

Leo Strauss and his Legacy

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That Leo Strauss, of all 20th-century philosophers, should be the person to whom the press attributes so much influence is strange. Strauss died over thirty years ago now, and while he had many fiercely loyal students his initial influence on politics was negligible. In addition, Strauss was not a public intellectual. He did not write op-ed pieces for major newspapers. He did not write on, or teach classes on, the practical problems of contemporary politics. As a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany he was deeply concerned with contemporary politics from a broad perspective, but he did not engage in intellectual debates about, for example, the merits of the Marshall Plan or American involvement in Vietnam. To the contrary, his teaching and research focused on close, careful readings of classic texts in political philosophy such as Plato's *Laws*, Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed*, Machiavelli's *Prince*, and Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. When he strayed to reflect on contemporary issues, his concern was the effect of broad intellectual trends on the body politic.

How did an obscure academic philosopher obsessed with fastidious study of classical texts in political thought come to be regarded as the most influential intellectual in America? The story

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is long and complicated. His students entered politics with unusual vigor and over time became increasingly influential. Therefore, at the very least, he attracted ambitious students whose ambition he was able to further focus. But while the students he attracted made it possible for Strauss's influence to spread, that influence would not have lasted beyond a generation of students if his ideas were not themselves compelling.

In this lecture, I will offer a brief description of Leo Strauss's background, his key philosophical ideas, especially the philosophical significance of the distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric, and conclude with a look at the state of his legacy.

By way of background, Leo Strauss was born in Germany in 1899, the son of a Jewish businessman. He came to the United States as a refugee in 1938. He taught at several universities in the US, foremost among them the University of Chicago, where he spent twenty years. He died in 1973. Even during his lifetime he was a controversial figure. One of his students called Strauss "one of the most hated men in the English-speaking academic world," and upon reflection continued, "I was about to strike out the word 'hated' as too strong, but in fact it is correct."¹ Why such rancor? Strauss was hated for two main reasons: his criticism of the dominant method for reflecting on political matters in his day, namely, the attempt to treat the study of politics as a science, and his purported conservatism, even if from within the perspective of liberal democracy.

Strauss began to receive broader attention when his student, Allen Bloom, published a popular version of some of his views in *The Closing of the American Mind*. But in the last five or six years, he has actually become a celebrity. Since the beginning of George W. Bush's presidency, the press has paid an unusual amount of attention to Strauss's influence, sometimes almost making it seem as though Strauss were running the government from the grave.² His teachings are blamed for the war in Iraq, Bush's resistance to stem cell research, our refusal to join the Kyoto Accord, the conservative jurisprudence of justices Scalia, Thomas, and Alito, broken treaties, the breakdown of civil liberties, the administration's general willingness to lie to achieve its ends, and so on.

The allure of Strauss's ideas grew from two contrasting

tendencies in his thought. The first was a turn to everyday experience as the starting point for political philosophy, whether via ordinary political opinion or through renewed study of nature as it presents itself to the human perspective. By rooting philosophy in everyday experience Strauss claimed to provide an alternative to two related tendencies that were leading modernity towards nihilism: on the one hand scientism or positivism, the claim that only scientific thought counts as knowledge; on the other hand historicism, relativism, or existentialism, the claim that there is no such knowledge to be had, so humanity would have to turn to some form of Willing to determine its future. Neither of these views, Strauss claimed, was able to speak philosophically about values. Science does not count values as facts; therefore values have no rational basis. Existentialism has a similar view of values, although it sees no saving power in those results that science can produce.

The second tendency in Strauss's philosophy that attracted attention was a philosophical teaching that, if understood incorrectly, could lead to extreme cultishness, a sense that one belongs to a persecuted sect who are the only ones who know the truth about political philosophy. On the one hand Strauss wanted to return political thought to reflections that grew out of everyday life, but he also taught that even if the wise and the ordinary share the same starting point, barriers arise as reflection continues, radically separating those of different abilities. What mediates between these two views is a deep understanding of philosophical rhetoric. That is, Strauss's philosophical rhetoric presents the truth as both obvious and obscure. His understanding of the difference between the esoteric and the exoteric is at the heart of his political rhetoric. Only if we understand Strauss's philosophical rhetoric can we understand his legacy.

