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**Leo Strauss and Nietzsche: Will to Power  
as a Vindication of God**

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Several months before his death, Leo Strauss penned a long essay on Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*. To my mind, this essay is a kind of testament, and it also constitutes one of the most peculiar and original interpretations of Nietzsche's work that I have encountered, since it argues that Nietzsche's doctrine of will to power, and the associated pathos-formula of the "death of God," in reality is nothing short of a "vindication of God".

For Strauss, Nietzsche is the thinker who disdainfully rejects the emergent social sciences and their claim to know – and thus direct – society and instead argues that the only legitimate "guides" of political life, of *Sittlichkeit*, can only be philosophy or religion. *Grosse Politik*, great – as opposed to petty – politics, refers to the agon between religious and philosophical leaders as to who ought to be the ruling power over the state and over its economics.<sup>1</sup> In a passage from *Natural Right and History* in which he rejects Weber's "petty" understanding of politics – according to which politicians merely aspire to the conquest of the state machinery – Strauss spells out what the rule of philosophy or religion means: "No alternative is more fundamental than this: human guidance or divine guidance... a life of obedient love versus a life of free insight. In every attempt at harmonization, in every synthesis... philosophy, which means to be the queen, must be made the handmaid of revelation or vice versa" (*NRH*, 74-75). The *agon* between philosophy and religion over rule is thus a struggle over who ought to guide human beings: a God or a human being, authority or reason. Rule is *Herrschaft*: the guidance of a *Herr* or Lord (better than "master"). The struggle between philosophy and religion which Strauss identifies as the leitmotif of Nietzsche's thinking is then a struggle about *who* is the Lord and *what* is the Kingdom of the Lord, and, perhaps more fundamentally, also *where* is the Lord's Kingdom: on earth, in the heart, or in some other, promised land? If philosophy teaches how the type "man" can become Lord of the earth (master of himself and of nature), then by contrast true religion teaches how this type stands in need of a divine archetype, from which it originates and to which it must return. Strauss's reading of Nietzsche's *grosse Politik* follows Nietzsche into the labyrinth, into the "great hunt" for the Lord, in both of its senses.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows I shall first discuss the basis of philosophy's claim to rule over society. I shall next show in what sense Nietzsche's doctrine of will to power is, in

Strauss's interpretation, a secret vindication of God. After that I will briefly consider the basis of religion's claim to rule. Lastly, I will suggest in what way *amor fati* figures the ultimate sense of the *agon* between religion and philosophy.

Both Nietzsche and Strauss denote the "rule" or spiritual *Herrschaft* of the philosopher by the term of tyranny. "This is an ancient, eternal story: what formerly happened with the Stoics still happens today, as soon as any philosophy begins to believe in itself. It always creates the world in its own image; it cannot do otherwise. Philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to the 'creation of the world,' to the *causa prima*" (BGE 9). The tyranny of philosophical knowledge is therefore a direct competitor with the Creator God. For Nietzsche, the philosopher relates to the text of nature as if this were its own creation: "philosophizing... is the most spiritual [*der geistigste*] will to power; it consists in prescribing to nature what or how it ought to be (aph.9)" (SPPP 176).

According to Strauss, the rule of philosophy is expressed in Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power, which is nothing other than a doctrine of the relation between truth and interpretation, or nature and man. For this doctrine, "the world in itself, the 'thing-in-itself', 'nature' (aph.9) is wholly chaotic and meaningless. Hence all meaning, all order originates in man, in man's creative acts, in his will to power.... Nietzsche suggests that the most important, the most comprehensive truth – the truth regarding all truths – is life-giving. In other words, by suggesting that truth is a human creation, he suggests that this truth at any rate is not a human creation (SPPP 177)." Philosophy's tyranny over nature takes the form of relativism, the Protagorean idea that man is the measure of all things (whereas Plato – always the theologian – had said that the God is such a measure). Yet for Strauss when Nietzsche asserts that the relativity of truth – the fact that there is no truth but only human interpretations – is "life-giving," Nietzsche is thereby recognizing that the *fact* of relativism, or perspectivism, "at any rate is not a human creation." All truth is relative to man, but that the relativity of truth is life-giving and not deadly, this "fact" of relativism is itself "not a human creation" and thus points to something transcending (man's) will to power.

