

Public Education and the Aesthetic Dimension of Strauss's Theologico-Political Problem

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Charles S. Peirce states that logic, “the theory of self-controlled, or deliberate, thought...must appeal to ethics for its principles,” and that ethics, “the science of right and wrong, must appeal to esthetics [*sic*] for aid in determining the *summum bonum*.” The logically good is a species of the morally good, but for a course of action to strike us as morally good, it must be “admirable”: the morally good is therefore “a particular species of the esthetically good.”¹ If Peirce is correct, the process that shapes our vision of the admirable is of paramount importance, for that process — aesthetic education, broadly conceived — determines what we respect, and hence what we believe and how we will act.

The purpose of this essay is to address three questions: First, what does Peirce mean when he says that we are ruled by aesthetics, which is to say, by our sense of the admirable? Examination of this matter is facilitated, but also made urgent, by the theologico-political problem, a matter that is central to the work of Leo Strauss. Because this concept is likely to be unfamiliar to most readers, we have the second question: What is the theologico-political problem? This, in turn, leads to the third question: What does explication of the theologico-political problem reveal regarding the propriety of the aesthetic impact of the public schools?

In what follows, I will address the three questions separately in the order in which they were raised. At the close of this activity, we will have arrived at the following claims:

1. The life of philosophical reason and the life of revealed religion, in accordance with their opposed underlying aesthetics, entail conflicting visions of human fruition, and hence embrace conflicting conceptions of a proper education.
2. Short of abandoning the heart of one life or the other, there appears to be no common authoritative ground for reconciling the conflict between these two aesthetically determined visions. The choice of one vision is incompatible with the deepest commitments of the other.
3. The public schools favor one of the competing aesthetics, thereby sustaining one vision of human excellence at the expense of the other. This practice understandably perturbs those whose perspective is thereby rendered subordinate or irrelevant.

THE ROLE OF AESTHETICS FOR PEIRCE

Logical thinking, for Peirce, is a matter of self-control. When thinking logically, we conform to “*logica utens*” (or “logic in possession”), an authoritative (though implicit) model for acceptable reasoning. Conforming to authority is a deliberate

choice. Such deliberation is an instance of ethics: Exercising our will, we elect one course of action over another. Of the various possibilities, we seek the one that is most admirable.

It is interesting that Peirce views aesthetics as determining “what it is that one ought deliberately to admire *per se* in itself regardless of what it may lead to and regardless of its bearings upon human conduct.”²² The “moralist,” says Peirce, would have us exercise self-control (that is, be logical). But in explaining why we ought to act in this fashion, the moralist “has to refer to the esthetician whose business is to say what is the state of things which is most admirable in itself regardless of any ulterior reason. . . . to tell us what it is that is admirable without any reason for being admirable beyond its inherent character.”²³ Peirce is well known for the assertion that “what we think is to be interpreted in terms of what we are prepared to do.”²⁴ Strikingly, then, while one’s conception of the admirable is to be understood and evaluated in light of what follows from it, its original impact exists independently of such considerations. The vital aesthetic component of morality in this sense stands alone. Because aesthetic appreciation — the impact of the admirable — is most effectively experienced in “a pure naïve state,” Peirce observes that “to say that morality, in the last resort, comes to an esthetic judgment is *not* hedonism, — but is directly opposed to hedonism.”²⁵ When one is in the grip of the admirable, one is not considering consequences — not even pleasure. Instead, one is simply seeing (and is attracted to) what is there. Still, the intellect remains active: While the focus of such attention is a “quality of feeling,” such feeling consists of and conveys an ideal that is admirable for “a reason.”²⁶

Peirce’s assertion that whatever is morally appealing is also aesthetically good overcomes at least one apparent objection when we consider that “aesthetically good” and “admirable” have no intrinsic connection to ease or pleasure. The ideal that animates us may in fact be the one that is most demanding. It might even require the impossible. Suffering may be at its core.

It is because the characteristics of the aesthetically good, or the admirable, may range so widely, varying from person to person, that the matter is of such pressing importance to education. Peirce’s account suggests that the mainspring for human behavior is susceptible to shaping and definition from without. This principle was well understood by Plato when, in the *Republic*, he emphasizes that what is said about gods and heroes, and even music that is heard, must be carefully regulated during a person’s earliest years. The properly reared individual will “blame and hate the ugly in the right way while he’s still young, before he’s able to grasp reasonable speech. And when reasonable speech comes, the man who’s reared in this way would take the most delight in it.”²⁷ Development of character is inescapable. But to what would we have the young be attracted?