One of the funny things that philosophers do when answering a question is to begin by asking the meaning of the question they're asking. Sometimes this process gets a little absurd, sometimes it's enlightening. I'm going to try it out. I've promised that I'm going to talk about Leo Strauss's legacy. But the nature of a (philosopher's or writer's or artist's) legacy is already a problem. We can begin to think through the problem simply by thinking about a common experience at a liberal arts college. When we read Plato or Emily

Dickinson, Virginia Woolf or Shakespeare, or we listen to Beethoven, or we look at the paintings of Mary Cassat, what is it that we hope to learn? Can the core of it be found in Cliff's Notes? Or does an outline of basic facts about the source and its history somehow miss something? Can one have a high level of cultural literacy and yet be, in another sense, uneducated? In other words, what legacy do these sources carry for us? Of course, one does not only leave a legacy through the works one produces, but also through those whom one influences directly. Nevertheless, the issue ultimately remains the same: how is it that one actually learns from a teacher or mentor?³ Surely it's not simply by being able to repeat their doctrines. And yet, their doctrines cannot be excluded from the process either. What does it mean to leave a legacy?

This question was one of the central concerns of Strauss's own work. Strauss wondered how we can read the writings of great thinkers of the past so that we can inherit their legacy. Thus, Strauss described a liberal education as fundamentally "listening to the conversation among the greatest minds."⁴ We can debate over who the greatest minds are, or even what exactly the standard of greatness is, and still agree that a central feature of liberal education is learning how to inherit the legacy of great minds of the past, not as something old and merely academic but as something both alive and enlivening. In fact, one of the reasons that a liberal education is open to misunderstanding, and sometimes even mockery, is due to the difficulty of doing just this. When a liberal arts education fails it leads to either mere cultural literacy or empty pseudo-intellectualism. But when we succeed, what is the nature of our understanding of the source? What do we hear when we hear the conversations of the great minds and what do we miss?

We can see one of the main difficulties in leaving a legacy by looking at the current state of Leo Strauss's own legacy. It is becoming increasingly common to differentiate between students of Leo Strauss, in a broad sense, and self-proclaimed Straussians. In fact, one cannot understand Strauss's legacy if one cannot differentiate the two. By "students of Leo Strauss" I don't mean simply those who were once in his classroom. Rather, I mean those who were in his classroom who found they had something important to learn from him, who found him a teacher in the best

sense of the word. Strauss's ideas presented his genuine students with a challenge. His students embraced that challenge as an important part of developing their own thinking. While the spirit of philosophical thought that Strauss represented inspired a kind of erotic ascent in their thinking, his ideas themselves had to be carefully thought through. Some of Strauss's ideas became their own, but only after struggling with how those ideas fit into the whole of their own thinking. Others were set aside, but only after likewise struggling with how the power of those claims pushed them to develop their own thinking in response.

The Straussians, by contrast, are less reflective. There are key elements in Strauss's thought that they accepted dogmatically. This is not unusual among those teachers who inspire intellectual ascent, whether through their living presence or through their writings. It would be incorrect to call such a response thoughtless or empty. The simple fact that they were inspired by his philosophical presence shows that their souls are alive. But in an effort to imitate their mentor they became closer to him on a superficial level while moving further from him on a deeper level. They were closer to him because their ideas were more similar to Strauss's than those of the students of Strauss. They were further from him because their ideas lacked the depth of Strauss's own, which is what truly posed a challenge to the students of Strauss. Stating the general principle in an exaggerated way, a deep idea has more in common with another deep idea whose surface claim is completely contrary than a shallow idea whose surface claim is in complete accord. As a general phenomenon, we can call this the paradox of discipleship. A corollary of the paradox is that sometimes it is not easy to tell whether one is a genuine student or a disciple. Those whom I would call Straussians or disciples of Strauss would probably not see themselves in this way. To the contrary, using my distinction they would call themselves students of Strauss. Let us leave the problem for the time being with the claim that Strauss's legacy has produced both genuine students and disciples.

