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INVITED CONTRIBUTION

Political Philosophy of Technology: After Leo Strauss (A Question of Sovereignty)

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Abstract Bernard Stiegler's contributions to political philosophy in the presence of technology are honored and complemented by imagining an encounter with the thought of Leo Strauss. The concept of sovereignty is taken as pivotal. Notions of sovereignty find expression not only in nation state politics but also in engineering and technology. Pierre Manent calls attention to further roots in Christian theology. The complexities and challenges of this interweaving point suggest the need for a "Tractatus Politico-Technologicus."

Keywords Bernard Stiegler · Leo Strauss · Sovereignty · Engineering · Technology · Nation state · Pierre Manent

Introduction

Given the occasion, the Bernard Stiegler Memorial Lecture 2022, it is appropriate to begin with a memory. I only met Stiegler a few times, but all were memorable. He was at once intense and unassuming, animated by a philosophical *eros* displayed in energetic argument and self-disregarding engagement … especially with students. I recall particularly one afternoon in Beijing, in the spring of 2017. Following a talk at Renmin University, Stiegler invited a group of students to meet at his hotel for further discussion. We sat in a circle with tea and a tray of cakes as he enthusiastically responded to and drew forth questions, gently midwifing a shift from simply sitting, enclosed by a massive technological structure, to thinking technicity. In this, he drew on, without explicit reference, his pioneering *Technics and Time*, an effort to apprehend technics "as the horizon of all possibility to come and of all possibility of a future" ([1], p. ix). What I most remember from the afternoon, however, is not specific ideas or arguments but his seriousness of purpose — a seriousness, I would venture, he shared, despite manifold differences, with Leo Strauss.

I never had occasion to meet Leo Strauss, although we did once have a single exchange of letters, more properly described as notes. With Strauss, my primary connection was through one of his less well-known students. Clark Bouton did his PhD under Strauss with a dissertation on Jean Bodin's theory of sovereignty, a concept deeply entrenched with the modern engineering-dependent nation-state. Falling in between Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, Bodin, while as great as neither, was nevertheless the first to define the state so clearly and simply in terms of power, and thus to make sovereignty the central concept of modern political science; as he put it in *Six Books of the*

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Republic (1576, bk.I, ch.I, p.1), the state is constituted by any "government of multiple households and that which is common to them, with sovereign power" — a definition that covers any human association from tribe to empire, so long as there exists an ultimately dominating power. The concept of the unitary executive, in the name of which modern technology is often deployed, originated with Bodin.

Although originally and primarily a political concept, sovereignty cannot help but invite, as well, the thinking of technology, its engineering wellsprings, and its progressive, not to say aggressive, sovereign power in our progressively engineered and engineering world modernity. Indeed, my hypothesis is that the emergence of political sovereignty has gone hand-in-hand with an emergence of technological sovereignty, that the two forms of sovereignty have been mutually reinforcing, and that the political philosophy of Strauss can help us appreciate this happening. Engineering and technology are not simply instruments available for use by the nation-state; they are constituent elements. My argument, however, will be less straightforward than a more reflective, episodic, and somewhat circular invitation to thinking that draws, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, on Strauss. I will be using Strauss to help us catch sight of something otherwise missing in philosophical discourse on engineering and technology. It is divided into five unequal parts.

Cities, Empires, and Nation-States

Prior to the modern period the two most well-defined, post-tribal political orders were cities and empires: cities circumscribed by walls and empires with indefinite boundaries anchored in a metropole. Bodin criticized Aristotle's conceptualization of the human association inscribed in a city, in terms not of power but of human flourishing as lacking generality; sovereignty, as a simpler concept, trumps flourishing in universality. The ultimate ineffectiveness of walls for protecting human flourishing from assaults of power, as well as establishing imperial boundaries, was discovered by both Roman and Han emperors, although the Chinese stuck with barrier technics longer and were slightly more successful. But the nation-state would require new technologies.

