdom," Kojève argues that "It is history itself that attends to 'judging' (by 'achievement' or 'success') the deeds of statesmen or tyrants."³ Probably being aware of it, Frost affirms that "only Time (= History = Being = Truth) will tell" who will be the winner in the debate between Strauss and Kojève.⁴ Therefore, it is possible to consider that judgment on this point is entrusted to us, those who are alive today.

Moreover, Waller R. Newell's article "Kojève's Hegel, Hegel's Hegel, Strauss's Hegel" in the same volume also provides important insights. Newell deciphers the debate between Kojève and Strauss, considering the lack of a "middle range" in Strauss's argument that could exist between the dichotomy of wisdom and tyranny. According to Newell, Strauss thought that "the independence of the philosophical life is the only certain defense against tyranny."⁵ In my opinion, Newell has in mind the fact that while Strauss did not admit any middle ground between philosophical life—which probably means "wisdom"—and tyranny, Kojève argued that "intellectuals," a middle range, are needed to fulfill an important mission of mediation between wisdom and tyranny. Being himself a bureaucrat as well as an "intellectual," Kojève writes that "The philosopher is right to leave the responsibility for bringing about a convergence on the theoretical plane between his philosophical

¹ Cf. Alexandre Kojève, "Tyrannie et sagesse," in Leo Strauss, *De la tyrannie*, Gallimard, 1997, p. 149. ("Tyranny and Wisdom," in *On Tyranny*, edited by Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth, University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 135.) Kojève wrote this article originally in French.

² Edited by Timothy W. Burns and Bryan-Paul Frost, *Philosophy, History, and Tyranny*, State University of New York Press, 2016. As for other previous research on the Kojève-Strauss controversy, see my book *Atheism and the State* (Nakanishiya Publisher, 2017 in Japanese), pp. 17-9.

³ Kojève, "Tyrannie et sagesse," *De la tyrannie*, p. 199. ("Tyranny and Wisdom," *On Tyranny*, p. 176.)

⁴ Frost, "Who Won the Strauss-Kojève Debate?," *Philosophy, History, and Tyranny*, State University of New York Press, 2016, p. 195.

⁵ Waller R. Newell, "Kojève's Hegel, Hegel's Hegel, Strauss's Hegel," *Philosophy, History, and Tyranny*, p. 220.

ideas and political reality to a constellation of intellectuals of all shades (more or less spread out in time and space).⁶

In this way, we can discover a wide variety of points of contention from *On Tyranny*, but what I would like to discuss in this article is the question of tyranny, especially in ancient and modern times. The discussions about tyranny developed by ancient philosophers may seem irrelevant to us, but as Strauss points out, “One cannot understand modern tyranny in its specific character before one has understood the elementary and in a sense natural form of tyranny which is premodern tyranny.”

⁷ It will be meaningful to consider the modes of existence of tyranny in the modern world through the discussions by Xenophon, Strauss and Kojève that attempted to determine the essence of tyranny.

In the following sections, while relying on Strauss, I will first clarify what tyranny was in ancient times, then clarify secondly the form of tyranny seen in modern times, next connecting it subsequently to the problems of science and technology, and finally I would like to discuss whether his arguments are still valid today.

Tyranny in Ancient Times

The Notion of Tyranny

This section I delve into the notion of tyranny as construed by ancient Greek philosophers. My particular emphasis will be on Strauss’s interpretations of the views held by Xenophon, Socrates, and Aristotle.

I would like to begin by clarifying the difference between monarchy and tyranny. Although Strauss does not mention Aristotle, in Book III, 7 of *Politics*, Aristotle defines tyranny as rule by one man in his own interest, contrasting it with monarchy as rule by one man for the common good (1279B).⁸

Strauss, however, argues that the process of becoming a ruler differs between a king and a tyrant. Strauss asserts that Xenophon did not only write about tyrants, but also described the life of the successful King Cyrus in *Cyropaedia*. Cyrus was the legitimate successor to the previous king, and Cyrus expanded his territory through marriage and just conquests.⁹ Tyrants, on the other hand, typically seize power through military force, and this is what distinguishes tyrants from kings. Strauss’s concept of a tyrant is unexceptional in that it is characterized by the absence of government legitimacy.

