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How to Read Texts? On Leo Strauss's Hermeneutics and Methods of Interpretation

Abstract

Methodology in the history of political thought has been lately a subject of a deepened research in political science. Beside new theories, there are some well-known perspectives that might be still applied in the field. In the article, I would like to present one of them, but in a new, critical approach: it will concern the methods of text interpretation found in the works of Leo Strauss. I will be particularly interested in Strauss's idea of a return to the "great books", which is a metaphor for studies on the most acknowledged philosophers of the past centuries, and which requires to understand these thinkers as they "understood themselves", as Strauss often repeats. In order to comprehend great minds, Strauss taught "how to read" texts and created his own school of hermeneutics. As an opponent of historicism and relativism, Strauss believed that by turning to the past, we gain a clear insight into contemporary situation, free of frameworks and intellectual limitations of our modern era. The aim of the article is therefore to reexamine the techniques of reading for which Strauss has been most famous, with careful attention to his theory of exotericism, the way philosophers would present their teachings.

Keywords: Leo Strauss, methodology, text interpretation, hermeneutics, exotericism, history of political thought

Introduction

Leo Strauss's idea of a return to the "great books", which is a metaphor for studies on the most acknowledged philosophers of the past centuries, stems from his strong belief that what is true lasts forever. And however exalted it may sound, Strauss makes of that belief a premise for philosophical text interpretations. As such, it is also a basis of what Strauss calls liberal education:

For all practical purposes, pupils, of whatever degree of proficiency, have access to (...) the greatest minds, only through the great books. Liberal education will then consist in studying with the proper care the great books which the greatest minds have left behind – a study in which the more experienced pupils assist the less experienced pupils, including the beginners¹.

The core idea of liberal education – and Strauss means above all education at the university – is studying texts of the past. Strauss consequently turns his eyes to what seems to be gone and forgotten: medieval thought, pre-modern philosophy, biblical exegesis. It looks as if he did not trust contemporary thinkers. He doubts that modern men – scholars, thinkers, authors – are capable of unbiased, fair interpretation of old texts. To understand what is the source of this distrust, we should recall one of Strauss's famous allegories – the so-called second cave. Talking about Plato's Republic, Strauss suggests that there is another, deeper cave in which we have fallen. This situation is "artificial" and is a serious obstacle to what should be a starting point for philosophy:

The artificial obstacles may be so strong at a given time that a most elaborate "artificial" introduction has to be completed before the "natural" introduction can begin. It is conceivable that a particular pseudo-philosophy may emerge whose power cannot be broken but by the most intensive reading of old books. As long as that pseudo-philosophy rules, elaborate

¹ Leo Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?", in Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 3.

historical studies may be needed which would have been superfluous and therefore harmful in more fortunate times².

Fortunately, this pseudo-philosophy (modern one?) that Strauss fiercely attacks can be “defeated” by historical approach in studying texts, that is by rejecting current experience and achievements of science and trying to understand the text of the “old authors” in accordance with their own intent. Strauss puts special emphasis on the necessity of historical interpretation, distinguishing it clearly from the historicist one, dominant – in his opinion – in the modern approach and characterized by an attempt to understand the “old authors” better than they understood themselves.

Contemporary hermeneutics wrongly assumes that every interpretation of the text is correct. The fact that there are infinitely many possibilities to read the text does not mean, according to Strauss, that the author understood his text in one specific way. And it happens far too often that the commentator looks down on the author, making it very difficult, if not impossible, to see in the author an equal intellectual partner who could give an insight into the truth. Strauss fears that today's approach to the old texts is almost exclusively “antiquarian”: modern scholars want only to “collect” and categorize these interesting, although already outdated ideas. In his discussion of the obstacles that stand in the way in the study of classical philosophy, Strauss suggests how to avoid the pitfall (or the cave) of historicism:

It would be a mistake to believe that the principles to be confronted with each other, especially those of classical philosophy, are readily accessible in the works of the historians of philosophy. The modern students of classical philosophy are modern men, and hence they almost inevitably approach classical philosophy from a modern point of view. Only if the study of classical philosophy were accompanied by constant and relentless reflection on the modern principles, and hence by liberation from the naïve acceptance of those principles,

² Leo Strauss, *How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise*, “Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research”, Vol. 17 (1947 - 1948), p. 82.

could there be any prospect of an adequate understanding of classical philosophy by modern men³.