What captures the educator’s attention in this account is not so much what is believed as it is the readiness to believe. In teaching others, no less than in understanding ourselves, it is important to grasp the process by which we develop our sense of what is satisfying and admirable. We need to examine *the preparation*

for belief, and perhaps we should make it our business to influence it. The processes through which such preparation may be influenced or achieved are the appropriate focus of the science (and intelligent practice) of education. The questions of whether that preparation should be the focus of deliberate activity and, if so, which aesthetic objective is thereby to be served, belong to philosophy. A thornier and more specific philosophical question is to which aesthetic ideal the public school is properly directed. In order more clearly to understand two primary candidates for that ideal, and thus to illuminate a critical decision facing the thoughtful educator, let us explore what Leo Strauss called “the theologico-political problem.”

THE THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL PROBLEM

Both the central importance of the aesthetic dimension and the manner in which it is, broadly understood, a function of education are illustrated by Leo Strauss’s characterization of the chasm between philosophy and revealed religion, that is, between a particular conception of reason⁸ and obedience to the Law — a tension he makes prominent as the “theologico-political problem.” According to a recent commentary on Strauss, “This antagonism goes back to two ways of experiencing the world. These in turn rest upon a moral choice prior to any theoretical conception of the world.”⁹ Where, then, Strauss focuses on the centrality of the moral choice, Peirce asks us to recognize that the moral choice is secondary to something more fundamental: our sense of what is admirable.

One might question such a sharp opposition between reason and obedience to the Law. Consider, for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, in the *Social Contract*, associates reason with, and defines moral liberty as, “obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves.”¹⁰ There can be good reasons to submit to authority. Obedience can be reasonable. Does not, in fact, the reasonability of obedience depend on the character of that to which we submit?

While this objection is plausible, we must be careful not to overlook the central issue raised by Strauss. Notice, first, that the obedience recommended by Rousseau is obedience to *oneself*, as opposed to obedience to an external law. By emphasizing the autonomous self, Rousseau typifies a stance, characteristic of modernity, which is fundamentally at odds with the core of revealed religion. Second, directing us to John Calvin, Strauss points to a condition within which reason loses its authority. Revelation, the expression of the will of an omnipotent God, not only may contradict the voice of reason, but it also constitutes an authority beyond the grasp of reason. Reason, the product of the comparatively puny human intellect, is denied “the right to judge revelation.”¹¹ Indeed, to wish to understand on one’s own is an act of rebellion. To seek confirmation of what is captured in Scripture betrays sinful pride and is the very meaning of impiety. Any claim to knowledge is properly subordinate to the authority of the Law.

Does not, however, revelation itself yield a sort of understanding? It does, but not all understanding is of the same nature. By attending to the role and status of the individual during the act of understanding, we can recognize some key distinctions. During revelation, and when informed by scripture that records such revelation, we

are submissive. We give ourselves to what is higher. In contrast, while exercising our rational faculties and attempting to determine what is reasonable to believe, we are applying rules that mankind either has given to itself or discovers and *rationaly* assents to.¹² That is, an idea or experience is subjected to criteria. We see freely and for ourselves that something is true (or untrue) when it successfully (or unsuccessfully) measures up. For this to occur, the individual must have developed critical acumen before acting independently in exercising it. In so doing, the individual necessarily stands apart from the Law. From such a perspective, the individual may even purport to evaluate the Law!

This difference in perspective is powerfully captured by Heinrich Meier as he presents the contrasting responses of the philosopher and the “prophet” to the “extraordinary experiences of *beatitudo* [the state of blessedness or extreme happiness and peace]” that are accessible to both.¹³ He speaks first of the prophet:

The beautiful is suddenly disclosed and visible, the whole that was perceived only piecemeal and disparately lights up in a flash, insights converge and gain an undreamt of, unforeseeable, overwhelming radiance in whose light things are no longer as they seemed, and life can no longer remain as it was. The prophet will be absorbed in the devotion to the beautiful. He is remolded, transformed, and newly minted in his individuality. He knows himself to be a vessel of God and nothing more. He will trace the happiness of transcending his own limitedness, the subsumption of the particular in the universal, his losing himself in the whole; he will trace his experience of the “practice of dying and being dead” in awe and reverence back to the author of the whole. In his felicity he will become aware of his mission. He will place himself completely in the service of the sovereign authority and, with all the resources available to him, defend the order that it guarantees him and that he craves. The philosopher turns his gaze in the opposite direction. He relates the beautiful back to the good. In his felicity he becomes aware of his own activity. In his erotic nature he recognizes the strength that carries him beyond himself and the power that enables him to find himself again in the whole. The experience of the *beatitudo* confirms for him that the highest *eudaimonia* is bound up with the dialectic that determines and moves the highest activity. It encourages him to live the dialectical tension between the “practice of dying and being dead,” on the one hand, and eros, on the other, between the necessarily anonymous truth and its individual understanding, between the devotion to the beautiful and the knowledge of our needy nature, which allows this devotion to be good for us. The “overlapping experience” of the prophet and the philosopher bifurcates and leads in opposite directions.¹⁴