Interestingly, Strauss points out that Xenophon did not dare to erase the distinction between the best tyrant and the king, since Xenophon knew that legitimacy with legality would bring benefits. Expanding on Strauss’s argument, we can deduce that Xenophon would have considered that tyranny, at best, fell short of good monarchy. Influenced by Xenophon, Strauss reasons that William III, who was

⁶ Kojève, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” p. 198. (“Tyrannie et sagesse,” *De la tyrannie*, p. 198.)

⁷ Strauss, “On Tyranny,” *On Tyranny*, p. 23.

⁸ Cf. Nathan Tarcov, “Preface to the Japanese Version,” *Senshu seiji ni tsuite (On Tyranny)*, Book I, translated by Yoshihiko Ishizaki, Shozo Iijima and Kazuya Omote, Gendai Shicho Shinsha, 2006, p. 16.

⁹ Strauss, “Restatement on Xenophon’s *Hiero*,” *On Tyranny*, p. 182.

legitimate in terms of his family lineage and became king after the Glorious Revolution, was a better ruler over the English than Oliver Cromwell, who usurped control from Charles I and established a kind of tyranny that took on the appearance of a republic.¹⁰ Xenophon sees a tyranny as an inherently unstable regime.¹¹ Moreover, it is not only a tyranny that is unstable, but a monarchy may also be unstable in some circumstances. In fact, Cyrus laid down a good government, but after his death, his sons fought against each other, and the country fell into chaos. Therefore, it cannot be asserted that a monarchy per se is a solid system. Nevertheless, Xenophon must have thought that a monarchy was still a relatively stable and enduring system compared to a tyranny.

Inferring from Strauss's remarks on tyranny, we can argue that Xenophon's Socrates, unlike a king who rules by law over his subjects who are willing to obey, a tyrant is a ruler who forces his unwilling subjects to obey. Since the tyrant is not bound by law, tyranny is "monarchical rule without law"; accordingly, it is difficult for people other than the tyrant to be blessed with freedom under such a system of government.¹²

Caesarism

Is this discussion of ancient Greek tyranny useful to those living in later times? According to Strauss, Eric Voegelin, in his book review of *On Tyranny*¹³ criticized the ancient Greek philosophers' conception of tyranny as being narrow or not very useful because it did not consider later phenomena such as Caesarism.¹⁴ Since Voegelin does not mention Caesar or Caesarism in his book review, Strauss may have found it in another of Voegelin's writings, or perhaps heard about it directly from him, but what is important for us is not identifying the source, but understanding how Strauss perceived Caesarism.

The question of whether Caesar was a tyrant is subject to debate. In Strauss's opinion, "Voegelin emphasizes, there are tyrannical as well as royal Caesars."¹⁵ Caesar may have been an unjust usurper of rulership because he became a dictator by force of arms rather than by blood lineage, and he was a consul, i.e. he did not ascend to the throne. Therefore, strictly speaking, it may not be possible to state that he was a king, yet perhaps Strauss's interpretation of Voegelin's real intention is to point out that it is possible to conclude that Caesar was a good ruler.

Secondly, I would like to consider the signification of Caesarism. According to Strauss, in Voegelin's thought, "Caesarism emerges only after 'the final breakdown of the republican constitutional order'; hence Caesarism" means a

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹² Strauss, "On Tyranny," *On Tyranny*, p. 69. It is a well-known fact that Plato advocated rule by philosophers, but both Kojève and Strauss acknowledged that the possibility of its realization was extremely low. Shadia Drury maintains that Strauss, who considered the rule not bound by law as tyranny, affirmed tyranny as rule by the wise. Cf. Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1988, p. 95.

¹³ Eric Voegelin, *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 2, April 1949, pp. 241-4.

¹⁴ Strauss, "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*," *On Tyranny*, p. 179.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

“postconstitutional rule.”¹⁶ Before Caesar, Rome had adopted a republic based on law, but Caesar overthrew this republic by becoming a monarch, and this is the reason why he was assassinated.