Strauss's point is that the will to power cannot will its own relativity: this is what makes it tyrannical, after all. Relativism, therefore, is a fact; and this limits from the start the reach of will to power: it makes will to power itself relative. Contrary to what is usually assumed, Strauss does not deny relativism or think that it is a self-refuting position: there is a truth to relativism, and such a truth is not itself relative. The doctrine of the will to power as interpretation is "at the same time an interpretation and the most fundamental fact." But this entails that nature cannot only be chaos.

Precisely because Nietzsche's dictum, "there is no truth, only interpretation" is not self-refuting, so too the doctrine of will to power is not a refutation of God. To the contrary, for Strauss this doctrine "is in a manner a vindication of God" (SPPP 178).<sup>3</sup> This surprising – perhaps even shocking thesis to a Nietzschean – turns on the claim that there exists a decisive difference between the atheism of "free spirits" who maintain the doctrine of will to power, and the figure of the "philosopher of the future... [who] will again worship the god Dionysus or will again be, as an Epicurean might say, a *dionysokolex* [a follower of Dionysus/MV] ." Strauss argues that Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power – properly understood – is both an experiment and a temptation (the German *Versuch* connotes both meanings). It is a temptation for man because it

functions as a tempting of God. To speak in the vocabulary of messianism, Strauss is saying that the doctrine of will to power can be read as a “prayer,” as an invocation, of the God to come. Nietzsche thematizes this temptation in the fourth book of *Zarathustra*. I would now like to explain this way of reading the *Zarathustra*.

It is typical of Strauss that the most important claim in his text – that around which his entire argument is structured – is never directly stated in his essay. In the case of his interpretation of Nietzsche’s will to power as a vindication of God, Strauss refers his readers to Karl Reinhardt’s 1936 essay *Nietzsches Klage der Ariadne*, saying that it contains “the nerve of Nietzsche’s ‘theology’ of which I have not spoken and shall not speak since I have no access to it” (*SPPP* 181). Strauss’s citation is a clear invitation to the reader to read Reinhardt’s text.

Reinhardt’s topic concerns the possible reasons that led Nietzsche to rewrite the Hymn of the Sorcerer, in the fourth part of *Zarathustra*, in the form of a “Klage der Ariadne,” Ariadne’s Elegy or lament. In this rewriting, not only does a hymn become an elegy, but Nietzsche also switches the gender of the one who is chased and hunted down by the God from masculine to feminine (Reinhardt 1936: 7). In *Zarathustra* the God-intoxicated Hymn of the sorcerer is unmasked as a temptation to be avoided and that is why Zarathustra hits the sorcerer with a stick. Reinhardt, though, believes that the Hymn is a temptation in a second sense of the term, that is, it functions as an invocation of the coming God, the God who Zarathustra – as a free spirit – cannot yet see, but who will be worshipped by the philosophers of the future. On this reading, Zarathustra embodies the Nietzschean ideal of self-overcoming: Zarathustra stands for the self who always overcomes itself, that is, overcomes its temptations (Z “Of Self-Overcoming” and “The Sign”). But, according to Reinhardt, higher than Zarathustra stands Ariadne: her Elegy signals the descent, the going-under of the self before the coming of the Hidden God (Reinhardt 1936: 11). Ariadne’s lament is in reality the acclamation of the newest – but also oldest – God.

Reinhardt believes that the “donkey litany” of the fourth book of *Zarathustra*, when the “higher men” worship the donkey – the ultimate Yea-sayer – as the return of God is not only to be understood as a relapse of these men into the stupidity of worshipping a dead God; rather, this very stupidity reveals itself to be the form in which the fundamental drive of will to power is divinized (*Vergötterung des Urtriebs*). Thus, when Zarathustra rejects the donkey he shows himself to be “simply an old atheist who believes neither in the old nor in the new gods [*bloss ein alter Atheist: der glaubt weder an alte noch neue Götter*]” (*WP* 1038) and is incapable of appreciating how the eternal return needs to be understood as the return of and to the originary God: the eternal return is the “*circulus vitiosus deus*” (*BGE* 56), the circle that always returns to God.

