

MICHAEL P. ZUCKERT &
CATHERINE H. ZUCKERT

Leo Strauss

and the

Problem *of*

Political

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Leo Strauss
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This book is dedicated to

ELENA, SABINE, JAMES, AND WILLIAM

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Abbreviations

All works listed here are by Leo Strauss unless otherwise stated.

- AAPL *The Argument and the Action of Plato's "Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).
- CM *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).
- ELN *Essays on the Law of Nature*, by John Locke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954).
- "GN" "German Nihilism," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (1999): 353–78.
- HPP *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- JPCM *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).
- LAM *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).
- "LER" "Liberal Education and Responsibility," in *LAM*, 9–25.
- "NCS" "Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*," in *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, by Heinrich Meier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 91–119.
- NRH *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).
- OT *On Tyranny: Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
- PAW *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).
- "PPH" "Political Philosophy and History," in *WIPP*, 56–77.
- PPH *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, trans. Elsa M. Sinclair (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936).
- "PR" "Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*

- by *Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 249–310.
- RCPR *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
- SA *Socrates and Aristophanes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).
- SCR *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. Elsa M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken Books, 1965).
- SPPP *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
- TALS *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy*, by Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
- "TL" "Two Lectures," *Interpretation* 22, no. 3 (1995): 301–38.
- TM *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
- "TWM" "Three Waves of Modernity," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 81–98.
- "WILE" "What Is Liberal Education?," in *LAM*, 3–8.
- "WIPP" "What Is Political Philosophy?," in *WIPP*, 9–55.
- WIPP *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959).

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Prologue

Leo Strauss was one of the preeminent political philosophers of the twentieth century. Although most of his work took the form of investigations in the history of political philosophy, his intentions were not simply those of a historian of ideas. His investigations had a philosophical and even, to a degree, a political purpose. His chief goal in both his historical and his more strictly philosophical writings was the restoration of political philosophy as a meaningful, even urgent enterprise. To that end, he delivered stinging critiques of two modern intellectual movements, positivism and historicism, that seemed to make political philosophy no longer possible. Strauss's historical inquiries led him to put forward a number of highly controversial theses about the course of Western philosophical history. He placed the beginning of political philosophy, which he presented as a new beginning for philosophy altogether, with Socrates, who, as Cicero said, "brought philosophy down from the Heavens and into the cities." Socrates founded a tradition of political philosophy that lasted, in several important variants, until Machiavelli, who revolutionized philosophy and instituted modern political philosophy, or more simply, modernity. Later thinkers subjected the tradition inaugurated by Machiavelli to very significant modifications, called by Strauss "waves" in a complex intertextual reference to Plato's *Republic*. The upshot of these modifications was the movement that Strauss called historicism, a movement that reached its fullest expression in the thinking of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger and that claimed to bring philosophy as previously known to an end. Strauss's philosophic activity might be understood as an effort to reestablish rationalism by showing that the death spiral of philosophy in modern times was a failure not of philosophic rationalism as such but rather of

modern philosophy. That death spiral provoked him to explore premodern philosophy as an alternative, which, he argued, if understood properly, proved immune to the critique of the philosophic tradition mounted in modernity and provided the basis for the revival of rationalism.

Strauss always emphasized the importance of beginning with the surface. Following his advice we begin with the most surface observations about him: he has been hounded by controversy, both about what he thought and about its value. We thus begin by asking, why all this controversy? Three answers come to mind, all of which we shall follow out to varying degrees in this book.

The Fusion of History and Philosophy

The first answer has to do with the particular character of Strauss's work. Most of his published writing took the form of historical studies of thinkers—most often canonic thinkers—of the philosophic tradition. As a result, Strauss himself is often difficult to find in his works. One senses that he is there, but where? Do any—or all—of the thinkers he explicates speak for him? Or are his readers free to pick and choose, selecting what seems to them to comport with their intimations, or premonitions, or prejudices about Strauss? Politics often plays a role in how readers pick and choose among Strauss's various explications of texts. He is known or thought to be some sort of conservative, and how readers stand toward conservatism in many cases determines what in his studies readers hearken to.

Strauss tends to fade into the authors he is interpreting.¹ Rather than cultivating an authorial voice that stands above and outside the thinker under consideration, Strauss attempts to become a mouthpiece for the thinker, to display the inner logic of the thought by reconstructing it from the inside, so to speak. Thus he takes on the voice of major characters in Platonic dialogues, of Xenophon, of Machiavelli, of Hobbes, of Nietzsche, of Schmitt, and of many others, with all of whom Strauss cannot possibly agree—although some of his critics seem to think that he does.

We are inclined to believe that this mode of presenting his interpretations is the single largest source of the controversy we so often see concerning the content of his thought. He does seem to be voicing Thrasymachus, and Maimonides, and Locke. But Strauss does not write like this, as the ventriloquist of the canon, in order to endorse the thinkers he studies. He writes in this way in order to satisfy his interpretive standard that one must seek to understand an author as he understood himself. How better

to do that than to attempt to reconstruct the thought and bring it to life as the thinker thought it?

