

Explicating the Premodern: An Introductory Political Philosophy of Strauss, Arendt and MacIntyre

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ABSTRACT--There are always historians of philosophy and political science who remind us that past thinkers may well have resources that most contemporary philosophers and political scientists in a rush to create or respond to the latest theory, sometimes ignore. In the second half of the 20th century, a number of such thinkers came to believe that the anti-realism, relativism and end of critical thinking that some contemporaries were announcing were actually the result of a wrong road having been taken in the 18th century. The question is, the problems of relativism and postmodernism or the problems that postmodernism points to, do they indicate that modernity or the enlightenment was already a wrong term.

Keywords-- introductory, political, philosophy, strauss, arendt, Macintyre

I. INTRODUCTION

People who make this claim might be called as premodernists. Some critical thinkers like Hannah Arendt and Martha Nussbaum simply saw in the politics and ethics of ancient Greece, particularly Aristotle's ethics of Virtue, a needed alternative to contemporary thought (Lyon 16). Others were more radical like Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, who argued that the classical rationalism of the Greeks and the medievals recognised the proper bargain between philosophy and politics which modern thinkers have forgotten at their peril (Ranieri 134).

Among this group of thinkers, Strauss is the most controversial. Leo Strauss gave a critique of what he called the modern rationalist tradition of political philosophy in favour of an older rationalism which he found to come to Spain to Plato before Machiavelli (Zuckert and Zuckert 35). The modern political thinkers like John Locke, according to Strauss rested their views on a totally different basis than the ancients: reality, rather than moral ideals. Modern political philosophy, Strauss said, following Machiavelli who tried to design procedures that would lead to a more or less just social outcome without presuming the virtue on the part of officials or citizens. The strategy of Plato, Aristotle and the medieval thinkers was very different. When they asked what would make a just society their answer was always that you can only have a just society if you have virtuous citizens or rulers. That is a necessary condition for a just society. Strauss pointed out that modern political philosophers try to ask the question even with mere self rational interest, not virtue on the part of citizens and rulers, can we nevertheless design a system that will result in justice or good society (Smith 198).

Strauss was particularly upset by the modern fact valued distinction, naturalism, relativism, historicism. He saw all of these connected; i.e., Strauss believed that once a certain premodern idealistic view of politics and philosophy was lost, then essentially the notion of ideals and the notion of the real contended to collapse into each

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other. Another difference between modern and premodern political philosophy, according to Strauss was controversially described in his famous *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952). The great tradition of ancient medieval philosophers, he said could not be honest i.e., when we read ancient and medieval and even some early modern political philosophers, the philosopher had to protect him or herself from political authorities. That meant they actually had to, well, *lie* in their political philosophy.

Furthermore, philosophy is in fact dangerous to the polity because Strauss admitted philosophical investigation can lead to skepticism regarding those very beliefs that keep citizens obedient to moral and civil rule. Politics in a sense has to lie; or if one wants to put it a little more gently, politicians and political life have to affirm the crucial and basic validity of values and rules which philosophers cannot justify. Because philosophers, when they try to justify them, run into a list of interminable, philosophical problems. One might notice that if one is familiar with Plato that this notion of Strauss' is very similar to Plato's notion of the noble lie i.e., Plato in *Republic* if one can pause to remember, argued that the artists and those who are responsible for promoting the culture of the political society must be censored and kept under control and one must tell those people who are going to be the virtuous leader of our societies, noble lies that will make them act justly and virtuously in all situations (Nehamas 48). This meant, for Strauss, that political philosophy faces a dilemma because political philosophy sits at the intersection of the conflict of philosophy and the polis. What philosophy does to our beliefs is that it, on many occasions undermines our beliefs and the polis, which needs a reliable set of beliefs to have a virtuous and just society.

At any rate, Strauss' views which were very intriguing and which came mostly out of the studies of historical figures, oddly enough moved far outside the academy because many Straussian students and the students of the students of Strauss have, it turns out played a significant political role in conservative administrations in the US in the last 30 odd years, often called neoconservatives.

Turning to the other premodernist, Hannah Arendt was one of the great political philosophers of the 20th century. Her range of work was remarkable, she wrote deep analyses of the very nature of the political i.e., what makes politics and the political dimension and social life different from the social, the economic, the culture etc. She wrote deep analyses of political history, works on the nature of human activity and contemplation and most famously she is the author of the three volumes of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and a smaller book called *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1964) which was actually a series of reports on the trial of the Nazi Eichmann by the Israelis and in that report she famously invented the concept of "the banality of evil" (Arendt Title) to try to describe Eichmann and his fellow Nazis.