In city-states, the question of sovereignty as such did not arise, and within traditional empires, its ultimate diffusion had to be accepted as a given. Even in the metropole, an emperor, whose sovereignty derived originally from crime and conquest, ruled from high above and far away, through allies and court officials who vied with one another for access and influence. Diffusion only increased as an empire expanded into the provinces; in order for an agriculture dependent despotism to produce the wealth of arms and artifice required to drape dynastic kingships, a realm had to rely on social ontological differentiations that included peasant families exercising some measure of subsidiary autonomy. Empires further exhibit temporal declines across a systole and diastole that is invoked by the opening sentences of the Chinese classic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*: "The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been."

Within the confines of city walls even more so, powers are multiple, more or less obvious, and able to be exercised by all citizens. As Aristotle saw it, the city as city presents citizens to each other "synoptically," thereby enabling agonistic deliberation. As Strauss describes it, echoing Aristotle, "the [city-state] is the complete association which corresponds to the natural range of [human] power of knowing and of loving" ([2], p. 254 n2]). No instrumental medium is required to bring people together. At the same time, the city is a site of passions, echoing and intensifying through its infighting the passions inside an imperial court, as citizens vie with one another through words and deeds to stand out in glory. According to the classics, cities too exhibit ανακυκλώσεις (*anakyklóseis*, recyclings): of timocracy, monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny. According to Polybius, a strong influence on Montesquieu, who in turn influenced James Madison, who drafted the US Constitution, what is best is a mixed regime of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy — best, however, in the distinctly modern sense of creating the most stable order, prescinding from arguments about what may constitute flourishing. The social binding in any political order, including city-states, nevertheless includes, at least for Bodin, autochthonic and mythic elements.

The modern nation-state is something different: it is larger than a city but not as great as an empire. It takes in a geographically extended but well-bounded territory, ruled by means of consciously constructed sovereignty,

in the name of a community of citizens sharing an ethnic or cultural identity that grants the government sole legitimate use of force (to adapt Max Weber). Differing from city and empire, it manifests what might be called "exposed sovereignty" (akin to what was no more than implicit and less executively unified in a city) across a miniature empire. Its mythic element is also different, resting in conditions created by Abrahamic revelation religions, especially Christianity.

The nation-state becomes increasingly dependent on engineering and modern technologies. Boundaries need to be surveyed and enforced, stimulating new forms of administrative engineering, including the monitoring and policing of populations (as analyzed by Michel Foucault); additionally, in order to assert power (whether monarchial or democratic) throughout the territory — power that would otherwise be weakened according to a sociological version of the inverse square law — sovereignty must be affirmed and asserted by means of engineered systems of transport and communication. The most consequent of technologies, however, are those of mechanical, chemical, and electrical engineering combined in mass industrial production.

Nation-States and Abrahamic Religions

Let me elaborate on two assertions that may raise questions. A first concerns the idea that the presence of Abrahamic revelation religion is a distinctive contributor to nation-state sovereignty. The most obvious connection is the dogma of divine sovereignty in revelation religion. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all proclaim the absolute power of one true God: omnipotence, omniscience, with power to save or damn every human being, conceived in radically individualist, egalitarian terms. Insofar as humans are created in the image and likeness of such a god, they — or at least their kings — cannot help but aspire to exercise some diminished version of such sovereignty, that is, autonomy.

In premodern political orders, whether cities or empires, sovereignty was also intertwined with myths about transcendents and divinities. The Chinese emperor was a son of heaven, and the Pharaoh was a god, as were pagan Roman emperors. In Israel, however, God ceased to take human form, and a split occurred between kings and prophets; and prophets of God were deputized with a divinely sanctioned oppositional stance toward kings, or any other political authority. Roman Christianity codified this in the institutional power of a hierarchical church that split the social order into two authorities: secular and spiritual (with the spiritual remaining subdivided into ecclesiastical and monastic).

Competition and struggle for sovereign power became a norm of European political life which, with the Reformation, turned into extensive domestic and interstate rivalries — ultimately into violence and internecine warfare. The problematic of this almost nihilistically destructive violence, with its roots in Christian fanaticisms about absolutist revelations, became a significant theme in political philosophy from Marsilius of Padua and Machiavelli thru to Bodin — a problematic that only began to be tamed by formulation of a politics of national sovereignty at the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The historically effective further assertion and development of sovereignty continued with the work of Hobbes and John Locke thru to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel — until it was challenged and attacked philosophically by Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. That, at least, is a Straussian reading of the modern political philosophical trajectory.