We do not believe that Strauss leaves his readers so adrift that they are without guidance as to where he stands vis-à-vis the thinkers he studies. True, he does not usually engage in the sort of critical analysis characteristic of the modern philosophic academy. As often as not, he proceeds by setting up a dialogue among thinkers in the tradition, and allows himself to stand back and let, say, Rousseau take on Hobbes. But he does let us know what he thinks of the contest and of its winners and losers. So he considers the later modern critique of early modern political philosophy to be cogent. But it is not success alone that determines his judgment, for he argues that the early moderns, who seem to have routed the classical philosophers, did not deserve their apparent victory. If readers would pay attention to his sometimes subtle guideposts, they would find it easier to locate Strauss himself in his texts.

But there is a broader question lurking in the surface character of Strauss's corpus: Why does he devote himself to the study of the thought of others rather than turn directly to the problems of political philosophy themselves? The thinkers he lavishes attention on were not oblivious to those who preceded them in the enterprise of political philosophy, but none of them devotes the bulk of his work to textual explication, as Strauss does. Machiavelli, for example, describes in a general way all his predecessors as unhelpful utopians and addresses particular authors, like Polybius, to contest one point or another that arises in the study of politics. But Machiavelli's focus is never merely on the thought of the past. Strauss the thinker would be much easier to lay hands on if he proceeded as Machiavelli did and addressed his themes directly. It is easy, in other words, to confuse Strauss with an intellectual historian. He always had great respect for intellectual history when well done, but he clearly aspired to being something else, a political philosopher. So much of his activity as a political philosopher looks like intellectual history, because he maintained that our era calls for an unprecedented "fusion of history and philosophy." That is to say, political philosophy today can be adequately carried on only in intimate conjunction with history and historical studies. This conviction accounts for the overall character of Strauss's work, but at the same time it is deeply paradoxical, for he also drew a firm distinction between historical studies (inquiries into what this or that philosopher thought) and philosophy (inquiry into the truth of the matter). Philosophy today must both fuse with history and remain distinct from it. That paradoxical combination tends to

distinguish Strauss on the one side from historicists, who accept the idea of fusion, and from political philosophers in the analytic tradition, like John Rawls, who engage in political philosophy in more or less complete independence from historical studies.²

We present a detailed account of that paradox in chapter 2 below. For now let us simply mention the most pressing reason for Strauss's call for this fusion of history and philosophy. Philosophy, Strauss thought for reasons we discuss in chapter 3, must begin with prephilosophic opinion, but opinion in our post-Enlightenment age is thoroughly pervaded or infected by residues of earlier philosophy. Already in the early nineteenth century Thomas Jefferson could speak of the chief concepts of Lockean political philosophy as "the common sense of the subject," a judgment that surely could not have been shared by Aristotle or Confucius or Isaiah. Moreover, it is not only Locke who has come to be part of our common opinions and concepts, but Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Marx, and many others. Strauss endorsed the Platonic image of the cave—we humans normally live in a cave defined by our opinions, the ascent from which constitutes the activity of philosophizing. But, Strauss thinks, we now live in a cave beneath the cave. Our cave is constituted by the layer upon layer of philosophically derived opinions that have become part of the atmosphere of thought we breathe. One response to this situation is the unreflective path of Rawls: he takes the consensus of opinion he finds in our cave as the necessary and sufficient starting point for constructive philosophizing. Strauss would say that Rawls only digs himself yet deeper—perhaps constructing another cave beneath the first two. Strauss follows a more radical, but slower and more tentative path. One must begin with an effort to clarify the opinions constituting our cave, and that can be done only via studies in the history of political philosophy. Such studies aim to reconnect our dead or smoldering stubs and residues of philosophic thought with their sources so that these thoughts can live for us again. Such studies can awaken us to the alternatives that lie undigested and unintegrated in our common opinions. History of philosophy, as Strauss understands it, is merely propaedeutic to philosophy proper, but a necessary propaedeutic nonetheless. (See chapter 8 below.)

Esotericism

A second reason for the elusiveness of Leo Strauss the political philosopher derives from one of his major discoveries in his studies of the history

of philosophy—his rediscovery of philosophic rhetoric, or the distinction between esoteric and exoteric writing. The first political philosopher, Socrates, did not write at all, because he thought that writings say the same things to everybody, whereas the correct way of proceeding is to say different things to different people, according to what suits them. Accordingly, Socrates rarely gave speeches to large groups of listeners; he usually chose instead to engage in one-at-a-time exchanges with individuals. Philosophic writing cannot proceed as Socrates did, but, Strauss discovered, philosophers prior to the modern era did write in such a way as to capture something of the Socratic way. They wrote so that different readers could find different things in their texts. They wrote so that only the most thoughtful, persistent, and philosophically minded readers were apt to penetrate to their deepest thoughts. One reason they wrote in that way was to blunt or even conceal the degree to which philosophy was in its very nature an activity that challenged and sometimes overturned the basic opinions on which societies necessarily rest. Unlike modern or Enlightenment thinkers, premodern philosophers did not have an agenda that called for the wholesale refashioning of reigning opinion; they accepted the fact that a wholly enlightened society is not possible. Society will always rest on only more or less true opinions about matters crucial to the ongoing health or viability of society.