The contrast between the prophet and the philosopher, while wondrous, is also stark. Our prophet is “newly minted in his individuality,” but it is an individuality of an entirely different sort than existed before. He sees that he is “a vessel of God and nothing more.” He is subsumed and loses himself. Revelation shows the prophet that he has a mission to which he must give himself “completely.” Through this transformation, the prophet’s life takes on the highest meaning. In carrying out his mission, the prophet not only is doing what he believes to be the most important thing that can be done, but he is at the same time fortified against the worst human possibility: boredom and insignificance.

Turning to the philosopher, we have a much different picture. The same kind of experience that submerges the prophet instead causes the philosopher to focus on “his own activity”: a form of dialectic that leads to “individual understanding” and finding himself again. Where the prophet has no task but to submit to the will of God, the philosopher is driven to question. Not only is this a result of experience of the

beatitudo, but the quest is also stimulated by the philosopher's encounter with revelation, and with the prophet whose very being is a challenge to philosophy, and who is therefore interesting. The prophet is unlikely to be so friendly to the willful blindness of the philosopher. *Nowhere is the contrast between the two ways of life more striking than in their attitude toward one another.*

In both cases, to understand or to "see" is an act of aesthetic satisfaction. But the requirements of achieving satisfaction vary immensely. The prophet "craves" the order that is provided by the "sovereign authority."¹⁵ Yet this is ambiguous. Is it that the prophet possesses a craving for order because he has encountered the sovereign authority, or did the craving precede exposure to the sovereign authority? From the perspective of the prophet, such distinctions are unimportant. For the prophet, it is enough to say that he has seen the truth. The missing element has been provided, and the path, while never certain, is clear. What is significant here is that the philosopher, in the face of the same phenomenon experienced by the prophet, responds so differently. Elimination of the craving for order was no doubt satisfying for the prophet. Now, to the degree that *eudaimonia* is understood to mean a good in itself which permits the greatest degree of flourishing, the prophet, as does the philosopher, experiences it. The philosopher, however, is said to experience "the highest *eudaimonia*." This comes through the dialectic. Satisfaction, for the philosopher, consists of the exercise of personal attributes that issues in awareness of her distinction: She knows that she understands. There may be no repose. But that scarcely matters to the philosopher, given the nature of her satisfaction. Indeed, in light of the source of her gratification, coming to a stop cannot be appealing. The essential thing is free investigation: to continue to call into question. This difference between the natures of satisfaction for the philosopher and the prophet, and the contrast in the characters of the life that leads to this difference, are both so fundamental that we may say that we are faced with two contrasting conceptions of what it is to be truly human.

It is because the conflict between philosophy and revelation refers to incompatible ways of life that we can speak of it as the "theologico-political problem." This conflict is a species of a broader phenomenon, namely, the tension between authority and unrestricted inquiry. Because, however, the "fundamental alternative is that of the rule of philosophy over religion or the rule of religion over philosophy,"¹⁶ the conflict between philosophy and revelation becomes the model for this tension — even for the Platonic portrayal of the conflict between philosophy and politics that preceded the encounter of philosophy with revealed religions (but perhaps anticipated it).¹⁷ Revelation is the clearest and most precise foe of philosophy. It is such because both revelation and philosophy aspire to the same objective: knowledge of the truth, especially about how one should live — and they claim to do so through mutually exclusive paths. Each prescribes a way of life that strikes at the heart of the other. Revealed religion inescapably gives rise to political theology, the reflection in political life of what is understood to be true. Revelation thereby becomes a political problem for philosophy. What is not so readily recognized is that philosophy, when driven by fear or frustration to act in its own defense (most notably in an

alliance with political authority known as “liberal society”), is similarly a political problem for revealed religion. The proximity of philosophy and revelation invariably produces the theologico-political problem.