I should also note that there are important advantages to discipleship. Disciples have a bolder, if less refined, form of enthusiasm than genuine students. Therefore, disciples are more likely to manifest an idea's political impact. In addition, since a

disciple's understanding of an idea is more straightforward, it is easier for them to transform the idea into a reproducible doctrine. If a genuine student is to have any impact, it is more likely by becoming a teacher him- or herself. But of course, this only leads to repeating the problem of discipleship in the next generation. Thus a second paradox of discipleship is that one needs disciples to form a lasting legacy.

In truth, by drawing such a stark contrast between genuine students and disciples I am being too harsh on the Straussians. We rarely see such pure forms of one or the other—most actual cases stand somewhere in between. But the sharp distinction helps to draw out an important question. If the true spirit of an idea is to have an impact, what must the relationship be between the deeper, philosophical, understanding of the idea, and the shallower, political, understanding?

To take one possible answer, the paradoxes of discipleship would disappear if the shallow understanding, in fact, preserved the essence of any deeper understanding; that is, if the deeper understanding were more elaboration than transformation. Such a view makes perfect sense in some contexts. Take, for example, the relationship between the founder of a religion and its future adherents. We would not want to say that the adherents' belief is only genuine if they understood the teachings of their faith as well as the founder did. Rather, we are more inclined to say that even if the adherents' understanding is deficient, they nevertheless have access to the core of the religious teaching.

The problem of the relationship between a deep and shallow understanding of an idea serves as an apt entryway into understanding Leo Strauss. One of Strauss's central philosophical influences was to revive the distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric. The discussion above gave us a first glimpse of what Strauss was trying to get at. If we call the deep understanding of an idea its esoteric, or inner, form and the shallow understanding of an idea its exoteric, or outer, form, we begin to understand what is arguably the fundamental question that Strauss spent a lifetime trying to answer: what is the relationship between a deep and a shallow understanding of an idea, or, said otherwise, what's the relationship between the esoteric and the exoteric? This problem was already present in the distinction between Strauss's students

and Strauss's disciples. If the presence of disciples is the necessary consequence of any deep philosophical teaching, then the distinction between the esoteric and exoteric is central to understanding any philosopher's legacy, and therefore is central to understanding Strauss's legacy.

If a deep teaching necessarily produces disciples, one should think about the kind of disciples one's teaching might produce. That is, one should be aware of both how their position will be understood and how it would be misunderstood. One may be able to choose a misunderstanding that in some way captures a proper understanding. But this may not be possible. In that case one must choose a misunderstanding. Strauss claimed that this is the dilemma that any philosopher faced. Thus, by focusing on political philosophy Strauss did not just consider the philosophical interpretation of the political, but the way in which philosophy may be consciously political or must be unconsciously political. To a certain extent, philosophers are responsible for the consequences of misunderstandings as well as a proper understanding. We may therefore ask what the relationship is between Strauss and his disciples. There are two key questions to consider: first, how have they distorted Strauss and second, how would Strauss have understood that distortion?

THE EXOTERIC AND ESOTERIC

A theme in the writing of Leo Strauss is the difference between the esoteric and the exoteric. In a broad sense, the terms describe the way a person or group chooses to publicly express their beliefs over time. Exoteric beliefs are foregrounded while esoteric are at least partially concealed by the foreground. More narrowly, these terms are used to describe the difference between foregrounded and concealed claims in a particular speech or piece of writing. Strauss and Friedrich Nietzsche have both been charged with immorality because they practiced exotericism, that is, they concealed their views.

The practice of exotericism becomes deeply political when the foreground and inner meaning are not the same, when the esoteric teaching becomes a secret teaching, something one chooses to hide, whether out of fear of persecution or some other motive. A variant of this practice has recently been popularized by *The Da*

Vinci Code. Due to the danger one faces if one tells the truth, one must learn to pass on the truth without being noticed. Thus one places hints that the enemies of truth cannot see, but that the friends of the truth, with careful study, can. Of course, while conspiracy theories make for a good story, the idea that anyone would actually write this way, or that there are actually truths that require one to write this way, seems peculiar from today's perspective. As a rule, we value truth. As evidence we can simply look to Juniata's motto, *Veritas Liberat*, the truth liberates, a sentiment found in the motto of many universities. According to this view, the truth is only dangerous in unenlightened political circumstances and dangerous only for those who speak the truth, not for those who may hear it.