Pierre Manent on the Nation-State

Allow me to reference here a reading by Pierre Manent, a leading French reader of Strauss. According to Manent, too, the nation is something in between city and empire, a "unique political form proper to Europe, since it was produced by a complex of circumstances and purposes exclusive to it and its American offspring" ([3], p. 90). This new political form was needed to mediate between city and empire under historical conditions created by a competing third, the church. The church was a new social order differing from both city and empire. This historical creation:

> decisively and definitively changed the way Europeans looked at the human association, and thus, it decisively and definitively transformed the conditions of their political life, but without ever being in a position to govern them…. The church is stronger than either the city or the empire because it goes deeper than the city [into the human soul] and further than the empire [claims to universality]. Conversely, the city is peculiarly inimical to the church because its civic passions bend the human heart toward human affairs, while the empire [opposes]

> the church because it entertains (competing) universal claims…. The entering wedge of the nation-to-be [for resolution of these tensions] was the Christian king ([3], pp. 96-97).

The Christian kingdom is more acceptable to church than either city or empire. Citizens in cities "are carried away by passions that make them forgetful of their souls," while an emperor "aims at a *plenitudo potestatis* that necessarily rivals" that of a Pope. By contrast, the Christian king, ruling a limited territory, with a sovereignty that Bodin conceived as founded in "divine right," could dispose subjects "to obey the law of God and the injunctions of the church" within geographical confines that promoted effectiveness superior to any emperor — or Pope, for that matter. Conversely, this king, because of his sovereign marshaling of a large population was "in a position to defend the prerogatives of the secular domain against … encroachments of the church" ([3], p. 98). Blessed by the church, it was nevertheless a king rather than a bishop who commanded armies. Yet along with this, divine kingship came a new challenge: political fanaticism greater than anything characteristic of the pre-Christian city. It was in response to this challenge that first Machiavelli then Hobbes sought to secularize the Christian kingdom.

A further word on Christian fanaticism: many religions have the potential for being enrolled to justify and support political violence. But the Abrahamic religions have special propensities in this regard. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each claim to be unique supernatural and super-rational revelations from an all sovereign God who asks for complete obedience to commands that are beyond human understanding, thus introducing into human affairs an extremism that is inherently difficult to moderate. For Tertullian, Jerusalem had nothing to do with Athens; he professed belief not despite its absurdity but because of it, radically rejecting any philosophical argument for qualifying or moderating faith. Some form of fideism is repeatedly echoed by right-wing fundamentalist conservative Christians, and even by some left-wing pacifist Christians, in both cases making believers difficult to live with. Indeed, as philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe argues, deontology (which can also be hard to live with) mirrors absolutism in secular form.

Even Thomas Aquinas, who granted reason some limited ability to know the truth, nevertheless argued that faith was necessary to perfect philosophy and necessarily provided more certainty than reason. As Thomas put the case for political theology in the *Summa Theologiae*:

> it was necessary for the human salvation that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known by divine revelation. Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that human beings should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors…. Therefore, in order that salvation might be brought to people with greater convenience and certainty (*convenientius et certius*), it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation (*Summa Theologiae* I, 1).

The combination of Christian theologies of propositional revelation and Greek rationalism infused into political ideals a degree of certainty that philosophy alone could never provide. This is a certainty and latent fanaticism lacking in, for example, such traditions as Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Within the cultural orbits of non-propositionally grounded, practice-based *dao* and *dharma* traditions, notions of extreme sovereignty are absent philosophically and politically missing. The clash of civilizations is philosophically real — although parsing relevant distinctions is complex.

Engineering, Technology, and Nation-State

A second question concerns the claim for engineering, technology, and mass productive industrialization as consequential elements in the theory and practice of bourgeois sovereignty. Machiavelli's core teaching, according to Strauss, constituted a "lowering of the standards" in political philosophy. In classical political thought, the standard for judging political orders was a propensity for cultivating and supporting virtuous lives. This was the case not only in Greek and Roman political orders but also in classical Islamic and medieval Jewish political theory. It was even the case, although only glancingly acknowledged by Strauss, in Chinese political thought.