Fundamental to Strauss's characterization of the distinction between philosophy and revealed religion is a moral choice “prior to any theoretical conception of the world.” The philosopher believes that one must see for herself. In contrast, people of the Book eschew personal ambition and await the Word. The “moral choice,” then, is manifest in an initial attitude that takes the form of expectations. The impact of these expectations is seen in one's activity (or lack thereof), as well as in one's sense of responsibility and a subsidiary understanding of how one ought to engage the world. The philosopher, by subjecting the world to the rules of free yet disciplined inquiry, is active. Devotees of the Book, by the grace of God, possess the Word. It is for them to wait and, in time, through further grace, to see.

The difference between the philosopher and one who lives in light of the Law is evident in their contrasting visions of the best way of life. While the former aspires through reason to respond to wonder (that is, to inquire and to contemplate), the latter wants nothing more than to consummate wonder by doing God's bidding. There are fearful consequences for failing to do what God wishes. As a result, there is unceasing torment: Am I doing the right thing? The philosopher, however, knows little of this. Instead, the philosopher's concern, in comparison with the Believer, seems not to be moral at all. While there may be compelling prudential reasons to be concerned with morality and politics, in his highest moments the philosopher is beyond all of that.

Note, however, that although the philosopher during peak moments is therefore indifferent to good and evil, it does not follow that he is insensitive to aesthetics. In the awareness that he understands, which constitutes the best way of life for the philosopher, there is an appreciation that is aesthetic in nature. Indeed, the philosopher is motivated by a morality of his own. Understanding is admirable and hence it is good. While contemplation is indifferent to what it sees, it is not itself indifferent. What philosophy finds admirable is to see for oneself. In contrast, the Law is hearsay. It is the Word of God as revealed to a messenger, or prophet. The Word, captured in a book and passed on as a teaching, is to be believed by way of faith. What philosophy finds admirable, seeing for oneself (to know on the basis of perception and reason), is both subversive of this tradition and, by putting “other gods before me,” sinful. “What to the classical philosophers appeared as the perfection of man's nature, is described by the Bible as the product of man's disobedience to his Creator.”¹⁸ The fundamental question, then, is which is to guide human life: Man or God? Reason or the Law? Philosophy or the Book? Both seek knowledge of the good. But is such knowledge accessible to our unaided efforts, through free and open inquiry, or is it the guarded possession of God, to be shared with mankind only on God's terms, which, above all, require obedience and submission? The vital thing is to be had in one way or the other. But the two paths are incompatible, “for each claims to be *the* one thing needful.”¹⁹ One must choose.

Let us at last be explicit about the contrasting aesthetics, or the contrasting senses of the admirable, that characterize the philosopher and the devotee of the Book. Philosophy admires, and proudly adheres to, the standard of the clearly evident. Revelation, on the other hand, begins from the conviction (or, better, the written word) that it is not for man, in relation to the important things, to have clear evidence. Instead, the highest thing possible is to believe, especially in the absence of such evidence. Faith is the true measure of humanity. This observation applies to revelation itself. The word of God may be a delusion. The Book may not be true. These things are not definitively evident. But they *are* written and many great persons have said they are true. What remains is the challenge of believing — that is, to have faith, even in the face of the possibility that one could be wrong. What is most admirable, then, is a condition of courage and fortitude. It is a steadfastness defined in terms of the absence of the very thing that the philosopher finds most admirable. Given their competing aesthetics, we will not be surprised if the two positions dislike, or even reject, each other.

PHILOSOPHY, REVELATION, AND THE SCHOOLS

Now that we understand the theologico-political problem and the competing senses of the admirable that are responsible for it, what might we say about the aesthetic impact of our schools? If critics, liberal and conservative, are accurate, the schools are effectively in the service of neither philosophy nor revelation. In this vein, Allan Bloom offers what is perhaps the most telling assessment of the consequences of public education: “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.”²⁰ The public schools characteristically eschew the serious and single-minded preoccupation with the question of how to live that marks both philosophy and revelation.

This account of the effect of public education scarcely seems to describe the victory of philosophy. Appearances, however, are misleading. To the degree that the schools oppose or even remain neutral toward the claims of revelation, they take the side of philosophy (though not seriously enough to promote philosophy as a way of life). This may be done either superficially or in full awareness of the mutually exclusive alternative. In the first case, educational authorities, conforming to a script whose origins are obscured by the mists of modernity, declare that the demands of revelation are unfounded, or that they are inherently and irredeemably controversial, which in either case makes them inappropriate for use in determining the priorities of the schools. In the second case, philosophy recognizes that just as any attempt by revelation to refute philosophy presupposes the validity of the faith upon which the revelation is built, any attempt by philosophy to refute revelation presupposes a knowledge of the whole that philosophy does not possess. Revelation *could* exist, and mankind *might* need it. Since philosophy understands that these attempts at refutation are circular and, further, that they are so because philosophy and revelation cannot comprehend one another, philosophy would refuse to take a position regarding which of the alternatives is superior. But in so reasoning, and in

erecting upon this foundation a regime of agnostic tolerance in the schools, philosophy is purporting to understand its own limitations (as well as those of revelation). Hence, philosophy is asserting itself while denying the very core of revelation: the command to submit and obey in spite of the voice of reason. By not teaching the Law as Law, the Law is broken. And, due to the influence of aesthetics as outlined by Peirce, by not teaching the Law as Law, the Law is lost.