The key to Reinhardt’s peculiar interpretation is found in the hidden relation between the donkey and Ariadne. Nietzsche speaks of Dionysus’s playful jesting with Ariadne, asking her why her ears are not longer, like a donkey’s. In aphorism 8 of *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche explains the sense of this jest: “There is a point in every philosophy when the philosopher’s ‘conviction’ appears on the stage – or to use the language of an ancient Mystery: *Adventavit asinus, pulcher et fortissimus*”. Commentators have pointed out that this ancient mystery refers to the subject matter of Apuleius’s *Golden Ass*, in which the protagonist’s curiosity transforms him into an ass and leads him at the end of his journeys to encounter Isis, goddess of fertility, of

simplicity, sometimes (from inscription at Sais) referred to as nature herself. But I believe that Nietzsche is also relying on another symbolical context, namely the Jewish and Christian symbolism, for which the donkey is the animal associated with the Messiah, who will enter Jerusalem riding on the back of an ass.<sup>4</sup> In Greek symbolism, the donkey is the animal of Dionysus.<sup>5</sup> I think that Strauss, by way of Reinhardt, is suggesting that the Messiah – the new God – comes to regain His Kingdom on earth by riding on the back of the old God – Dionysus.<sup>6</sup> I can put the same point in a vocabulary that may more familiar to some of you and that was surely present to Strauss's mind: in the "Theological-Political Fragment," Walter Benjamin states that the messianic age consists in nothing other than the resurrection of nature – of animality – from its human all too human domination, and that the only politics which can tempt the Messiah's coming is that of nihilism. Ariadne's elegy is therefore at once a hymn or invocation of Dionysus, understood as resurrected nature, and an acclamation of the Messiah.

I now move on to a discussion of religion's rule, that is, the tyranny of religion, rather than of philosophy. In aphorism 188 of *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche writes that: "Every morality is... a bit of tyranny against 'nature'; also against 'reason'... all there is or has been on earth of freedom... whether in thought itself or in government or in rhetoric and persuasion, in the arts just as in ethics, has developed only owing to 'the tyranny of such capricious laws'; and in all seriousness, the probability is by no means small that precisely this is 'nature' and 'natural' – and not that *laisser-aller* (BGE 188)."<sup>7</sup> Strauss comments on this aphorism: "Over against the ruinous permissiveness of anarchism [the *laisser-aller* of late modern liberalism/MV], Nietzsche asserts that precisely long lasting obedience to unnatural and unreasonable *nomoi* is 'the moral imperative of nature'. *Physis* calls for *nomoi* while preserving the distinction, nay, opposition of *physis* and *nomoi* (SPPP 183)." Freedom and obedience, nature and law, are thus not to be opposed, just as Nietzsche argues in *Zarathustra* ("Of Self-Overcoming") that command and obedience also do not simply stand in opposition. All moral value comes from obedience to authoritative rules or laws, which are neither rational nor natural.

This is a striking admission to make on the part of Leo Strauss – who is universally considered to be the advocate of "natural right" against legal positivism. If Strauss is right about his reading of Nietzsche's aphorism, then a natural right, that is, a natural foundation of morality, is strictly speaking a contradiction in terms. Nature has no order in itself but stands in need of order, and that is why it develops its own imperative: create order through obedience to customary laws. Nietzsche has given us the natural foundation, i.e. a foundation in a conception of nature as chaos, of the *priority of authority over reason for morality*. Since customary laws that are derived neither from nature nor from reason leaves open only the third possibility, that is, that they descend from a God, then aphorism 188 of *Beyond Good and Evil* may be read as a sort of naturalistic deduction of the necessity of divine revelation. Once again, Nietzsche's atheism (that is, the belief in the chaotic essence of nature) becomes an ally of revealed religion, and Nietzsche's thought shows itself to be a vindication of God. I draw to my conclusion. If we cannot but think – religiously speaking – about nature without referring to its Creation (just as we cannot but think about nature – philosophically speaking – as chaos), then nature must present an "original text" which lies beyond all the interpretations of nature that philosophy has heretofore given,