Machiavelli radically criticized classical political philosophy for taking its bearings from idealistic, imaginary

fictions about the ways people live. The masses — especially the masses to which the church offered spiritual escape from suffering — are decisively moved not from above by aspirations to virtue, understood in any noble sense, but from below by attempts to escape the scarcities and depredations of this life, including the crushing consequences of greed and power. Machiavelli therefore argued for a transvaluation of virtue, from cardinal and theological narratives emphasizing harmony with the good, to *virtù* as the power to take control of *fortuna* where and whenever she appears, and to bend her to one's will by whatever means available.

It is not difficult to recognize what a small step it is from Machiavelli to Francis Bacon and a theory of knowledge as power aimed at "the conquest of nature for the relief of man's estate." In Bacon's New Atlantis advisers to the Prince, if not the Prince himself, become scientist engineers. Their new aim, the relief of the human condition, after conceptual maturation in Hobbes and Locke, eventuates in the self-assertion of English-speaking engineering as "the art of directing the great sources of power in nature for the use and convenience of man" (to quote the 1828 founding charter of the Institution of Civil Engineers) — that is, in the ideal of bourgeois engineering sovereignty, the sovereignty of capitalist commerce and technology.

For Machiavelli, of course, the lowering of the standards of was not a lowering at all; he presented it as a raising of the standards, in the sense that it was more in line with reality and thus able to offer practical guidance for any prince who would create a new political order — especially from the disordered society of early sixteenth century Italy, which existed "without head, without order, beaten, despoiled, torn, overrun" (*The Prince*, 26). Machiavelli was particularly incensed by a Christian legacy that could simultaneously emasculate secular sovereignty by subjecting it to spiritual oversight, while endorsing secular practices of "pious cruelty" to enforce doctrinal purities. The full scale civil and national wars of religion, which broke out 3 years before Machiavelli's death, intensified philosophical efforts to defang Christian religious fanaticism, as in the biblical criticisms advanced by Hobbes and then in Benedict Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670).

There is a sense, however, in which the theological fanaticism of Abrahamic revelation religion is mirrored in, if it does not infect, Machiavelli's own all-out political philosophical attack on classical political philosophy, leading ultimately to a rejection of philosophy as the zetetic way of contemplation exemplified by Socrates or the pursuit of Aristotelian *sophía*. It is this infection by what was rejected, or return of the repressed, that Strauss alludes to when he describes Machiavelli as animated by an "anti-theological ire," an ire or rage which has, it may be suggested, become characteristic of a whole strain of modern political philosophy. The first wave of rage directed against Christian political theology was in short order repurposed in a second wave, against the bourgeois liberalism that the first founded.

This paradoxical lowering-and-raising of standards — lowering from classical conceptions of virtue and raising toward political effectiveness — was domesticated by Locke's labor theory of value and argument for a basic right to private property. Assumptions that the value of material good rests with the amount of work someone puts into producing it (rather than its proportionality to the good) and that people have inalienable rights to possessive individual ownership (giving individuals direct control of material conditions and marginalizing practices of negotiation and cooperation customary with shared ownership) made possible what Karl Marx termed the bourgeois revolution. This cultural superstructure in the eventual political form of liberalism would not have been possible — nor more or less unjustly stabilized across the long nineteenth century — without an engineering industrial base: unjustly, because the rich continued to outpace the poor in their share of the economic pie; but stabilized by increases in the size of the pie as a whole. The consciousness of the poor was bought off, as it were, by their own smaller increases, which were nevertheless increases. In Herbert Marcuse's deft phrase, "technology delivers the goods" in a one-dimensionality that overwhelms all other dimensions. The inability of exploited workers and consumers to perceive what is happening behind our backs has only been aggravated by the platform virtual economy constructed with the internet, in which users are uncomplainingly enrolled as unpaid content producers.