At any rate Hannah Arendt is a philosopher, historian, journalist all rolled into one. In perhaps her most interesting book, *The Human Condition* (1958), she argues that modern politics has forgotten the lessons of Aristotle. In the ancient Greek world, the word *oikos* meant household; interestingly it is from the word *oikos* that we get our word economy. *Oikos* or household for Aristotle was understood to be private, literally the home; the arena where individuals have their biological needs satisfied (Klamer 272). The public realm in contrast according to Arendt's description of Aristotle is the political realm. So the political realm and the realm of the fulfillment of biological needs are in Aristotle's view to be kept quite separate from each other. Hannah Arendt distinguished three different forms of the *vita activa*, or what could be called as the active life. This is in distinction of the

contemplative life of humanity. But regarding our active life, she distinguished three different features or domains: labour, work and action.

Let us pause for a moment and understand these. By labor, Hannah Arendt meant the cyclic or you can say the metabolic activities that human beings engage in so as to produce the biological necessities of life. The perfect examples would be, on the one hand raising food, we labour to create food. Once we have created it, what do we do with the food? We eat it and destroy it and it is gone. In other words, labour leaves nothing behind it. So labour is absolutely necessary but it for her the lowest and least meaningful form of human activity. So what Arendt is doing is that she is presenting this theory as a way of explicating the ancient view of Aristotle. She is connoting that this is what Aristotle would have said.

Then we move to work; it is the construction of artifacts. It is the activities in which we make things and in this kind of activity which is quite different from labour there are a couple of key considerations. One is that in work we always have a distinction between means and ends, my tools, my methods and procedures by which we produce the finished object; the finished object is the goal and has a special value. The procedure has a value because it leads to the goal and work is supposed to create durable objects. It does not mean that it is supposed to last forever because if that were true then there would not be any. But in other words she is referring here not only to all fine art but also building, engineering, architecture, painting, sculpting and care for a home. All the activities which make something durable that is supposed to last or create the artifacts of culture.

The last one is action. Action, for Arendt, specifically refers to politics. Action is the deeds and speeches that human beings engage in in public in front of a forum of their equals and peers. Politics means me or any of you entering into the “forum”, some context we could say in our life, the famous town meeting place, someone who steps up and speaks at the town meeting, takes a position and gives his/her view and then sits down. So, those deeds and speeches that take place in the public realm that is the realm of action. And the realm of action is very different for Hannah Arendt from labour and work, as we will see.

From this distinction, she gets her critique of the modern age. Writing in the 1950s, Arendt argues that both the liberal capitalism of the west and the Marxism of the east had something bad in common; they both make politics the servant of economics (McCarthy 239). That is, they both regarded public life as nothing but the public organisation of a massive collective household or collective economy. In other words, on the one hand in the east, the Marxist view made the sole collective business of society the state organisation of the economy. On the other hand, in the west, government was of course kept separate from (to some extent) the economic life under capitalism; nevertheless, the sole business of politics was how do we tinker with the economy in order to make it right.

So, in each case politics is being put in the service of economics, something that if we were looking at it from the point of view of Aristotle, he would say precisely puts the cart before the horse. For Aristotle, economics is the care for those private biological necessities which we want to get taken care of so that we can go out in the public realm and do what really gives life meaning i.e., participate in political activity. For Aristotle, politics is intrinsically good. Political activity is of much higher value than economic activity. Economic activity is a need. Political activity is the expression of oneself, the creation of a persona and the appearance before one's peers. The results of political action while in essence, they just take a moment you give your speech and it is over but it

becomes recorded and remembered through acts of work i.e., the artist and artisans record, if you will, the great acts of the great political actors.

This may sound politics at a very abstract level but it does have some rather concrete political implications. Hannah Arendt endorses what we call civic republicanism. Civic republicanism was one of the two major traditions in the modern western world for how to conceive a free society. One way is the typical liberal conception, liberal in the classical sense, having nothing to do with any democratic party. The classical liberal sense, that a free society means, one in which government gets out of the way of the individual, and the individual is free to avoid politics or government. Civic republicanism says that a free society is the one in which the citizens actively participate in political activity. They participate in their own governance. That is the form of a free society that she tried to promote with this theory. But this, the view of Hannah Arendt, is more than just a political theory.