Strauss disagrees with Voegelin’s view and asserts that Caesarism was nonetheless a sub-concept of the “absolute monarchy” conceived by ancient philosophers.¹⁷ For this reason, the ancient philosophers’ debates over tyranny are useful for later generations. Absolute monarchy is thought to refer to rule by one good ruler, in contrast to tyranny. In this case, the question should be what constitutes a good ruler. When Strauss writes, “Is not the difference between good and bad the most fundamental of all practical or political distinctions?”¹⁸ he does not explicitly define what is good and what is bad. The distinction between governance by good rulers and governance by bad rulers can be rephrased as the distinction between Caesarism and tyranny, but Strauss admits that the distinction is “too subtle” and that “The true doctrine of the legitimacy of Caesarism is a dangerous doctrine.”¹⁹

The Good Ruler

What kind of individual does Strauss think that good rulers would be? To find out the answer, we need to review Xenophon’s description in “Hiero or Tyrannicus.” As I mentioned in the Introduction, at the end of “Hiero or Tyrannicus,” Simonides, the wise man, proposes to the tyrant Hiero that he become a good ruler. Interpreting Xenophon’s writings, including “Hiero or Tyrannicus,” Strauss argues that “a good ruler is necessarily beneficent,”²⁰ and goes on to rephrase himself writing, “beneficent tyranny or the rule of a tyrant who listens to the counsels of the wise.”²¹ But what does “beneficent” mean?

In answer to this question, I would like to quote here what Strauss says about Xenophon’s concept of justice.

The just man is a man who does not hurt anyone, but helps everyone who has dealings with him. To be just, in other words, simply means to be beneficent.²²

Therefore, a good ruler is a person who does the right thing in the sense that he gives alms to those around him, that is, he is a “beneficent” person. This idea of Strauss’s is based on the “Machiavellian” suggestion by Simonides in “Hiero or Tyrannicus” (on and after 9.1) that the tyrant should not punish the people but should award the meritorious persons by himself.²³ Other than “Hiero or Tyrannicus” as the basis of his argument, Strauss briefly lists in the notes some references from the writings of ancient Greek philosophers, however he does not offer any detailed explanations.²⁴

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

²⁰ Strauss, “On Tyranny,” *On Tyranny*, p. 74.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁴ *On Tyranny*, p. 120.

In one of Strauss's references, *The Apology of Socrates* (26), Plato writes that since Socrates had turned toward the direction in which he could do his greatest good deeds, Socrates asked the people for the reward he deserved for his deeds. In another reference, *Memorabilia* (Book I, Chapter 2, 7), Xenophon writes that Socrates stated that the greatest persons of merit should be owed the greatest gratitude. From these facts, it can be said that Plato, Socrates, and Xenophon think that good deeds should be rewarded in the form of prizes and gratitude.

Let us bring the discussion back to Strauss. Justice transcends the lawful and the unlawful: it is supralegal. Strauss even admits that "rule without laws may very well be just ... in so far as the good ruler is 'a seeing law,' and laws do not 'see,' or legal justice is blind."²⁵ Law itself is not a person and, therefore cannot "see," whereas a good ruler can "see" those around him. If the person himself or herself is just willing to do so, it is possible to realize "the justice in business dealings—Aristotle's commutative justice proper" by appropriately giving benefits according to people's achievements.²⁶

Then, what kind of tyranny did Xenophon think should be practiced? In Chapter 9 of "Hiero or Tyrannicus," Simonides states that trust between a ruler and his citizens is established by the ruler through praising and honoring those who do the best things. In Chapter 10, Simonides states that the citizens willingly pay to hire mercenaries if the ruler, rather than hiring the mercenaries just for himself, hires them to protect all his citizens, which allows each citizen to focus on building his or her personal fortune. In Chapter 11, the last chapter, Simonides insists that the ruler should spend money for "the common good" for his citizens, instead of constructing his own "house embellished at tremendous cost."²⁷ By doing so, everyone in the ruler's vicinity becomes his allies, and the ruler can safely travel anywhere. Simonides adds that this would eventually lead to the ruler sharing the property of his allies. In these last three chapters, Hiero speaks little, remaining completely silent at the end of the treatise. Xenophon concludes by writing, "the polite silence in which a Greek tyrant, old in crime and martial glory, could listen to a siren-song of virtue." Strauss interprets the meaning of this silence as implying Hiero's agreement with Simonides.²⁸