When thinking about how the distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric might function, there are two key problems. First, what is the natural epistemic relationship between the exoteric and the esoteric? Second, are there truths that are generally harmful? The first concerns how much truth is hidden by nature, the second how we might choose to cover or uncover the truth through rhetoric. Together, the answer to these questions determine if, when, and how one should practice exotericism. Five answers to this question seem possible.

The First Option

One option, of course, is that one need not practice it at all. But this is only possible under certain conditions, broadly speaking, the achievement of political Enlightenment. Truth as a value beyond any question of consequences. More importantly, the results of inquiry can be held up to intellectual scrutiny and confirmed or denied according to its scientific merits. One of the values of scientific thought is that it's an intellectual mode that appears to be healthy because it is shared by all. Most people, with a little education, are sufficiently capable of judging the scientific validity of political claims. Further, even if some claims might be beyond the ability of many of us, we can trust that the merit of a claim lies in its scientific validity as determined by the community of scientists. There is usually a corollary that if there is a debate about something that can't be scientifically demonstrated, for example, the truth of certain values, we can at least scientifically

determine the conditions under which competing values are fairly mediated. If the presuppositions of the Enlightenment are true, then the fulfillment of such a view is the same as living in an enlightened age. That is, all truths can potentially be determined by scientific scrutiny and none of these truths are politically dangerous. To the contrary, maximizing access to the truth is politically healthy. Strauss describes the situation in this way:

The Enlightenment was destined to become universal enlightenment. It appeared that the difference of natural gifts did not have the importance which the tradition had ascribed to it; method proved to be the great equalizer of naturally unequal minds. While invention or discovery continued to remain the preserve of the few, the results could be transmitted to all.⁵

If this vision was correct, there would be no need for exoteric writing because all truths are exoteric. That is, all genuine truths can be publicly demonstrated.

The Second Option

A small epistemic variation from this view, however, leads to the practice of exotericism. One may view that the vision of enlightenment is overly utopian. One may accept the ideal of enlightenment but believe there are certain myths in play that must still be removed. In the history of the Enlightenment, religion was usually considered the source of such myths. We may also add the myths told as a means to enhance personal power, which we can also call propaganda. The important point is this: until the myths are permanently removed, those who have reached Enlightenment must practice a kind of exoteric paternalism. The traditional enlightenment response to this dilemma is to differentiate between intellectual maturity and immaturity. The most well known statement of this difference can be found in the opening lines of Kant's essay "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?":

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity [Unmündigkeit]. Immaturity is the inability to

use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is *self-imposed* when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* "Have courage to use your own understanding!"—that is the motto of the Enlightenment.⁶

While this seems to point to the genuine possibility of enlightenment for any individual, eliminating the need for paternalism, Kant later explains that freeing oneself is nearly impossible in an unenlightened society. Thus, "only a few have succeeded, by cultivating their own minds in freeing themselves from immaturity and pursuing a secure course." Therefore, broad enlightenment cannot take place until those few who have liberated themselves create the proper conditions. Once they have done so, Kant optimistically claims, enlightenment will easily spread. Thus, Kant can argue that enlightenment is the proper natural state of humanity, part of our "divine rights," but history had made it necessary for those few who achieve enlightenment to create the circumstances in which most of humanity can break free of their self-imposed tutelage.⁷ But, with only a little bit of pessimism, we may ask when such a society will appear if the strong tendency towards a state of immaturity is natural even in an enlightened society. In this case, at least some of the people will always need their leaders to point out their genuine scientific self-interest. Since those who are immature already have an interpretation of their own self-interest, those who are already mature, namely, the educated, must use political rhetoric to persuade them to act in the way that they would if they simply thought for themselves without the veil of myth or propaganda. Within a society that strives for enlightenment, this is a common exoteric practice by those who interpret themselves as already mature. Such a form of exotericism is practiced by all parties in an enlightenment culture. (As an example, think about how you explain why those who disagree with your political inclinations do so. The left claims of the right that the people are hoodwinked by corporate America. The right claims of the left that the people are hoodwinked by the liberal intellectual elite.)