For her, the modern world uses a set of categories that fail to grasp the human condition. For Hannah Arendt, the meaning of human existence cannot lie in nature or biological needs or ecology but in two things, in the free action of human agency and politics; there deeds and speeches in front of others and the construction of durable, cultural objects that provide us with a meaningful artificial environment. From her point of view, nature by itself is meaningless; only human creation or creative activity gives life meaning.

Now we are going to move to a third thinker; the most recent of the three the American philosopher and most famously an ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre; and see how he tries to embed rationality into historical tradition. If the modern project of the enlightenment sought to justify realism from purely rational grounds that abstracted from all cultures and traditional resources and if that has failed, in other words if Descartes, Locke, Kant and others try to ground and prove the existence of knowledge, independent of accidental factors like where you were born or what your cultural tradition is, so if that enlightenment project has now failed then we must either accept, this is what MacIntyre says that power, not truth should adjudicate our value questions and he labels that with the name of Nietzsche (Lutz 30). That is, Nietzsche's notion of the will to power or we have to go back to a different kinds of rationality, the rationality of the ancients and the medievals. In other words, what MacIntyre says very straightforwardly is if the enlightenment project of modernity has gone into a dead end then the only options are Nietzsche or Aristotle.

MacIntyre's own claim which is to return to the ancients is quite radical. MacIntyre expressly admits that rationality itself only operates within a tradition. That is, rationality is not structured to achieve reasonable solutions to philosophical or ethical problems without being contextualised in a tradition. This is a basic blow against certain parts of the enlightenment tradition, because part of the enlightenment was all about telling us that we must leave behind superstition, tradition, custom, culture; these are the things that hold us back. What we should trust is reason, experience and nature. And these things will tell us the truth about the world and become the basis for which we can organize rationally organised society so that it best serves human beings.

MacIntyre is claiming that there is no such reason or rationality outside the workings of a culture customary tradition. This coheres with MacIntyre's basic anthropological point that humans achieve intelligibility in their lives through narratives. The characteristic form, he claims of intelligibility for a human agent is the story. Traditions are organised around such stories from whose elements individuals in the tradition fashion the meaning of their lives. So, in other words, how do we, the writers understand ourselves: through continually rewriting in our own minds our own autobiographies where we have been, what we have done, what has happened to us and

what it means. When we do that, that is, write our autobiographies in our head, if we don't write it down on paper, we take figures, tropes, ideas, dramatic elements from our cultures which is like our cultural traditions are the autobiographies of the whole society that we are a part of and we take elements from it and incorporate it in our own self stories

II. RESULTS

MacIntyre emphasises that living cultural traditions are not monolithic. This is very important because if you are going to base everything on culture tradition, you have to have a sensible account of what cultures are like and the first thing he wants to tell us is that cultures are not monoliths, they are full of disagreements and debate. Nevertheless, they do structure and constrain debate. So, rational discourse within a tradition makes use of the available resources within that tradition. His point is that for reason to be effective there must be a fund of plausible reasons people can give for what they do and what they value in a set of constraints as provided by a living tradition.

Now there are several ways that a tradition typically gives such constraints. The first is through a set of canonical texts. Cultures have books that stand behind them that everybody reads, these texts for example the Vedas, the Quran, the Indian Constitution, these texts form a fixed set of nodes, but they can be interpreted in various ways. So, when a tradition, let us say in the Muslim tradition, one can hold many different views but there will be different views about the Quran or the saying of the Prophet and rational arguments will take place between those who disagree, the same is true in the Vedic tradition, the same is true in interpreting the constitution. These canonical texts can be interpreted in various ways and the living tradition is the ongoing debate among all these alternate interpretations of the canonical texts.

But along with a set of canonical texts goes canonical practices that contain their own goods. By practices, it is not just behaviour or not even just human action but complex series of actions that are relatively self-contained that many different people can participate in at any given time. Marriage is a practice, it is an institutional set of activities that lots of people engage in. Practices are good containing i.e., you could define goodness within practices, and with them many of the artifacts used in them. MacIntyre is a very interesting ethicist and he would point out that while philosophers have traditionally worried well that we prove that anything is good because of the distinction between fact and values, maybe there is no rational way to adjudicate these values (Lambek 283).

MacIntyre points out that within practical context of activity, it is quite possible to show that every rational person will accept the same set of values or goods. As he liked to say the knife is *supposed* to be sharp, that is what it is for. It is difficult to say may be what you should do with a knife. A knife is supposed to be used; it is supposed to be in a certain condition to accomplish a certain purpose. Likewise, we cannot describe making babies or searching for food or resolving a conflict or building as if they were value neutral activities. Each of those practices or activities, once you engage in them they contain their own goals hence goods or values. So, the practices are a second part of the tradition.