Aesthetic education determines what an individual understands to be admirable. If Peirce is correct, it constitutes the formation of that which informs morality and thus permits us to act in good conscience. This is a process that determines what sort of person one will be. The public schools, as though they took their cue from Rousseau ("tolerance should be given to all religions that tolerate others"²¹), establish and teach as most admirable the virtue of openness, where openness is not a portal to distinction and greatness, but is instead marked by the abandonment of any sense of these things and, thus, by indifference. Tolerance of difference, built on avoidance of discrimination, becomes the path to good conscience. Under this view, even intolerance is but another option (though an unattractive one). And, lest one become unattractive, it is imperative not to stand too strongly for something, or to pursue aggressively, or assert forcefully an answer to, the question of how best to live. Bloom's freshmen are the predictable result.

Exclusion from the schools of the claims of revelation is justified neither in the eyes of revelation nor by the reasoning of philosophy. That those who follow the Book object to such exclusion, and that they will make their dissent known, ought, then, to surprise no one.

Although the conflict between philosophical reason and revealed religion can be ignored, it cannot be rationally resolved. What *can* be done, given the nature of aesthetic development, is to adopt practices that systematically shape the young so as to reduce occasions for conflict, or at least to make the outcome of such conflict, when it arises, predictable and agreeable. Many devotees of the Book, evidently understanding these matters very well, act accordingly. I understand the readers of this essay to be adherents of the alternative view — that of philosophical reason. The essay will have succeeded if it has prompted these readers to recognize the nature of a critical conflict that cannot safely be ignored, to confront it with candor, and perhaps even to respond to it with insight and determination.

1. Charles S. Peirce, "An Outline Classification of the Sciences," in vol. 2 of *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 260; Charles S. Peirce, "The Three Normative Sciences," in vol. 2 of *Essential Peirce*, ed. Peirce Edition Project, 201.

2. Charles S. Peirce, "The Maxim of Pragmatism," in vol. 2 of *Essential Peirce*, ed. Peirce Edition Project, 142.

3. Charles S. Peirce, "What Makes a Reasoning Sound?" in vol. 2 of *Essential Peirce*, ed. Peirce Edition Project, 253.

4. Peirce, "Maxim of Pragmatism," 142.

5. Charles S. Peirce, "The Seven Systems of Metaphysics," in vol. 2 of *Essential Peirce*, ed. Peirce Edition Project, 189 (emphasis in original).

6. Peirce, "What Makes a Reasoning Sound?" 253.
7. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom, section 402a (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 80.
8. It is essential to the chasm as understood by Strauss that this is the unalloyed philosophical reasoning of Socrates, as opposed to that of medieval or modern times.
9. Daniel Tanquay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), 34.
10. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. George Douglas Howard Cole (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1950), 19.
11. Tanquay, *Leo Strauss*, 33.
12. "Rational theology" asserts that reason can illuminate the divine. If this is true, then the conflict between reason and revelation would not necessarily be equivalent to the opposition "atheism vs. theism." Indeed, reason and revelation could prompt belief in the same god. The question then shifts to how one party ought to regard the claims of the other. How speaketh the Lord? By what criteria do we understand His word? Is it even possible to fathom God? Rational theology, by asserting the possibility of knowing the nature or meaning of God (by modeling Him on the perfection of the philosopher himself), begs the issue at the heart of the conflict between reason and revelation.
13. Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 42.
14. *Ibid.*, 42–43 (notes omitted).
15. *Ibid.*
16. Leo Strauss, "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*," quoted in Meier, *Leo Strauss*, 8.
17. Meier, *Leo Strauss*, 12–13.
18. Leo Strauss, "Reason and Revelation," quoted in Meier, *Leo Strauss*, 149.
19. Leo Strauss, "Notes on Philosophy and Revelation," quoted in Meier, *Leo Strauss*, 171 (emphasis in original).
20. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 25.
21. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 140.