Based upon what is developed in the above paragraphs, Simonides's use of the expression "ruler" instead of "tyrant" in the last three chapters of "Hiero or Tyrannicus" indicates that Xenophon did not regard tyranny as the best of all political systems. That is why Strauss claims that Xenophon "seems to have thought that tyranny at its best could hardly, if ever, be realized."²⁹

²⁵ Strauss, "On Tyranny," *On Tyranny*, p. 74.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²⁷ Xenophon, "Hiero or Tyrannicus," *On Tyranny*, p. 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64. Readers certainly may have to wonder whether Hiero was completely persuaded, as Strauss himself implies in the note to this sentence. Cf. *On Tyranny*, p. 118.

²⁹ Strauss, "On Tyranny," *On Tyranny*, p. 75.

Tyranny in Modern Times

Possibility of Establishing the Ideal Tyranny

In contrast to Xenophon, what is Strauss's opinion in regard to the possibility of good tyranny? Strauss contends that "Good tyranny is a utopia," in other words it is something extremely difficult to realize. Furthermore, he states, "We never denied that good tyranny is possible under very favorable circumstances."³⁰ Although Strauss does not give an explanation here as to under what circumstances it is possible to practice good tyranny, if the tyrant successfully carries out Simonides's proposals mentioned above, good tyranny can be thought to have been realized.

Kojève disagrees with this view by Strauss, however, he does not argue that the realization of a good tyranny was simple in antiquity. In his article "Tyranny and Wisdom," Kojève points out that in modern times it has become an almost banal phenomenon, in contrast to the fact that the "'ideal' tyranny sketched by Simonides" in the last three chapters of the article "Hiero or Tyrannicus," was "only a utopia" in ancient times.³¹ Kojève offers three reasons for this proposition. Firstly, a good tyrant must reward the people (Chapter 9 of "Hiero or Tyrannicus"). For example, in the Soviet Union, rewards were given to those who contributed to the movement to increase labor productivity called the "Stakhanovite" emulation. Secondly, the tyrant should organize a national police force and a standing army (Chapter 10). This was practiced not only in democratic countries, but also in countries ruled by tyrants when Kojève wrote his article. Thirdly, if the tyrant builds public facilities instead of his own mansion, his subjects will like him (Chapter 11). Building public facilities was nothing new even at the time when Kojève was alive.

In response to this objection, Strauss quotes Kojève's reference to the example of the Soviet Union, accusing Kojève of believing Stalin to be the ideal modern tyrant. In addition, Strauss ridicules Kojève's desire to claim that Stalin was free to travel anywhere outside the Iron Curtain, and that all those who lived behind the Iron Curtain were Stalin's allies.³² Prior to the publication of the edition of *On Tyranny* containing his article "Tyranny and Wisdom," Kojève had asked Strauss to modify or delete the paragraph including the above statement: "Kojève denies (...) (*Hiero* 11, 11 and 11, 14)" (a letter from Kojève to Strauss on September 19, 1950).³³ However, after closely examining the "Restatement," in comparison to the letter from Strauss to Kojève on September 28, 1950, I believe that it can be inferred that Strauss did not completely accept Kojève's request and only deleted the part containing Hitler from the previous paragraph, and published the book containing the part about Stalin.³⁴ Strauss's ridicule of Kojève is bitter, but it is not surprising that Stalin saw

³⁰ Ibid., p. 188.

³¹ Kojève, "Tyranie et sagesse," *De la tyrannie*, p. 153. ("Tyranny and Wisdom," *On Tyranny*, p. 138.)

³² Strauss, "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*," *On Tyranny*, p. 189.

³³ *On Tyranny*, p. 256. In fact, the quoted page reads "II, 11 and II, 14," but this is probably a typographical error that occurred when the editors transcribed it. Originally it must have been "11, 11 and 11, 14," since on page 189 where the content of the letter is written, it reads "11, 11 and 11, 14."

