The Lovers--A Record and a Reverie
(4/16/82, Shakespeare class)

by
Ken Masugi

This is a draft copy, not for attribution. The manuscript has not been checked by any of the speakers.

"Socrates didn't give a shit about Athens."
"You idiot." [addressed to Sanderson Schaub]

---Thomas Pangle, the previous evening, in his talk on Xenophon's Apology

Readers should use these fragments from the afternoon's conversation as a basis from which to create what must or should have been the full argument.

From a discussion of Falstaff the logos turned to the relationship between morality and philosophy:

HVJ: Philosophy enables morality to have a proper purpose. In Strauss's "Progress and Return" he noted the agreement between Moses and Plato on morality. Plato had a higher purpose for that morality, however.

TP: You speak of only half of political philosophy's meaning, for pre-Socratic philosophy continued with political philosophy. Political philosophy is also a politics for philosophy's sake.

HVJ: But concerning Strauss's own interest in classical political philosophy, see the first paragraph of the introduction to the City and Man: "We are impelled to [return to classical political philosophy] by the crisis of our time."

TP: But note that this is an efficient cause. We do not need to be reminded of the crisis of the West... In fact we must forget the twentieth century, the problems of our times, in order to become people who understand Socrates. The ancients, after all, had no interest in modern problems. What is the crisis of our times? World War I destroyed the consensus known as western civilization.

HVJ: No, the crisis is the lack of ancient political philosophy...

TP: Did Strauss make Christianity that important? No. It is philosophy and not theology which make the difference in western civilization. And understanding philosophy was Strauss's project.

HVJ: The distinction between Caesar's things and God's things meant the end of the ancient city. This created the Jewish question, which is the starting point of all Strauss's works.

TP: No, in fact the ancient-modern controversy is his question. The core of the contradiction is between reason and revelation.

HVJ: There is no tension between reason and revelation in Aristotle and the ancient world. Where did western civilization begin? With this very tension. Western civilization began with Jerusalem and Athens. The crisis of western
civilization began with modernity attempted to replace both at the same time. The crisis of western civilization does not begin as long as morality was the source for religion and philosophy.

HVJ and TP agree that the decisive point is Machiavelli.

HVJ: The task of political philosophy transformed itself with Christianity, a universal religion. . . . Political formulae can in fact be extracted from Politics V and VI.

TP: But the crisis of the West involved modern nations, those that fought World War I.

HVJ: A sober form of modernity is the most prudent way of ending Christianity's civil war. This is America's contribution to this question.

TP: . . . . Jefferson did not understand Cicero, Aristotle, Sidney, and Locke, if he thought they were the sources for the Declaration. So what you're proposing sounds more like McIlwain and Sabine than Strauss.

HVJ: No, Strauss was really improving them. The founders observed classical principles. Their practice was ancient.

TP: It's not true, as you charge, that the modern philosophers who attempted to philosophize their way out of modernity turn out to be even more radical moderns. What about Shaftesbury, as one who advocated a re-birth of classical natural right? He was an Aristotelian. Shaftesbury attacks the new natural rights doctrines and advocates a new gentlemanliness. (Hence Xenophon was important for him.)

HVJ: I haven't read Shaftesbury. But George Washington did the sort of thing you describe Shaftesbury as doing.

TP: And Shaftesbury would have liked him.

HVJ: The founders made a prudent use of the doctrine of natural rights . . . .

TP: But why not simply preach the Nicomachean Ethics with prudent Spenserian formulations? The battle has in fact been lost. You understated the severity of the crisis. Go back a century or so. Strauss says the consensus of a century ago was based on faulty modern principles. Our weak principles were unsound to begin with.

HVJ: "Aristotelianism" means doing what prudent men do, and interpreting it in light of sound theory.