Thus, only awareness of his own cognitive limitations can prevent the commentator of the text from excessive "boldness" of interpretation. But the liberation from naivety is just a first step in the commentator's mission. To find the true meaning is its goal.

• **Strauss's Hermeneutics – Preliminary Reflections**

Hermeneutics, which principles Strauss often formulates using only hints and allusions, seems to be inextricably linked to his project of renewal of the classical political philosophy. In the only work devoted entirely to this important issue of the "proper" interpretation of historical texts – the collection of essays *Persecution and the Art of Writing* – Strauss decides to present the bond that exists, in his opinion, between author's way of writing and author's views, or more broadly – author's philosophy, understood specifically as science of knowledge. This way of writing – "the art of writing", as Strauss calls it – is one of the most controversial issues in Strauss's teachings, but also its most recognizable element. Strauss expresses the relationship of exoteric writing with philosophy as follows:

The exoteric teaching was needed for protecting philosophy. It was the armor in which philosophy had to appear. It was needed for political reasons. It was the form in which philosophy became visible to the political community. It was the political aspect of philosophy. It was "political" philosophy⁴.

Exoteric writing, conceived as a "shield" that provides protection for the views of pre-modern thinkers, is of course a crucial aspect of Strauss's hermeneutics. But it is maybe more important to pay attention to the relation that Strauss indicates between philosophy and society, the relation which practical expression is "political philosophy", or even "politicized" philosophy, i.e. used for political purpose.

³ Leo Strauss, *On the Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy*, "Social Research", Vol. 13, No. 3 (September 1946), p. 328.

⁴ Leo Strauss, „Introduction" in Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1952), p. 18.

Transmission of philosophy to the public, if at all possible, takes place only through the exoteric structure of philosophical communication. And Strauss proposes deciphering the "code" by which the message is encrypted. According to his conception, in the political tradition of the West there is no idea or text that does not need to be read in an "appropriate" way.

The specific approach to the problem of proper reading is clearly inspired in Strauss's works by teachings of his great master, Maimonides, who "invented" all sorts of methods of text exegesis. In the *Guide for the Perplexed*, for example, in descriptions of the visions of the prophets, Maimonides uses a special form of commentary, so called "parables". Sarah Klein-Braslavy claims that Maimonides applies this method to the passages of the Bible which have two meanings, internal and external.

By "parables" Maimonides means verses and passages that have two meanings: an external meaning and an internal or hidden meaning. The external meaning is apprehended by a reading of the text in a conventional way, the internal meaning by a reading of it in a philosophical way. The internal meaning contains "wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is" (GP Introduction, p. 12), that is, with philosophical truths. Nevertheless, the external meaning of the well-constructed parable contains wisdom that is useful for practical life, especially for "the welfare of human societies"⁵.

The theory of two complementary layers of an analyzed text - perhaps the most characteristic exegetical method of Maimonides - assumes that the biblical text has two types of recipients who read it on two different levels of understanding. Josef Stern calls these two levels an "inner speech" and an "external speech", and remarks that the latter is a kind of externalization of the first, made in order to communicate the truth to those who are not able to capture it in a direct way. Maimonides therefore takes the Platonic tradition to see in the allegory - medium of the philosophical truths - a way of teaching them to readers

⁵ Sarah Klein-Braslavy, "Bible Commentary" in Kenneth Seeskin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 254.

of limited ability of cognition. So does, as we will see, Strauss in his theory of reading texts.