³⁴ Ibid., p. 257.

the citizens of the Eastern Bloc as his comrades and was able to travel safely within their circles. From our present point of view, it is difficult to imagine that Stalin really did good deeds. Yet, according to Kojève's niece Nina Kousnetzoff, Stalin's misdeeds were not known in France at the time, and it is likely that Kojève was unaware of them.³⁵

In the first place, it is not Stalin, but Salazar, the leader of Portugal, whom Kojève himself cites as an example of a good tyrant in modern times in "Tyranny and Wisdom." Just before mentioning Salazar, Kojève states that Xenophon "had not seen 'tyrannies' exercised in the service of truly revolutionary political, social, or economic ideas (that is to say, in the service of objectives differing radically from anything already in existence) with a national, racial, imperial, or humanitarian basis."³⁶ But Kojève does not claim that Salazar ruled based on these purposes and foundations. In Kojève's eyes, the good "tyranny" that Xenophon's Simonides thought was nothing more than a utopia has been realized by Salazar in modern times. It should be noted, however, that Kojève does not go so far as to praise Salazar unreservedly.

In response to Kojève's view, Strauss concedes in writing, "I am inclined to believe that Kojève is right, except that I am not quite certain whether Salazar's rule should not be called 'postconstitutional' rather than tyrannical."³⁷ As can be seen from Strauss's avoidance of making an assertion, Salazar could not be called a tyrant because he enacted a constitution, and it is possible to conceive that Salazar obtained power legally rather than unjustly usurping it. Thus, according to Strauss's definition of a tyrant, Salazar may have been a good *leader*, but he was not a good *tyrant*. Unlike Strauss, it may be presumed that Kojève defines a tyrant simply as a leader who has seized power, and that is probably why there was disagreement between Strauss and Kojève. It seems, therefore, that both Kojève and Strauss saw Salazar as a good leader to some extent.

Science and Nature

But the question of whether there were any good leaders in the contemporary age is less important for us than the question of what Strauss conceives of modern tyranny being like. He believes that modern tyranny is based not only on the popularization or spread of philosophical or scientific knowledge, but also on the infinite progress of modern science in its quest to "conquer nature,"³⁸ and it seems that Strauss was more critical of the latter point. According to Strauss, in contrast to modern science, whose goal is to conquer nature, the classical philosophers knew "the possibility of a science that issues in the conquest of nature and the possibility of the popularization of philosophy or science, (...) but, the classics rejected them as 'unnatural,' i.e., as destructive of humanity."³⁹

Contemporary philosophers who have discussed technology combined with science include Lewis Mumford, José Ortega y Gasset, Jacques Ellul, Martin

³⁵ This is based on my interviews with Kousnetzoff from 2010 to 2011 in Paris, France.

³⁶ Kojève, "Tyranie et sagesse," *De la tyrannie*, p. 154. ("Tyranny and Wisdom," *On Tyranny*, p. 138.)

³⁷ Strauss, "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*," *On Tyranny*, p. 189.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

Heidegger, and Hannah Arendt. Since they all were critical of technology, it is likely that amid such a trend that Strauss focused his attention on the issue of the destruction of humanity by science linked to tyranny. Before examining this point by Strauss, I would like to introduce the view of technology held by Arendt, a contemporary and acquaintance of Strauss. In her opinion, the worldview of “the maker and fabricator,” namely, “homo faber” which is seen as a characteristic mentality in the modern era, is colored by “sovereignty” which considers that nature can be freely transformed so as to facilitate fabrication.⁴⁰ And such a worldview is based on “the principle of utility,” which “was found wanting and was superseded by the greatest happiness of the greatest number” formulated by Jeremy Bentham.⁴¹ Consequently, it ended up “with the triumphal victory of exchange value over use value, first introduced the principle of interchangeability, then relativization, and finally the devaluation, of all values.”⁴² We can interpret this as meaning that technology has finally brought about a kind of nihilism.