interpretations which, as we saw, constitute a tyranny over nature. How can nature as Creation and nature as Chaos be reconciled? What is the ultimate meaning of the agon between religion and philosophy? Strauss finds a formulation to this problem in aphorism 231 of *Beyond Good and Evil*: “But at the bottom of us, really ‘deep down,’ there is, of course, something unteachable, some granite of spiritual *fatum*, of predetermined decision and answer to predetermined selected questions. Whenever a cardinal problem is at stake, there speaks an unchangeable ‘this is I’ [...] At times we find certain solutions of problems that inspire strong faith in *us*; some call them henceforth *their* ‘convictions’. Later – we see them only as steps to self-knowledge, signposts to the problem we *are* – rather, to the great stupidity we are, to our spiritual *fatum*, to what is *unteachable* very ‘deep down’” (BGE 231). This aphorism contains one possible reading of what Nietzsche means by *amor fati*: what must be loved, as a philosopher, is precisely what in us refuses to be taught, “the great stupidity we are.” With the formula of *amor fati* Nietzsche’s conception of philosophy as tyrannical, whose purpose is the ultimate domination and change of the “original text” of nature gives way to a conception of philosophy which no longer sees in the change of reality and in the domination of nature its ultimate goals, but in the love for what cannot be changed: the pre-historical and the supra-historical, to speak with the early Nietzsche. All truth would then depend on a subjective piece of *fatum*, on a stubborn stumbling block, on something unteachable because unlearnable: the priority of authority over thought.<sup>8</sup>

Nature is a problem because it is “non-sense and chance,” because it is “a riddle, a gruesome accident,” and this calls forth man’s conquest of nature by way of its interpretation. The conquest of chance (i.e., the uprooting of inequality and suffering) is the driving force of democracy in modernity, culminating in the social ideal of communism. But the conquest of chance entails the elimination of that unteachable, unreformable *fatum* which is every singular life. For the sake of this singular, it becomes necessary for nature to be postulated as an ordering of ranks, as a justification of authority, and thus as being the opposite of chance.<sup>9</sup> Nature is “eternal” not “in itself” but only because it is eternally willed by “the highest nature” – it is a postulate of a superhuman will, not a fact.

The democratic movement is therefore not mistaken when it holds that all rank orderings between human types are an illusion, not based on a natural fact. But its error, for Strauss, consists in thinking that man can force the equality between human beings to happen *in history and through society and politics*. This is an error on Nietzschean grounds: because man is not the future of man, rather: this future is what lies beyond man, in the over-man, or in the messianic age. Just as it is false to believe – as Marx holds – that it is man who lies at the origin of man.

Strauss wants to dispel this democratic illusion – or noble lie – by another illusion – or pious fraud – namely, the illusion that postulates orders of rank as something natural. This illusion is the doctrine of the eternal return of the same: unlike the doctrine of will to power, which said that there are no facts but only interpretations, the doctrine of the eternal return is that interpretation which states that there are no interpretations, no becoming in history, but only facts: “things that are, thing eternal” as Nietzsche says in *On the uses and disadvantages of history for life*.

Strauss’s final position is that the natural order of rank is a postulate of that singular life which recognizes that its origins (in Greek: the *genos* from which every

nature descends) are the only presupposition of its thinking. Philosophy – both in Socrates and in Nietzsche – begins with the acceptance of an origin (a *genos*) that is not philosophical, a piece of *fatum*, a stupidity, which must be loved without giving a reason. Strauss owes to Nietzsche the realization that because philosophy depends on ranks of nature, philosophy must depend on the act of will (of the philosophers of the future) which postulates such an order of rank and which reveals tyranny, rather than Being or ontology, as the fundamental result of philosophy. But because philosophy depends on *fatum* and on an act of will or decision with respect to origins, philosophy becomes another faith, and therewith the *agon* between Athens and Jerusalem remains forever open.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> “The fundamental alternative is that of the rule of philosophy over religion or the rule of religion over philosophy; it is not, as it was for Plato or Aristotle, that of the philosophic and political life; for Nietzsche, as distinguished from the classics, politics belongs from the outset to a lower plane than either philosophy or religion” (Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 176). Cited as *SPPP*. See also Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953) cited as *NRH* below.