The expression "theory of reading texts" may, however, suggest that Strauss aims to create some kind of universal way of reading. This is not true. Strauss's hermeneutics – understood as a philosophy of language – does not constitute any complete system of rules and concepts. Strauss never meant to write a "textbook" for those learning how to read. He would probably say that this kind of explicit instructions are completely unnecessary for an intelligent reader, able to look carefully at the text and to use the inner hints included in it in order to reveal its true meaning. These hints or guidelines can be found on many pages of his essays and lectures. However, in a few rare cases, Strauss allows himself to formulate more openly some general principles according to which he reads philosophical texts, and according to which, we should assume, he would like his texts to be read as well. One of such examples of Strauss's papers on exegetical methods is his polemical essay *How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise*, which was a critical introduction to the English translation of the works of the seventeenth-century philosopher. Strauss uses this introduction as an opportunity to share his own views on the interpretation of the Bible in particular, and the texts of ancient authors in general. Here is how Strauss formulates his basic premise of what we might call an interpretative analysis:

To understand the words of another man, living or dead, may mean two different things which for the moment we shall call interpretation and explanation. By interpretation we mean the attempt to ascertain what the speaker said and how he actually understood what he said, regardless of whether he expressed that understanding explicitly or not. By explanation we mean the attempt to ascertain those implications of his statements of which he was unaware. (...) It is equally obvious that, within the interpretation, the understanding of the explicit meaning of a statement has to precede the understanding of what the author knew but did not say explicitly: one cannot realize, or at any rate one cannot prove, that a statement is a lie before one has understood the statement in itself⁶.

⁶ Leo Strauss, *How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise*, p. 70.

The ambiguity of “understanding” is, in Strauss's opinion, one of the major difficulties that we encounter when reading a text. To facilitate a conscientious reader's task, Strauss distinguishes two stages of reading: interpretation and explanation. In the broadest sense, the first one means an analysis, and the second one – a reader's judgment. The meaning Strauss gives to the terms is somehow surprising – usually, in “natural language”, we tend to assign to them exactly the opposite meanings: we consider explanation as an attempt of unbiased inquiry, and interpretation as a sort of surplus, a commentator's opinion on a text. Thus, distinction proposed by Strauss might seem illogical. Nevertheless, when we take a look at it in terms of subjectivity and objectivity (which admittedly are rather unknown categories to Strauss's rhetoric), we will be able to justify the “optics”, point of view, adopted here by our thinker.

1. The First Level of Reading: Interpretation

As suggested above, Strauss treats interpretation as a kind of “subjectivation”, a research perspective in which the commentator's attention is focused on the author of the text. Interpretation is an attempt to indicate the author's very own, subjective views. In the essay *How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy* Strauss says: “Historical understanding means to understand an earlier author exactly as he understood himself”⁷. The goal that Strauss sets in front of the reader, though seemingly simple, turns out to be very difficult to achieve. To understand the author is not only to determine what exactly he said, but also what he meant by using these (and not other) words. It is necessary to realize – often emphasizes Strauss – that the author expresses his views not only literally, but also in a veiled form. Even the most meticulous analysis of the author's statements is only the first step in the interpretation of the text. It is also necessary, for example, to specify whether the statement is ironical, or simply a lie⁸. Thus, not only reflection on the techniques used by the author, but also knowledge of

⁷ Leo Strauss, “How to Begin to Study Medieval History”, in Leo Strauss, Thomas L. Pangle ed., *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism. An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 208.

⁸ Leo Strauss, *How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise*, p. 70.

the author's writing strategy, his literary inclinations and habits, as well as his way of thinking, is what characterizes a mature interpretation.

Among numerous methods of exoteric writing that Strauss "discovers" in other authors' works, there are few that may present difficulties for someone unfamiliar with "the art of writing", or in this case – the art of reading. In his "peregrinations" through historical texts, Strauss encounters intentional concealment, ambiguity of a text's plan, contradictions that exist both within a text and between different works by the same author, complex but unclear rhetorical apparatus, and finally deliberate errors in argumentation. However, before we start to reveal these specific methods, we should concentrate on more basic tools of text interpretation:

It is (...) obvious that, within the interpretation, the understanding of the explicit meaning of a statement has to precede the understanding of what the author knew but did not say explicitly: one cannot realize, or at any rate one cannot prove, that a statement is a lie before one has understood the statement in itself⁹.