Nature

However, Strauss did not think that technology or science would bring about nihilism. Let us return to Strauss’s discussion of the “conquest of nature” by science and the destruction of humanity. For the time being, the question to be asked here is what nature and humanity are for Strauss. In *On Tyranny*, he does not elaborate on this point.⁴³ Hence, in referring to Strauss’s *Natural Rights and History* (1953) based on lectures given at the University of Chicago in October 1949, I would like to explore the answer to the question of what nature and humanity are for Strauss. These lectures and the publication of this book appeared between 1948, when the first edition of the book *On Tyranny* was published, which included his articles “Hiero or Tyrannicus” and “On Tyranny,” and 1954, when the French edition of the same book was published. The French version additionally included Kojève’s article “Tyranny and Wisdom” and Strauss’s “Restatement.”

Strauss thinks that nature was originally concealed by the authority’s decisions or, in his words, “authoritative decisions.”⁴⁴ What is authority in this context? Strauss states that “Authority as the right of human beings to be obeyed is essentially derivative from law, and law is originally nothing other than the way of life of the community.”⁴⁵ Strauss also points out that before the discovery of nature, different communities had different “ways” or “customs,”⁴⁶ which were decided by authority. Strauss gives concrete examples of ways such as menstruation for women, abstaining from alcohol for Muslims, and not eating pork for Jews.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second Edition, The University of Chicago Press, 2018, p. 305.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 307-8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 307.

⁴³ Often referring to the concept of nature in *The City and Man*, Strauss develops his theory, typically seen in his affirmation that since the idea that all “evils” should be eliminated “is against nature,” “The just city is then impossible,” and in his sentence that “The equality of the sexes and absolute communism are against nature.” Strauss, *The City and Man*, The University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 127.

⁴⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, The University of Chicago Press, 1953, p. 91.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-3.

But, after the discovery of nature, things changed completely: “the ‘customs’ of natural beings” came to be regarded as their nature, and “the ‘customs’ of different human tribes” as their “conventions.”⁴⁸ Using the previous examples, natural beings can be thought of as women, and various human groups, such as Muslims and Jews. Nature and convention correspond to the Greek words *physis* and *nomos*. Discovering nature is a work of philosophy, and Strauss specifies that philosophy was established separately from myth when nature was discovered in ancient Greece.⁴⁹ In order for the idea of “natural right” to emerge, authority must first be questioned: such natural right is different from the righteousness based on the ways and customs of predecessors.⁵⁰

In Strauss’s opinion, one cannot live without thinking about “the first things, i.e., the oldest things.”⁵¹ This can be interpreted as meaning that Strauss assumes nature to be the primary being, because he writes that “Nature is the ancestor of all ancestors or the mother of all ancestors.”⁵² In fact, the Hebrew word for “nature” does not exist in the Hebrew Bible, Strauss therefore states that the Old Testament “does not know ‘nature,’” and that “heaven and earth” which appear in the Bible are different from “nature.”⁵³ Strauss also aptly points out that artificial things (or “art” in his words) presupposes nature, but nature does not presuppose artificial things.⁵⁴ Thus, Strauss seems to have recognized nature as the origin of all things.

Human Nature

Next, I would like to discuss how Strauss perceived human nature. Rephrasing “humanity” as “human nature,” he states that “We must distinguish between those human desires and inclinations which are in accordance with human nature and therefore good for man, and those which are destructive of his nature or his humanity and therefore bad.”⁵⁵ Hence he argues that this kind of harmony with nature leads to a good life, that is, a good human life.

As some ancient philosophers held that “the good” was not essentially the same as “the pleasant,” and that “the good” was more fundamental than “the pleasant,” they were critical of hedonism.⁵⁶ Influenced by their views, Strauss goes on to state that “the life according to nature,” as opposed to the life aimed solely at the pursuit of pleasure, is the life of a “high-class person,” and that it is “the life of human excellence or virtue” or simply “the good life.”⁵⁷ And “by nature,” he points out, there is an inherently admirable life which concerns perfected human nobility, and that such a life is often not preoccupied with one’s own interests or calculations.⁵⁸

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 90.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 81-2.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 84.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 91.

⁵² Ibid., p. 92.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 81.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 92.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 95. In the present day, we should avoid using “man” to generalize people. In his use of neutral masculine pronouns, Strauss does not have any intention to discriminate against women.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 127.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 127.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 128.