<sup>2</sup> Against the prejudice that “the death of God” means the end of religion, Strauss to the contrary suggests that the best of the philosophers, namely, Plato, envisaged an organization of society that is not different – in essence – from the one proposed by the Brahmin’s code of law: in the Antichrist Plato and Manu both appear as founders of religions. Moreover, Strauss claims that Nietzsche’s philosophy withholds a secret “theology” of its own (again, the parallel with Plato, who was the first to coin the term “theology”). These indications suggest that Strauss believes that Nietzsche in the end may favor religion over philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> The doctrine of the will to power is a doctrine concerning the relativism of human truth claims; it is a doctrine that reveals philosophy as a form of power (albeit the most “spiritual” kind); it is a doctrine that poses nature as a “problem.” All three assertions provide good reasons why the doctrine of will to power need not be seen as a refutation of God, but Strauss goes even further and attempts to twist Nietzsche’s conception of philosophy, which belongs to atheistic “free spirits,” into a straight out “vindication of God.”

<sup>4</sup> Zechariah 9:9: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey”.

<sup>5</sup> Lactantius, *Institutes* 1.21-27; on this symbolism, see (Goodenough 1992).

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting, given Nietzsche’s well known revival of the opposition between Rome and Judea, that Tacitus, in his famous excursus on Jews in *Histories* 5.4 states: “Among Jews all things are profane that we hold sacred; on the other hand, they regard as permissible what seems to us immoral. In the innermost part of the Temple, they consecrated an image of the animal which had delivered them from their wandering and thirst [namely, the donkey], choosing a ram as beast of sacrifice to demonstrate, so it seems, their contempt for Hammon” (Tacitus 1992: 273).

<sup>7</sup> While philosophy claims to find the “foundations or morals either in nature or in reason,” Nietzsche holds that “morality is based on some tyranny against nature as well as against reason” (*SPPP* 182).

<sup>8</sup> Strauss refers to *BGE* 231 in order to make a crucial point: the philosophers of the future are “not the work of reason but of nature; in the last analysis all thought depends... on a fundamental stupidity; the nature of the individual, the individual nature, not evident and universally valid insights” (*SPPP* 190). The pre-modern opposition of nature to reason is related to the “stupidity” constituted by the existence of irrational *nomoi* that one obeys out of authority. Additionally, nature so understood – the unhistorical and suprahistorical meaning of nature – points to the intimate connection between the authority of the laws and “the nature of the individual.” The emphasis on the individual, on the fact that obedience to revealed law speaks for the singularity of the individual, is intended to counter the Marxist assumption that the nature which man (as a species-being) creates is a “social” nature, is a species-life, and thus not an individual’s singular life.

<sup>9</sup> The tension in Nietzsche between nature as order of rank and nature as chaos or chance is finally resolved by making “slavery” necessary for the *Gewaltmenschen der Cultur*: only culture (religion) can justify nature as chaos, and culture (religion) requires slavery, and slavery requires to be justified by the belief in an order of rank between natures. This in turn requires saying Yes to inferior beings, willing their inferiority as a bridge to the future. This is the aspect of Nietzsche’s thought on democracy that Siemens refers to as “deep compatibility” between democracy and aristocracy (Siemens 2008: 239-241). See the discussion of Nietzsche and the creation of a new race to master chance – first meaning of *grosse Politik*, but also idea that “philosopher-legislators” do not rule politically (*ibid.*, 241); on the motif of the philosophical *Gewaltmenschen* who hammer “human material into shape (*ibid.*, 249-251); on the motif that slaves must be commanded by another race: this is the “exploitative” model (*ibid.*, 253). Finally,

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Siemens addresses the “compatibility” of democracy with order of rank – this idea is important for me, but in another sense – in a messianic sense, the other side of order of rank. For Siemens, Nietzsche sees two types of men, the herd and the exception, both are necessary to each other, and neither can be evaluated in terms of the other: antagonism of herd-exception relation (Ibid., 257-261). On the two castes: see *HH* 439; but also that warning that Nietzsche’s *grosse Politik* is “ethical or cultural, rather than political by nature: the creation of new values; the perfectibility of the human species in the face of our growing contempt for the human; and the question of what constitutes human worth.... However... there is nothing even approaching Plato’s Republic” contra Appel (Ibid., 264).

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