To search for the "explicit meaning" is nothing other than linguistic analysis. Strauss reaches such a level of scrupulousness in reading texts that he even analyzes single words, looking for their origins and unexpected meanings. A good example of Strauss's commitment to this method is his explanation given in the essay *Progress or Return?* of the Hebrew word *teshuvah*: its ordinary meaning is "repentance", as Strauss notices, but its "emphatic" meaning is "return". And "return" can also mean returning "from the wrong way to the right one", in other words - "homecoming"¹⁰. That is how Strauss handles words, giving them not so obvious meanings.

Importance that Strauss attaches to literality of interpretation cannot, however, hide the fact that this is only the beginning of a true text analysis. Similarly to the basic division into two levels of reading – interpretation and explanation – Strauss made the same distinction within interpretation itself, identifying two stages of exegesis. Strauss's

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Leo Strauss, „Progress or Return?”, in Leo Strauss, Thomas L. Pangle ed., *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, *ibid.*, p. 227.

Introduction to the *Persecution and The Art of Writing* can shed some light on the issue:

The context in which a statement occurs, and the literary character of the whole work as well as its plan, must be perfectly understood before an interpretation of the statement can reasonably claim to be adequate or even correct. One is not entitled to delete a passage, nor to emend its text, before one has fully considered all reasonable possibilities of understanding the passage as it stands – one of these possibilities being that the passage may be ironic¹¹.

Exploring the rationality of the text is one of the basic premises of the interpretation. Therefore, at the first stage, a literal reading stage, the “exegete” must treat the text as an internally consistent, logical and rational, and must do it *a priori*, without premature questioning. Only after careful analysis of the language, the commentator can look not “only” for words, but also for presuppositions that stand behind them. The literal reading is a prerequisite for the correct interpretation, but it is not sufficient. To learn the true opinion of the author, especially when it is not expressed by him openly, is to find in the text hidden signs.

The second stage of the interpretation is therefore a search for what is invisible, hidden from “untrained” eye. This approach stems from the Strauss's concept of "signposts"¹². He believes that each epoch has its own methodological tools of text interpretation – the signposts – and it is important not to confuse them. In his objection to all sorts of historicisms, Strauss recommends to historians to reject their contemporary attitudes and habits of interpretation and to make an attempt to find "the signposts which guided the thinkers of old", and which are now "concealed by heaps of dust and rubble", as he metaphorically puts it. To "dig up" for guidelines that were left by the old authors means, above all, to cast aside "the most obnoxious part of the rubble", that is "the superficial interpretations by modern writers, the chip clichés which are offered in the textbooks and which seem to unlock by one formula the mystery of the past"¹³. Only cautious

¹¹ Leo Strauss, „Introduction” in Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, p. 30.

¹² Leo Strauss, “How to Begin to Study Medieval History”, p. 211-212.

¹³ *Ibid.*

separation of the historian's own exegetical techniques from the guidelines with which the old author directs his reader, gives the opportunity to read the text in a proper way.

When a historian frees himself from his own stereotypes, he is ready to search for the true meaning – the one that is often hidden. The decision whether to interpret a text fragment more literally, or already to search for the "second bottom", depends to a large extent on how well he knows "an author's manner of writing". And Strauss gives here another clue: "It is a general observation that people write as they read. As a rule, careful writers are careful readers and *vice versa*"¹⁴. There is no doubt that in this way – by giving an account from his thorough readings – Strauss also presents his own technique of writing. It consists of not only adequate, but never accidental choice of words, including ambiguous expressions, as well as specific sentence structure (especially if it is clearly flawed). The context of statements, overall book or text plan, with particular attention to all its ambiguities – strange configuration of quotations and choice of arguments, omissions of certain important steps in argumentation, are of similar significance. In *Thoughts on Machiavelli* Strauss notices:

If a wise man is silent about a fact that is commonly held to be important for the subject he discusses, he gives us to understand that the fact is unimportant. The silence of a wise man is always meaningful. It cannot be explained by forgetfulness¹⁵.