Strauss rejects both of these options because of his critique of

positivism. That is, if science is not the best path to wisdom, the problem does not appear in this form. Strauss, in fact, treats positivism as a kind of religious belief. First of all, positivism is hoisted on its own petard because positivism is incapable of justifying itself scientifically. Secondly, positivism is closed off to a wide range of truths. Using a favorite distinction from Pascal, Strauss explains it this way:

The scientific spirit is characterized by detachment and by the forcefulness which stem from simplicity or simplification. The spirit of finesse is characterized by attachment or love and by breadth. The principles to which the scientific spirit defers are alien to common sense. The principles with which the spirit of finesse has to do are within common sense, yet they are barely visible; they are felt rather than seen. They are not available in such a way that we could make them the premises of our reasoning. The spirit of finesse is active, not in reasoning, but rather in grasping in one view unanalyzed wholes in their distinctive characters. What is meant today by the contrast between science and humanism represents a more or less profound modification of Pascal's contrast between the spirit of geometry and the spirit of finesse. In both cases the contrast implies that, in regard to the understanding of human things, the spirit of science has severe limitations—limitations which are overcome by a decidedly non-scientific approach.⁸

The Third Option

A third option view is that while the truth is inaccessible to many, by participating in institutions built around the truth one participates in it. Thus, for example, one may act in accordance with the virtues of one's community with relatively little reflection, say, because the community has raised you well, but still be considered virtuous. We may not really understand why we are virtuous, but in certain ways the immediacy of virtuous behavior is even more praiseworthy. The deeper reflection has actualized itself politically, which in some important way preserves the value of self-conscious action. Thus one participates in truth without

knowing the whole truth. We already encountered this position earlier in the relationship between the founder of a religion and the faithful. This view reflects a kind of Hegelian interpretation of one's relationship to truth. Such a view remains within the ambit of the Enlightenment because its main concern remains maximizing participation in the Truth. However, it recognizes the limits of much of humanity in finding the truth. Therefore it is anti-Enlightenment in claiming that many can participate in truth only indirectly. Within this view we also begin to encounter the limits of scientific inquiry. Investigating the truth is still possible, but learning the truth no longer proceeds along a path that can be confirmed by public scrutiny.

Strauss frequently used this form of exotericism. In Strauss's presentation of democracy he often speaks of three general human types: the philosopher, the "gentleman" (his term), and the masses. Strauss clearly portrays the philosophical life as highest and rarest. The "gentlemen" represent the best political type and as the best political type in some way they participate in philosophy. Therefore if one cannot be a genuine philosopher (and Strauss thought genuine philosophers were extremely rare) one can at least participate in the highest form of life by being a gentleman. In fact, promoting some notion of participation is Strauss's most powerful exoteric device for those who are not his students. One test that one is a gentleman rather than a philosopher is a prejudice towards the values of one's own political context. As noted above, the philosopher calls all prejudices into question. So, for example, if one is prejudiced in favor of the United States one is more of a gentleman than a philosopher. Some other country, say, France or Brazil in fact might have more potential.

Strauss employs the "participation" argument in his discussion of democracy. Democracy as an institution is made effective by those who are able to climb beyond mass culture by means of liberal education:

Liberal education is the counterpoison to mass culture, to the corroding effects of mass culture, to its inherent tendency to produce nothing but 'specialists without spirit or vision and voluptuaries without heart.' Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass

democracy to democracy as originally meant. Liberal education is the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society. Liberal education reminds those members of a mass democracy who have ears to hear, of human greatness.⁹

As a counter-poison to mass culture, the presence of an aristocracy within democratic mass society transforms the meaning of that mass society even if for many the transformation is only due to the presence of those who do in fact have ears to hear.

The relationship between the gentleman, or elite, and philosopher is more difficult. On the one hand Strauss claims, “The Gentleman as gentleman accepts on trust certain most weighty things which for the philosopher are the themes of investigation and of questioning. Hence the gentleman’s virtue is not entirely the same as the philosopher’s virtue.” The Gentleman’s trust, not mentioned here, is in the political virtues of the polis. The philosopher does not trust these virtues but questions them. But Strauss goes on, “Despite these differences, the gentleman’s virtue is a reflection of the philosopher’s virtue; one may say it is its political reflection.”¹⁰ Thus, the chain is completed but the relationship is tenuous, for he notes:

The city needs philosophy, but only mediately or indirectly, not to say in a diluted form. Plato has presented the state of things by comparing the city to a cave from which only a rough and steep ascent leads to the light of the sun: the city as city is more closed to philosophy than open to it.¹¹