Then there is the ultimate good. Any living tradition posits some ultimate good. However, the members of the tradition disagree about how to interpret it so that one ultimate good logically dictates a whole lot of set of activities or practices. For example, one might say love is an ultimate good in the Christian tradition and there are Christians who very differently interpret what love means and what it entails. Thus, the tradition is an ongoing

debate about the meaning of its ultimate good, its canonical practices and its canonical texts. Without tradition, according to MacIntyre we are left with what he calls bureaucratic liberalism and in fact this gets into his diagnosis of our current predicament. From MacIntyre's point of view, our modern post enlightenment languages, French, English German, Spanish, the languages of the most economically advanced countries on earth (it should include Japanese), these languages have become decontextualised from any ethical tradition. They are context-less modes of communication. They are thereby more universal but at the same time they don't involve a commitment to a tradition.

III. DISCUSSION

In other words, historically to speak a language was also to be a member of a tradition, but today in the modern age that is no longer the case. Consequently when we talk in English is a little bit more technical, when you get a bunch of American students in a philosophy class and you have them speak in English and argue about ethical problem the English language, he thinks actually at this point lacks resources for resolving ethical questions. It is in such languages the fact value dichotomy or the claim that value judgments have no rational judgment justification can make sense. People may have heard in a class or in a discussion where somebody says something and someone says "O that is a value judgment"; from MacIntyre's point of view every legitimate or interesting judgment that human being has to say probably is a value judgment or has value implications, and he wants to claim that traditions are themselves value embedded.

So you might simply put it this way, you can't make ethical or philosophical conclusions without premises and it is the traditions that provide us with a set of premises or rather they provide us with a thick language that is not a value-neutral means of communication. It is a value-full means of communication. Modernity, on the other, hand has invented a tradition-less and rootless and valueless method of communication. In such a mode of communication, it is never rational to assert a substantial good. There are no justificatory values or reasons that are embedded in the discourses itself. Understand what this means, it does not mean that there is something immoral about speaking English. It means that the modern conception of rationality applies independent of any particular forms of value.

In other words, when two Nazis, say were having discussion at a concentration camps and one says that 'we can't kill more than 3000 Jews today', and when another one says 'No, no I think we could push production up to about 4000'; they are having a perfectly rational discussion. It is an *evil* discussion, but it is rational. Rationality has become separate from moral standards. The claim of rationality in a tradition, in MacIntyre's making might seem to lead to relativism. Relativism identifies true what seems true to us or defines true as true in a perspective or true in a particular language (Mosteller 47).

That kind of relativism would make contrary claims of different traditions or cultures equally valid. For example, if someone claims that the holocaust never happened, the relativists would have to say that it is true for them while for the rest of them the holocaust did happen. Relativism would say each claim is true because the truth of a claim is now relative to the people or culture who asserted and there is no universal or perspective or culture independent of truth to service the standards from which any culture dependent claim can be criticised. Not only

would this throw realism out, MacIntyre fears, it would also mean anyone or any group with power can claim their view is as true as any other. In effect, anything goes.

Notice, something to remember that when someone says no body has the right to impose their view or their truth on anyone else, someone who says that is not a relativist. Someone who says that is making a claim of universal tolerant morality. A relativism of the above kind that we have been describing would say, instead that if your culture says it is right to impose your view on others then it is right for you even if it is wrong for the culture you are imposing on.

IV. CONCLUSION

At any rate MacIntyre argues that such relativism is avoided as long as tradition retains criteria for rational progress that can judge particular ideas and practices from another tradition to be superior to its own. Living traditions can do just that. When a living tradition faces problems that it can't solve by its own criteria, it is perfectly capable of importing foreign ideas that it judges superior by its own criteria, which from a relativist standpoint, could not happen. This means that it always has a standard of rational progress independent of its own beliefs of the moment. A tradition that can do this never faces the position of saying that whatever seems true to us must really be true. So moving on one can see that one option for avoiding postmodernism is to recapture a notion of rationality i.e., unlike the modern enlightenment notion, tradition that incorporates traditional, ancient elements to turn as MacIntyre put it to Aristotle, instead of Nietzsche or postmodernism, that rationality as MacIntyre thought of postmodernism as essentially, the Nietzschean will to power (Delanty 43).

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