By obvious mistakes and meaningful silence "wise men", the old authors, send to today's readers their message. Sometimes the only way to receive it is "reading between the lines"¹⁶, as Strauss often reminds. Searching for contradictions and ambiguities of the analyzed text and drawing on their basis conclusions about true intentions of the author,

is the point where two levels of interpretation – literal and not literal – come to meet. It is a synthesis of what Strauss calls "reading as

¹⁴ Leo Strauss, *How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise*, p. 71.

¹⁵ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958), p. 30.

¹⁶ Leo Strauss, „Introduction" in Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, p. 30.

intelligently as possible". It is also what let us avoid "overlooking the wood for the trees"¹⁷.

2. The Second Level of Reading: Explanation

The second level of reading – an explanation – consists in "objectification" of the text. It should be understood as an extraction of its actual content or sense, regardless the intent and efforts of the author. The objective content of the text exists somehow out of consciousness of its creator. We can imagine that what Strauss has in mind is to identify such implications of the author's statements that he is unaware of. Strauss clearly defines that it is about searching in the text for "unconscious expression of a wish, an interest, a bias, or a historical situation"¹⁸. It is necessary to understand the intellectual climate of the times in which the author created, as well as the socio-historical environment from which he originated. In other words – Strauss would like to explain the text by looking in it for some deep structures, expressions of the times the author lived, and his rooted beliefs.

Interpretation and explanation, in principle mutually complementary, may however differ in their basic assumptions (insight "from the inside" versus overview from the "outside"); sometimes they can appear almost as contradictory. Strauss notices this controversy:

The fact that interpretation and criticism are in one sense inseparable does not mean that they are identical. The meaning of the question 'What did Plato think?' is different from the meaning of the question 'Whether that thought is true'. The former question must ultimately be answered by a reference to texts. The latter question cannot possibly be settled by reference to texts. (...) But interpretation and criticism are not only distinguishable from each other. To a certain extent they are even separable from each other¹⁹.

In basic terms, Strauss means that the views of the author must be strictly separated from the criticism carried out from an external

¹⁷ Leo Strauss, "How to Begin to Study Medieval History", p. 207.

¹⁸ Leo Strauss, *How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise*, p. 70.

¹⁹ Leo Strauss, *On Collingwood's Philosophy of History*, „Review of Metaphysics”, Vol. 5, Nr 4 (Jun., 1952), p. 583.

point of view. Strauss clarifies this problem in his response to the principles of the biblical hermeneutics formulated by Spinoza: "His demand that the interpretation of the Biblical teaching and the judgment on the truth or value of that teaching be kept strictly separate, partly agrees with what we meant by distinguishing between interpretation and explanation"²⁰.

With this short sentence Strauss explains two important issues. Firstly, he compares the division "interpretation – explanation" to the distinction between interpretation and judgment, which clearly indicates their separate functions. Secondly, he gives to the judgment a role of objective evaluation, because its criterion is absolute - it is the truth. We see that for Strauss the judgment on the truth of the text is exactly what we do on the level of explanation. It must be said Strauss was convinced that for a serious study on ancient texts, it is necessary to transform ourselves from historians to philosophers and to believe that the text is, in its essence, true. Strauss explains: "We can understand medieval philosophy only if we are prepared to learn something, not merely *about* the medieval philosophers, but *from them*"²¹.

Strauss often accentuates the significance of interpretation in reading texts. However, he also entrusts to the reader (and he probably means himself too) an important, if not the most crucial role which exceeds the powers of an "ordinary" commentator.

Conclusion

Strauss's "art of reading", which rejects the suggestion that it is impossible to understand an author as he understood himself, is a clear contradiction of the principles of historicism, relativism and contextualism. Strauss always tried to distance himself from this kind of fashionable "isms" that became the sign of our times. His devotion to the search for the philosophical truth might look a bit "old-fashioned" as well. However, Strauss gives us, the modern men, some very interesting tools of independent thinking. Learning by reading – these three words could sum up Leo Strauss's concept of both good education and good life.

²⁰ Leo Strauss, *How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise*, p. 74.

²¹ Leo Strauss, "How to Begin to Study Medieval History", p. 211.

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