One political philosophical way to think about what is going on in the political economy might adapt Plato's famous analogy of the cave. In an essay on "How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*," Strauss pointed in such a direction with his own arresting version, in which people in the cave had become so prejudiced against an:

> ascent to the light of the sun … that they dig a deep pit beneath the cave … and withdraw into that pit. [Anyone who] desired to ascend to the light of the sun, … would first have to try to reach the level of the natural cave, and he would have to invent new and most artificial tools unknown and unnecessary to those who dwelt in the natural cave. He would be a fool, he would never see the light of the sun, he would lose the last vestige of the memory of the sun, if he perversely thought that by inventing his new tools he had progressed beyond the ancestral cave-dwellers ([4], pp. 155-156).

For Strauss, this offered an image for the trajectory of modern political philosophy, but it is not difficult to imagine a divided-line interpretation that incorporates technology, even more explicitly than he has already done.

Toward a Tractatus Politico-Technologicus

To this point, my argument has been that, using the distinctly modern political concept of sovereignty as an amphiboly — I have, admittedly, played a little fast and loose —, it is possible to see that the nation-state, and modern engineering and technology, are inherently and symbiotically intertwined. No nation-state without technology; no modern technology without the nation-state. Modernity is constituted by a dual sovereignty of political and technological power or a political-technological sovereignty, that is in its turn, a secularization of Abrahamic revelation religious conceptions of divine sovereignty. Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologio-Politicus* deserves to be complemented with a "Tractatus Politco-Technologicus." Although this is not the place to undertake such a task, it may at least be adumbrated.

Spinoza's *Tractatus Politicus*, while not finished at the time of his death, was the first political philosophical treatise to defend what we now think of as liberalism: a nation-state whose fundamental rationale is to provide peace and security (as argued by Hobbes) not just by subordination of religion to the state (as with Hobbes) but by means of democratic governance — and, even more significantly, by a freedom of thought and expression that enables the indefinite production of scientific knowledge. One moment in a political-technological treatise would be to extend Spinoza's analysis, to demonstrate how freedom of thought lends itself not just to the production of scientific knowledge but, given the nature of modern scientific knowledge, to *laissez-innover* engineering.

A second moment would consider how the unqualified liberty to engineer is captured by free market capitalism to create a techno-lifeworld juggernaut. A third would then examine how this engineering juggernaut could become counterproductive in fascist or communist-ruled nation-states combining sovereignty with technology to attack their populations, and in the undermining of peace and security by polluting or destabilizing the natural environment on and within which all human orders (including nation-states) ultimately depend. Attempts to criticize and qualify destructive sovereignties in both political and technological terms would then need to be examined. Across the turn of the millennium, the most obvious cases are efforts to establish international human rights based institutions and global forms of environmental regulation. Yet as Machiavelli reminds, any optimism must be tempered by recognizing the difference between armed and unarmed prophets — if not by Joseph Stalin's question, "How many divisions does the Pope have?"

With regard to all three basic moments, Strauss can make distinctive contributions, but to none more so than the third. Thus I venture to conclude with a lengthy quotation from the final pages of what is arguably Strauss's greatest book, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. As Strauss wrote:

> The classics were for almost all practical purposes what now are called conservatives. In contradistinction to many present day conservatives, however, they knew that one cannot be distrustful of political or social change without being distrustful of technological change. Therefore they did not favor the encouragement of inventions, except perhaps in tyrannies, i.e., in regimes the change of which is manifestly desirable. They demanded the strict moral-political supervision of inventions; the good and wise city will determine which inventions are to be made use of and which are to be suppressed. Yet they were forced to make one crucial exception. They had to admit the necessity of encouraging inventions pertaining to the art of war. They had to bow to the necessity of defense or of resistance. This means however that they had to admit that the moral-

> political supervision of inventions by the good and wise city is necessarily limited by the need of adaptation to the practices of morally inferior cities which scorn such supervision because their end is acquisition and ease. They had to admit in other words that in an important respect the good city has to take its bearings by the practice of bad cities or that the bad impose their law on the good. [At the same time,] the [classical] opinion that there occur periodic cataclysms in fact took care of any apprehension regarding an excessive development of technology or regarding the danger that man's inventions might become his masters and destroyers. Viewed in this light, the natural cataclysms appear as a manifestation of the beneficence of nature…. It would seem that the notion of the beneficence of nature or of the primacy of the Good must be restored by being rethought thru a return to the fundamental experiences from which it is derived ([5], pp. 298-299).