TP: You're saying this as if there were not something peculiarly terrible about our situation. Earlier we might have done this. We could go back to Aristotle's phenomena. But what Strauss meant was that this was possible only to a limited extent. Modern philosophy has raised such severe questions that we can't be sure it's wrong. Strauss himself was not sure that the ancients were right. Strauss falls silent on this in his late, mature books after Natural Right and History. It's no longer a theme. Natural Right and History was a kind of rhetorical and moral position beneath which there were problems which Strauss felt were unresolved.
HVJ: Life and death set limits to the actions of a man . . . . (Note my dis- cussion of natural right in the new introduction to Crisis of the House Divided.) But did not Strauss have a dogmatic morality.

TP: No, this does not do justice to Strauss's Machiavellianism, his obvious delight in the descriptions of evil. He had a philosopher's interest in mor- ality, not a moralist's.

HVJ: Without the moralist's concern for moral virtue, there would be no charm in the anti-moralist position. Consider Swift's argument concerning support of Christianity: There's no longer anything left to joke about.

TP: Yes, and in Marx's universe there were no jokes because nothing is pro- hibited. But for Strauss, Nietzsche was the thinker. Nietzsche and Heidegger, Heidegger and Nietzsche. He said he wanted to live in the twentieth century, because that made it possible for him to read Nietzsche.

HVJ: When did he say that? I never heard him say that.

TP: On three separate occasions. . . . Strauss was by no means convinced that Machiavelli was wrong. We can't look only at the beginning and end of Thoughts on Machiavelli, which you point to, because these are rhetorical. In the book we get an idea of Machiavelli's powers.

HVJ: Machiavelli attempted a Christian solution on the level of Christianity. Machiavelli's originality was due to the phenomenon of Christianity.

TP: No, his originality was that he saw the same thing in a new light. Strauss never says that he was wrong. Thoughts on Machiavelli is not a sealing of the Machiavelli case, but the opening of it. It was not a crime but an act of phil- osophy. The last three to four pages of the book is not an impressive argument. It is only rhetorical and paradoxical. This was a rhetorical ringing affirma- tion of morality. Strauss was at his heights in the book in his dialogue with Machiavelli. He then comes down at the end.

HVJ: You totally misread Strauss. . . . Shakespeare was the last great classi- cal political philosopher.

TP: But maybe Shakespeare was a Machiavellian. All the evidence for classical wisdom can also be presented as Machiavellian. . . . In any case natural rights and equality are alien to ancient political philosophy.

HVJ: This is wrong! The original equality of men results in inequalities.

TP: No, equality means morally equal. But there is no ground in Hobbes and Locke for one man to have a greater claim over another.

HVJ: But consider George Washington's moral ascendancy over other men of his time. . . .

TP: So what? This does not mean Locke's principles were not behind the American regime.

HVJ: But Locke was not so understood, as you understood him. And neither was Montesquieu.
TP: It's rather the case that America has evolved true to its theoretical principles. . . . But classical natural right, Plato and Aristotle, stands or falls with the superiority of the contemplative life, and there is no evidence for this in modern political philosophy and the American founding. Moreover, human equality in your sense is common to all philosophers, ancient and modern. Even the pre-Socratics believed in human equality in this sense. (cites a pre-Socratic fragment) The anti-natural rights schools concede this, but it is irrelevant. Furthermore, modern natural rights teaches that all just government arises from consent. (This was not a classical principle.) The pre-eminent basis of government is wisdom or virtue (not the equality of all men). The question becomes one of blending wisdom and consent. Ancients and moderns represent different sides of the consent-wisdom duality. Plato's attitude toward lawyers and merchants—denying them citizenship—in the Laws and Republic indicates how decadent the American regime is. The founders did not know how low they were.

HVJ: I object to your use of "decadent." Tom, you understand the politics of philosophy, but you don't understand the politics of politics. Consider the dialogue in Politics III between the oligarch and the democrat. Political philosophy arises out of that conversation.

TP: No, political philosophy is not generated by political life. Political philosophy arises from pre-Socratic philosophy, not politics. "On Classical Political Philosophy" proves my case.

HVJ: It proves mine. You totally misread it.

TP: Let's take Laws III. Here it is argued, concerning the flood, that one cannot understand political life without pre-political life. Statesmen do not concern themselves with such matters. The philosopher enters the scene to transform their blindness. Consider too the Crito's argument about obligation, and its difference from the Hobbes-Locke social contract model. Philosophy arises from an examination of nature.