Then what is the actual content of Strauss's assumption of "human nature"? He declares that "Man is by nature a social being," without daring to mention Aristotle by name.⁵⁹ And unlike animals, humans have language, reason and intelligence.⁶⁰ By communicating through languages, humans are more social than animals, therefore Strauss writes "Humanity itself is sociality."⁶¹ Human sociability is not derived from the calculation of the pleasure obtained from it, but is based on the nature that humans have innately, and consequently, humans derive pleasure from interacting with others.⁶²

The human nature defined by Strauss also includes freedom. However, as we all know, humans are not completely free to behave towards others as they see fit.⁶³ In this way, the exercise of liberty must be accompanied by restraint. "Restraint is therefore as natural or as primeval as freedom,"⁶⁴ Strauss points out.

He believes that coercive restraint rather than voluntary restraint is necessary for such restraint to be effective in the majority of cases. Strauss assumes that most people cannot control their own bodies through persuasion from others. Surprisingly, Strauss declares:

Man is so built that he cannot achieve the perfection of humanity except by keeping down his lower impulses. He cannot rule his body by persuasion.

This fact alone shows that even despotic rule is not per se against nature.⁶⁵ He continues by arguing that "despotic rule" is not necessary only in limited cases, such as in those where people actively accept persuasion from others and thus governed, or in those where they have excellent understanding.

Problems of Democracy and Criticism of Open Society

But, as can be seen from the fact that Strauss wrote "even despotic rule" in the previous quotation, what he intends here does not seem to be a positive affirmation of despotic rule or tyranny. What he is apprehensive about is the corruption that results from the exercise of liberty without any constraint. In *The City and Man* (1964), commenting on Plato's *Republic*, Strauss points out that people who thoroughly enjoyed freedom under democracy would fall into corruption. Based on Socrates's view that the human soul and the State are in a parallel relationship, Strauss explains the characteristics of human beings under democracy as assumed by Socrates:

The democratic man comes to sight as the son of an oligarchic father, as the degenerate son of a wealthy father who is concerned with nothing but making money: the democratic man is a drone, the fat, soft, and prodigal playboy, the Lotus-eater [the one that is immersed in pleasure] who,

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 129.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 127.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 129.

⁶² Ibid., p. 129.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 129.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 130.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 132-3.

assigning a kind of equality to equal and unequal things, lives one day in complete surrender to the lowest desires and the next day ascetically.⁶⁶

If such is the case, “the democratic man” is by no means villainous, but he is unable to distinguish between good and bad deeds and tends to be captivated by his own desire. According to Strauss’s interpretation of Socrates, under democracy many people cannot control their desires nor improve themselves.⁶⁷

This is not the only problem with democracy. Although not mentioned by Strauss, Socrates said that the people under democracy tend to elect one person to be their leader; accordingly, whenever a tyrant is born, the tyrant is rooted in such a popular leader (*Republic*, 565D). In this way, Socrates recognized that democracy tended to easily turn into tyranny.

In addition, Strauss thinks that not only democracy, but also an open society dehumanizes people. In his opinion, although the open society encompasses several societies composed of various levels of political maturity, the society in which a human being can perfect his or her nature is necessarily a closed society.⁶⁸ Strauss prefers “a closed and relatively small society” to “a very large city,” because in the latter each person can live according to his own desires, but the range in which humans can exercise positive consideration is limited. He cites “Babylon” as an example of such a very large city.⁶⁹ Since he placed double quotations around “Babylon,” this term is interpreted to be used in a symbolic sense of “any rich and magnificent city believed to be a place of excessive luxury and wickedness,” rather than simply “the chief city of ancient Mesopotamia.” We can surmise that the closed societies which he envisaged include a group of philosophers who have communicated truth among themselves, using the esoteric art of writing and taking the form of oral tradition, so as not to be seen as dangerous by outsiders. Since Strauss also argues that “The distinction of the human race into a number of independent groups is according to nature,”⁷⁰ the closed societies which he supposes do not necessarily refer to depopulated areas, and it cannot be said that Strauss rejected the large framework of the nation-state.