In the twenty-first century, the prospects for such political-technological catastrophes are indefinitely greater than when Strauss wrote. The Cold War triumph of ideological democracy in the competition to engineer technologies of mass destruction has been followed by emergence of multiple authoritarian, not to say tyrannical or fanatical regimes, and competitions to engineer so-called smart or autonomous weapons of miniature and virtual but nonetheless consequential destruction. Additionally, global competition in the engineering of mass wealth has had the counterproductive result of producing destabilizing levels of difference between the rich and poor inside and out liberal democratic republics, as well as intensified degrees of resentment both bottom up and top down.

The rich-poor gap takes more than economic form. In 1941, Strauss ventured a sympathetic interpretation of nihilism as moral protest against the loss of a sense of the seriousness of life in liberal culture. As he channeled this ultimately corrupted Nietzschean moral protest from Weimar Germany, "Only a life which is based on constant awareness of the sacrifices to which it owes its existence, and of the necessity, the duty of sacrifice of life and all worldly goods, is truly human." This is a stance we can see reprised today in Patrick Deneen's [6] recent *Why Liberalism Failed*, with a central chapter devoted to "Technology and the Loss of Liberty," arguing that too much liberty undermines the seriousness of life.

Finally, the web of the natural environment in the form within which human civilization has arisen, and on which it ultimately and decisively rests, is now under increased destabilizing engineering action by much more than nuclear weapons: from planetary levels of industrial forever chemicals and losses of biodiversity to global climate mutation. The unrestrained innovation in socially and cosmologically disruptive technologies, thru increasing alliances between engineering and nationalist capitalisms, infuses historically and globally unprecedented change of pace and fragility into political orders. It is Strauss's clear eyed, non-alarmist, almost detached acknowledgement of the potential for catastrophes natural, anthropogenic, and political that is one of the most salient features of his thought. It is also one of the features of Strauss that is most relevant to thinking political philosophy of engineering and technology in our time.

Epilog

As an epilog, let me return to something hinted at with my introductory remarks. Just as I think Strauss and Stiegler share a philosophical *eros*, it seems obvious that they erotically challenge one other. I do not know Stiegler's work nearly as well as I know Strauss's, so it would be a fraught exercise to venture much by way of elucidating the challenges. I certainly consider Stiegler's philosophical analysis of technics as anthropogenesis, especially in *Technics and Time*, a significant contribution to the philosophy of technology, one quite different than that of Strauss, yet I have barely scratched the surface of Stiegler's later work on media and political economy, in which it might be said that he more consistently than Strauss focuses on catastrophic prospects. These later works, originating in public talks, exhibit a political concern for raising public consciousness and for initiating new practices, new ways of living in our progressively engineered and engineering world.

Nevertheless, in homage to Stiegler's own boldness if not Strauss's circumspection, I venture to recall a passing remark that Strauss once made comparing the sensibilities of Jane Austen and Fyodor Dostoevsky — a remark suggesting that he, Strauss, was more akin to Austen ([7], p.

104). There is a sense in which Stiegler presents a Dostoevskian challenge to Strauss on which any reader of Strauss might reflect. After all, Strauss has admitted that in his youth, no philosopher was more influential on him than Nietzsche, and Nietzsche described Dostoevsky was the one who taught him most about psychology.

At the end of a Bernhard Stiegler memorial lecture on Leo Strauss, it, thus, seems appropriate to acknowledge what I have not done — that is, I have not reflected on the challenge that Stiegler's "extroverted *eros*" presents to Strauss's elusively seductive "introverted *eros*" — and to suggest that in light of Strauss's own analysis of the great dangers posed by modern technology, Stiegler's politics may actually be more proportionate to our circumstances than Strauss. However, this may be, for both Strauss and Stiegler, political philosophy can be taken as first philosophy.

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