Many misunderstandings swirl around Strauss's notion of the necessarily unphilosophic character of society and the beliefs on which societies rest. His point is not the one often taken to be his: since the conventional views are not wholly true, they must be wholly false. Those who draw this conclusion are quick to assume that Strauss simply negates conventional views, and that he therefore must be an immoralist or nihilist. No—as he makes especially clear in his analysis of Plato's *Republic*, the reigning views are *partial* truths; the whole truth incorporates rather than simply rejects the truth contained in opinion. (See chapter 5 below.) Not entirely unlike Hegel, Strauss sees the transcended partial truths transformed, but retained in a larger, more comprehensive truth (albeit one that may consist in awareness of the enduring problems or alternatives, rather than a unifying synthesis).³

The Straussian philosopher may arrive at an understanding that supports in important ways the dominant opinions in a country, but along the way he intransigently challenges those opinions. Philosophers question what is taken for granted and insist on inquiring into what is held to be sacred and undeniable. Philosophy in its raw form has a natural ten-

dency to run afoul of the keepers of authoritative opinion, and all premodern societies had such keepers. Concern with its public face is thus a self-protective garb for philosophers. Substituting "philosophy" for "learning," Strauss agreed with Alexander Pope:

A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.

In Strauss's terms, this means that philosophy can be harmful not only for the philosopher but also for those who imbibe some but not all of the activity. Some individuals can be shaken in their healthy commitment to the norms of their society without going all the way to philosophy and the reorientation that it gives to a human life. A little philosophy can undermine the authority of the norms without providing anything to replace it. Since it is highly unlikely that most individuals will or can make the transition to the philosophic life and consequently highly likely that they will continue to live their lives in the realm of opinion, it is an act of moral and social responsibility to be concerned about what one says in public to those who will not "drink deeply" at "the Pierian spring."

Strauss's theory of esotericism has produced understandable controversy, both about the general theory and about the often disturbingly novel readings of the philosophers it has produced. Another kind of controversy, more relevant in our own immediate context, concerns Strauss's writings themselves. He announced the maxim that an author writes as he reads—and whether that maxim is true of all the authors in the canon or not, it would appear most likely to hold true of the person who formulated it. Thus many of the most sophisticated readers of Strauss are certain that he too engaged in esoteric writing.⁴ But as many of his critics say when they challenge his application of the theory to authors like Xenophon or Locke, it is extremely difficult to pin down an esoteric writer. How can one find one's bearings in a text when one cannot take at face value what an author says? This same difficulty besets those who seek to read Strauss himself esoterically.

Strauss, of course, had a response to these worries. He does not think that "reading between the lines" can ever produce a definitive reading of a text, but he also denies that the esotericism thesis is a warrant for undisciplined and willful reading.⁵ Among other things, he insists that before reading between the lines one must read what is on the lines—and take that with the utmost seriousness (*PAW*, 30–31). Unless there is reason to question what is said on the lines, that should be taken as the author's in-

tent and meaning. Esoteric readings require actual evidence; admittedly at times that evidence is indirect and inferential, but there must be more to it than the application of a syllogism of the following sort:

A writes esoterically;
A says Y openly and on the surface;
Therefore, A must really affirm not-Y.

Unfortunately, much of the effort to read Strauss esoterically has this character. In the case of any other author it would be laughable to dismiss the many strong statements in favor of rule of law and constitutionalism Strauss makes and insist that he actually favors tyranny and even National Socialism, as some of his readers have claimed. (See chapter 9 below.) Putting aside such extreme misreadings, it is undeniable that Strauss writes, if not esoterically, then extremely subtly, a fact that contributes to the difficulty even responsible and careful scholars have in pinning him down.

We have responded to this difficulty in the following two-pronged manner. The subtleties of Strauss's texts require close attention. He constructed each essay and each book with immense care, and understanding him requires equally careful attention to each piece as a piece. Thus many of our chapters consist of close analyses of individual essays or chapters, analyses aimed at capturing his thinking at what we might call the microscopic level. In these chapters we make a point of following him as attentively as we can. But there are also parts of our book that operate macroscopically, that attempt to present the forest without losing sight of the trees. Thus, for example, in chapter 3 we present an overview of Strauss's rereading of the philosophic tradition, set off against Martin Heidegger's parallel but very different account of Western philosophy. Understanding Strauss requires this sort of bifocal view of his corpus, whereby the microscopic and macroscopic inform and check each other.

Whether we have succeeded in unraveling Strauss's thought or not, whether he engaged in full-blown esotericism or what we have elsewhere called pedagogical reserve, it is certain that he writes in a way that makes it difficult to say with certainty what the chief conclusions of his thinking are or, in many cases, what the reasoning leading to his conclusions is. In a word, Strauss's way of writing constitutes a second ground for the difficulty his readers have had in pinning down just what he does say.