And, even more strongly, the tension between the philosopher and the gentleman:

Leads to the difficulty that the philosophers will be ruled by the gentlemen, that is, by their inferiors. One can solve this difficulty by assuming that the philosophers are not as such a constituent part of the city. In other words, the only teachers who are as such a constituent part of the city are the priests. The end of the city is then not the same as the end of philosophy. If the gentlemen represent the city at its

best, one must say that the end of the gentleman is not the same as the end of the philosopher.¹²

Despite his argument for the relationship between the city and philosophy, and therefore the gentleman and philosophy, Strauss always returns to the point that the city and the philosopher (therefore the gentleman and the philosopher) have fundamentally different interests. Nevertheless, he encourages the belief that the rebirth of the gentleman will return value to democracy.

The Fourth Option

A fourth possibility is that there are dangerous truths which are relatively accessible. Strauss's view on this point is more foreign to us. Strauss claims that the fundamental philosophical truths are, in fact, politically destructive, and need to be concealed. Now this position can take on various forms depending on the answer to the first question, namely, the epistemic availability of those truths. Let us take the example of the *Da Vinci Code* again. The fact that the Merovingians are the descendents of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is easy for anyone to understand, whether one believes it or not. Those who know this truth must conceal it due to political circumstances, and if revealed it would initially have many doubters, but the secret itself is comprehensible. Similarly let us take one claim that some say is central to Strauss's esoteric teaching: "There is no God." While this claim may be politically dangerous, the meaning of this phrase is not hidden by nature. Rather, one may choose to hide the fact that they believe it because they believe that claiming it's true is dangerous. Or, to take an example that often comes up in a classroom, let's take the belief that all values are relative. Anyone can understand what this means. But if I believed it, I might in fact choose to conceal it from others out of love if I thought it would harm them, or out of wickedness, if I thought it would put me in a better position to exploit them.

The question is why Strauss thinks fundamental philosophical truths are politically destructive. This has several levels to it. First, believing in a particular philosophical truth detaches one from one's local condition. At a more serious level, we may become

detached from, or come to doubt, some basic views that are, generally speaking, politically useful. Take, for example, the belief “what comes around goes around.” When I ask students who claim to be relativists in some form whether they are in some way restricted from exploiting others, this is the response that I often get. This is one of the views that attempts to keep relativism attached to decency, or makes relativism politically safe. But it’s not difficult to make the point that sometimes bad guys finish first. That is, I openly say to them that sometimes you can commit an injustice and get away with it, possibly even most of the time if one is very careful. Now, when I say it to them I do try to present it in a manner that moves them away from relativism. I claim the argument shows that relativism is indecent, as opposed to their belief that it makes one good by making one tolerant. Some who are convinced by my argument will feel ashamed and will, in fact, question their own relativism. (Others may see the truth of what I am saying and begin to commit injustices.) The point is that disarming this type of belief is even more politically threatening than detaching one from one’s local conditions. If one takes some truths to be inherently dangerous politically, one may make efforts to conceal them. For example, one must conceal that the gentleman has no relationship to the philosopher.

The Fifth Option

A final option is that higher truths are simply inaccessible to some, both ideally and in practice. Now it may be that the lower image of those truths, the misunderstanding that they generate, is in itself healthy. In this case there is no need to hide the higher truths. However, the misunderstanding may in fact be dangerous. In this case the higher truths need to be concealed by those who are in the know. This break between higher and lower truths creates its own political problem. Those who know become isolated and unable to confirm their inquiries, and therefore easily become self-deceived. On the other hand it is very easy for those who don’t know to think that they do, since they cannot recognize their own distance from the higher truths. Therefore they act like those who have access to these truths even though they do not. This phenomena is the main way in which one generates disciples.

STRAUSS'S LEGACY

I think that this is the most powerful form of Strauss's exotericism because in this version those who may be gentlemen think themselves philosophers. The "Straussian" influence on the Bush administration is itself an exoteric form of Strauss. That does not mean that Strauss would reject it. It may indeed be the exoteric effect that Strauss desired. Further, there may be some who promote such politics with an understanding that it is only an exoteric expression. But in many cases I think that most of these views are based on the misunderstanding of his views that Strauss presented to his own students. Strauss remains responsible for these views, but I do not think they represent Strauss's own views.