Furthermore, in as much as it was Kojève who envisioned the arrival of the Universal and Homogenous State, it can be assumed that Strauss’s criticism of the open society was also directed at Kojève. Yet, it is inconceivable that Kojève would agree with equating the open society with the Universal and Homogenous State. Although Kojève does not desire the emergence of a tyrant ruling the Universal and Homogenous State, Strauss is concerned about the emergence of “the Universal and Final Tyrant,” the one who will rule the world for a long time and prevent free activities in closed societies: Strauss hereby particularly bears philosophical research

⁶⁶ Strauss, *The City and Man*, pp. 132-3. Notice that [...] is added by me.

⁶⁷ Although not mentioned by Strauss, Socrates said that the people under democracy tend to elect one person to be their leader; accordingly, whenever a tyrant is born, the tyrant is rooted in such a popular leader (*Republic*, 565D). In this way, Socrates recognized that democracy tended to easily turn into tyranny.

⁶⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 131-2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

in mind.⁷¹

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored Leo Strauss's nuanced discussion on the nature and evolution of tyranny, juxtaposing ancient conceptions with modern realities. How should we grasp the arguments developed in this text?

First, in considering ancient tyranny, Strauss's reading of Xenophon's "Hiero or Tyrannicus" leads him to the conclusion that it was "monarchical rule without law," and that beneficent tyranny was permissible for the ancient philosopher. Democracy led by politicians who are not beneficent is not much different from a political system ruled by an evil tyrant. Xenophon held that the beneficent tyrant should reward persons of merit and build institutions for the common people instead of constructing palaces for himself. According to Kojève, to expect such things from tyrants in antiquity was nothing more than a fantasy, but modern rulers ordinarily practice such policies. Whereas Kojève regarded Salazar as a good tyrant that Simonides of Xenophon in "Hiero or Tyrannicus" assumed was impossible, Strauss acknowledged the possibility that Salazar was a good ruler, although probably not a tyrant by definition, as Salazar's government might have been rather a "postconstitutional rule."

Second, in regard to modern tyranny, I have confirmed that Strauss developed his argument which transcends the phases of political development: modern tyranny does not only conquer nature as the external environment, but also attempts to destroy human nature by using the power of science.⁷² Strauss was concerned about the fact that science would conquer nature in this way and eventually destroy human nature. Although it would be debatable whether all kinds of science destroy human nature, if science aims only at the pursuit of pleasure and the enhancement of human power and not at promoting the good in our human nature, science can be harmful to human nature. Following Strauss's opinion, we can state that it is certainly desirable that science makes human life more convenient, yet it is preferable that science and technology be used within a range that does not destroy human nature. In other words, we should aim to develop science and technology in a

⁷¹ Strauss, "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*," *On Tyranny*, p. 211.

⁷² Interestingly, like Strauss, Kojève not only contrasted humans with nature, but also recognized nature (or animality) in humans. He boldly stated:

In order to negate, there must be something to negate: an existing *given* and hence an identical given-Being. And that is why man can exist freely—that is, humanly—only while living as an animal in a given natural World. But he lives *humanly* in it only to the extent that he *negates* this natural or animal given. (Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, assembled by Raymond Queneau, edited by Allan Bloom and translated by James H. Nichols, Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 222 / *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, Gallimard, 1947, p. 494, emphasis in the original.)

The viewpoint of "conquest of nature" mentioned by Strauss has something in common with Kojève's view of the world derived from Christianity, in which humans "deny" or modify nature. However, as is clear from the previous quotation, Kojève did not think that such denial of the natural given meant the destruction of humanity, but on the contrary, he perceived humanity in the denial of the natural given.

way that does not destroy human nature. Also, as Strauss pointed out, if human beings can perfect their nature in closed societies, we must be skeptical of people simply aim for an open society by means of science. Hence, it can be said that we should reaffirm the modern role of philosophy as a discipline that assists people in aspiring to virtue or excellence in closed societies.

Given that Strauss's theory of tyranny is not limited to the realm of political science, but includes the perspective of human nature, it is still pertinent today to reconsider the mode of science and how it should be used in the future. Even though the tyrant is "postconstitutional" and superficially appears good, if modern tyranny uses science to destroy human nature without destroying human beings, we must reject such tyranny and explore the mode of science.

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