HVJ: No, Christianity is the key here. Hobbes and Locke argue thus because of sectarian warfare of the time. . . .

TP: This is historicism! Such a view of Hobbes turns him into a child of his times. . . . Consider Hobbes' De Cive, which had the Roman republic as his model.

HVJ: Again, the key element for Aristotle is prudence . . . .

TP: But how can anti-Aristotelian doctrine be made compatible with Aristotle? . . . . I can't imagine how Lincoln's Aristotelianism is incompatible with the regime's basis in Locke and "ontesquieu.

TP: But you're confusing us: An Aristotelian gentleman could compromise with any doctrine. The American regime's compromise is not the worst, by any means, though Judaism's is better. One simply has to accept the compromise as a compromise, that is, as an inferior position.

HVJ: Is there really less of a possibility of cultivating moral virtue in Aristotle's polity than in the eighteenth century? Consider, for example, the emphasis on education in the Northwest Ordinance.
TP: But this version of moral education is not the same as classical virtue. Religious freedom is not an Aristotelian principle. There is no civil religion in the founding.

HVJ: Civil religion is there. The elimination of sectarian warfare [provides a new basis for morality.]

TP: Only the words are similar. An intellectual compromise exists here... For Plato and Aristotle a polytheistic civil religion is the core. Our regime's talk of morality does not mean Aristotelian morality. Civic education can take place through the civic participation possible only in the polis. America is a Persian despotism. That's what representative democracy really is.

Marlo Lewis: Is it correct to call the American regime democratic, in Aristotle's sense? Is it not rather aristocratic, since we have representation, which for Aristotle was an aristocratic device?

TP: But the virtue and wisdom of the Federalist are not virtue and wisdom as Aristotle understood them. They are businessmen's and lawyers' virtues here.

HVJ: Well, better merchants and lawyers than kings and priests.

TP: But can you deny that this nation is a commercial republic? The American regime is like the state described in Politics III, the one of Lycophron's contract.

HVJ: This is absolutely wrong and inapplicable. [Quotes Coolidge on captains of industry and the need for moral and civic education.]

TP: Captains of industry cannot be civilized, and neither can merchants. They should not be citizens in any decent regime. In any case the Declaration and the founders are silent on virtue. And the Declaration's "laws of nature" do not point to Aristotle. After all, Montesquieu said the same thing. Such words do not entail an ancient presence in the founding.

HVJ: We must consider the 1776 context of the Declaration. Consider the connection between God and law. Man is treated in the Declaration as the in-between being. A theoretical distinction lies behind the practical one. [He recapitulates the argument of How to Think.]

TP: This may be true of some of the founders, but what of the others' motives?

HVJ: The founders believed in a structured universe which underlay the rights of man.

TP: This universe was a-teleological, not divine or moral.

HVJ: A document must be understood in light of the context. George Washington used Locke; he did not necessarily read him with care.

TP: When a non-philosopher uses this language, the meaning of the document does not rest on the author alone. The success of Machiavelli rests on his making men think like Machiavelli. Locke would build a world in which men would realize over two centuries that they could [not?] be both Christian and Lockean.
HVJ: One cannot simply take specific dicta from the *Politics*; in this way its wisdom can be continued. You're still a young man, and you need to read more, and consider the way texts can be read.

TP: I was continually insulted last night, and I won't take any more. ... The boundaries have been so firmly set that we have fewer possibilities. We study the ancients to see how low we are. Then we qualify our attachments to our regimes. Our detachment to our hopes for this regime will lead us to philosophy.

HVJ: Any attempt to separate philosophy and morality will fail. Philosophy offers a support for it.

* * * * * * * * *

That evening Pangle gave a lecture on what we can learn from Nietzsche.

---

\(^{1}\)Ken Masugi was about to ask TP whether his insistence on tying Aristotle's teaching to the *polis* does not historicize Aristotle, the very thing he accused HVJ of doing with Hobbes. Is not prudence--our prudence--the antidote to such an historicized understanding of the political philosophers?