Taken together, these possibilities show that exotericism need not be driven simply by political problems, but that certain political problems are created in our understanding of how we gain access to truth. At the deepest level, Strauss's philosopher remains concealed by the gentlemen pseudo-philosophers, who may have genuine philosophers among them. The gentlemen pseudo-philosophers pass on his exoteric teaching, the gentlemen bring it into effect.

In the end, we must understand that Strauss had only one interest: philosophy. His political interests are in the service of philosophy. In other words, the gentleman is completely instrumental. The gentleman restrains nihilism. For Strauss, under Nietzsche's influence, nihilism is not just the inability to distinguish political values, but to distinguish higher from lower, thereby preserving the possibility of philosophy.

Nevertheless, in the end we can ask which of Strauss's exoteric views are actually needed to preserve the philosopher.

The War In Iraq

On the one hand, Strauss did believe that there was no such thing as international law. The restrictions on what a nation can do are measured by its consequences. From the perspective of the United States, the decision to go to war is right or wrong depending on whether it actually promoted American interests. From the philosophical perspective, the usefulness of the war depended on whether or not it promoted philosophy. On the other hand, Strauss

would not see any necessary value to spreading democracy, although he certainly would approve of using such political rhetoric if necessary. In addition, Strauss had no particular interest in American global domination. That is, as a philosopher Strauss was not a patriot. One may take a similar view of Strauss's influence on other aspects of American international relations.

Promoting The Natural Law Tradition

Strauss did want us to return to ordinary experience as the starting point of philosophy. Natural law resonates with that interest. But nature hides and therefore reading the "law" from nature is all but impossible. While Strauss added weight to the natural law tradition, he only succeeded because of timely confluence with neo-Thomism. However, Strauss does acknowledge the political need to make a powerful myth of a nation's founding. An interpretation of the constitution as a kind of sacred document helps to create that myth.

Intelligence Gaps

Strauss was a careful reader whose care was not often recognized by others. If Straussians have deserved pride in one area its in their ability to read. But reading Maimonides is not the same as reading intelligence documents. Interpretive judgment and the Statesman's judgment are not the same. I suspect that excessive pride was at work here.

Lying To The People

This issue is the most complicated. Not all practices of exotericism are merely an intent to deceive. Some are necessary due to epistemic limits. Some may be necessary as an act of wise paternalism. But there is also unwise paternalism, not to mention base self-interest. I believe we see Strauss in Bush's speeches more than in his inclination to deceive. Strauss would grant that such deception is needed at times, but I think the tendency of this administration has as much to do with a quirk in Bush's own personality. Bush values loyalty, which is praiseworthy when it's not pathological. When dissent, even private dissent, within his own administration is considered disloyal, a praiseworthy value

has become blameworthy. Strauss helped set up the theoretical context in which lying is acceptable, but many of the choices are an expression of Bush's own personality.

Ultimately, Strauss's central political concern was whether philosophy, in his own peculiar sense, has been promoted. If he must be misunderstood, he attempted to be misunderstood in a way that preserves those values. In order to preserve those values, the political context must be stable enough to give the philosopher peace and diverse enough that the philosopher can observe the full range of humanity. In addition, in order to make the development of future philosophers possible it must promote access to the greatest minds. Finally, the political context needs to preserve some sense of greatness itself. At the same time, all these values must be promoted as also in the interest of the city. In the end, Strauss's genuine legacy can be measured only by the accomplishment of these goals. Everything else is just political philosophy.



NOTES

- ¹ Stanley Rosen, "Hermeneutics as Politics," in *Hermeneutics as Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 107.
- ² See, for example, Tom Zeller, "Father Strauss Knows Best," *New York Times*, May 4, 2003, Section 4, p 4.
- ³ Leo Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?" in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 7.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ⁵ "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *Perpetual Peace and other essays on Politics, History, and Morals*, trans. by Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 33, 35, emphasis in the original.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 44, 40.
- ⁷ "The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Rationalism," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, selected by Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), x.
- ⁸ Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?" 5.
- ⁹ Strauss, "Liberal Education and Responsibility," in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 14.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14.