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The “Fundamental Political Predicament”: Leo Strauss on Plato’s Laws, Book III

“Those who desire to know the Laws form a different class from those who cannot bear the toil of study and of meditation; the desire of those who have the velleity to know the Laws, while they cannot bear the toil of study and meditation, turns necessarily into aversion, since knowledge of the Laws cannot be acquired without the toil of study and meditation”

“The Laws is not a book of whose content one can merely take cognizance without undergoing a change, or which one can merely use for inspiring himself with noble feelings” (Leo Strauss, “How Farabi Read Plato’s Laws,” What Is Political Philosophy?)

The following is an account of an important chapter of Strauss’s *The Argument and the Action of Plato’s Laws*, 1 his commentary on Book III of the *Laws*, Plato’s “political work par excellence” which reveals the character of classical political philosophy with “the greatest clarity.”² This chapter in Strauss’s book articulates the fundamental tensions and conditions of politics, following a discussion of the nature, goals, and origin of lawgiving, the city, and the regime, and leading to the legislative program launched in Book IV. The chapter indicates how Strauss reads Plato’s book on legislation as providing an “antidote” to unfounded hopes from legislation, as well as to excessive expectations from political education and prudence. With Strauss as a guide, one sees that Plato was at least as aware as Machiavelli of the amoral conditions of, and threats to, virtue and of the power of chance, while expecting less than Machiavelli did from the efforts to conquer chance. At the same time, Strauss’s interpretation shows that the limits of prudence, the problems of power, and the increase of vice, are in a way coincident with the possibility of philosophy.

Radically Imperfect Origins

Strauss begins by indicating that in the first two books of the *Laws*, “we have learned” the ends of legislation and their natural order (the virtues), but this knowledge is insufficient for guiding a legislator³—the virtues may transcend the city but they cannot be understood properly without considering the city. The Platonic text says that the origin of the regime (*politeia*) is being sought (676a), but Strauss notes that the discussion in Book III concerns also the origin of the city or rather of cities (681a1). Books I and II are on the goals of political life while Book III is on the genesis of the political regime. In Book III, the aim of law is no longer education, let alone “all of virtue” but is devoted to a fact-based “gymnastics” in which the divine origin of legislation is discounted and the natural origin and character of the human situation are discussed. The *Laws*’ commonly noted but often trivially interpreted “realism” is given its most solid foundation in Book III.

Strauss notes that the consideration of the genesis of cities with which Book III begins is meant to help one avoid “misconceiv[ing] the context within which political life is possible or, more precisely, the condition or limitation of political life.” Even more radically, Strauss adds that such a consideration is necessary since the city is “essentially a derivative phenomenon, derivative from man, proceeding from man.” This does not yet have to mean reducing the goals of the city to its originating necessities: say, economic and military necessities of survival. As Strauss says elsewhere, one would be right “that the factor of novelty does not exist in human history...”
