Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy

MICHAEL P. ZUCKERT and
CATHERINE H. ZUCKERT

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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.

NRH  Natural Right and History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).
“PPH”  “Political Philosophy and History,” in WIPP, 56–77.
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).

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 tendency 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. 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. 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 intent 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.

Political Philosophy

The theme of Strauss’s political philosophy is—political philosophy. It is Strauss’s multilayered and complex understanding of political philosophy that produces most of the ambiguities in his writings that lead readers to be unsure of his meaning.

The theme of political philosophy runs throughout Strauss’s work, but it rises to greatest explicitness in his set of lectures entitled “What Is Political Philosophy?,” one of only two writings to explicitly raise the Socratic “what is . . . ?” question in its title. This essay, like the Apology of Socrates in the Platonic corpus, is the natural starting point for considering Strauss’s thought.6

The lecture series “What Is Political Philosophy?” consists of three lectures: “The Problem of Political Philosophy,” “The Classical Solution,” and “The Modern Solutions.” The guiding thought of the series, to judge by the titles, is “the problem of political philosophy,” to which there are a number of proffered “solutions.” Yet Strauss nowhere specifies in so many words what “the problem of political philosophy” is to which the classics and the moderns provided different responses.

A reader of the first lecture might be led to say that “the problem” of political philosophy is constituted by the modern challenges to political philosophy: positivism (or “science”) and historicism (or “history”), “those two great powers of the modern world [that] have finally succeeded in destroying the very possibility of political philosophy” (“WIPP,” 18). That inference would seem to be mistaken, however, because although Strauss speaks of both the “classical solution” and the “modern solutions” in the two later lectures, the classics and most of the moderns of whom he speaks predate the emergence of the challenges posed by positivism and historicism. The problem to which the ancient and earlier modern thinkers present solutions cannot therefore be the challenge posed by “those two great powers of the modern world.”

A more promising approach to identifying “the problem of political philosophy” as Strauss understands it is to notice that he supplies not one but two different accounts of what political philosophy is in the opening pages of this essay. We might tentatively conclude that the problem of political philosophy concerns the relation between these different notions. Strauss’s first account of political philosophy develops it as an aspect or offshoot of politics; the second develops it as an aspect or offshoot of philosophy.

“All political action,” Strauss observes, “aims at either preservation or change.” In general that must be true, and in the particular historical context in which Strauss was making that observation it corresponds well with the division of the political world into liberals and conservatives, the latter of which are commonly said to aim at preservation and the former to aim at change. Actions aiming at preservation and change implicitly make reference to the political good. One seeks either to preserve the good or to change to the better. “All political action has then in itself a directedness towards knowledge of the good: of the good life, or of the good society.” Normally, political action tends to be incremental and not to entail an explicit formulation of anything approaching the complete political good. But human beings acting within political life may well come to formulate ever more explicit and comprehensive ideas
about the political good at which their actions aim. “If men make it their explicit goal to acquire knowledge of the good life and of the good society, political philosophy emerges” (“WIPP,” 10).

Political philosophy thus understood emerges directly out of political life and is implicit in the most ordinary political actions. Political philosophy comes to light as something like the completion of political life, or at least as that toward which political life itself points. Political philosophy provides the ultimate standard for improving or perfecting political life, for it explicitly articulates the state of affairs at which political action implicitly aims.

Strauss adds, however, that political philosophy “forms a part of a larger whole: of philosophy; or that political philosophy is a branch of philosophy” (“WIPP,” 10). Political philosophy, on this account, emerges not from politics but from philosophy, for “philosophy is the quest for universal knowledge, for knowledge of the whole” (11). As quest for knowledge of the whole, philosophy is perforce driven to extend itself into the political realm along with all the other spheres that make up “the whole.” Philosophy as Strauss understands it is the “attempt to replace opinions about the whole by knowledge of the whole” (11). Philosophy is “a treatment which both goes to the roots and is comprehensive.” It goes to the roots of political life by attempting “to replace opinions about the nature of political things by knowledge of the nature of political things” (11–12).

With this formulation the “problem of political philosophy” comes to view. As an enterprise standing at the juncture of politics and philosophy, political philosophy points in two different directions and takes its bearings in two different ways. Political philosophy begins in opinion, but subjects opinion to keen dialectical examination so as to wring knowledge from it. The knowledge that emerges from philosophy drifts substantially away from the kinds of opinions that dominate political life. In the immediate sequel to his discussion of political philosophy, Strauss identifies a cognate form of political reflection that he calls “political theory.” The latter consists of “comprehensive reflections on the political situation which lead up to the suggestion of broad policy. Such reflections appeal in the last resort to principles accepted by public opinion or a considerable part of it; i.e., they dogmatically assume principles which can well be questioned” (“WIPP,” 13).

Political theory thus understood looks very much like the first kind of political philosophy, the kind that emerges out of and in basic continuity with political life itself. That is to say, political philosophy of that sort may fail to go “to the roots,” because it may fail to challenge sufficiently the root opinions of political society. Political philosophy of the second type goes more to the roots but seems in danger of losing the intimate and guiding connection to political life itself. So far as it loses that connection, it is in danger of missing true knowledge of “political things,” which are “by their nature subject to approval and disapproval, to choice and rejection, to praise and blame” (“WIPP,” 12).

Since, as Strauss insists on many occasions, opinion is the element of political life, and since philosophy involves the questioning of opinion, the second sort of political philosophy is not only not directly continuous with political life but in principle at odds with, even hostile to, political life as it is lived by ordinary statesmen and citizens. This possibility results in the tension Strauss famously emphasizes between
philosophy and the city. That tension leads to yet a third notion of political philosophy: political philosophy is the face philosophy shows to ordinary, nonphilosophic human existence. It is a barbered and trimmed view of philosophy, a presentation of philosophy that blunts and blurs the tension in which it stands with the opinions constitutive of society. Such blunting is in part for the sake of the philosopher and his safety, but perhaps even more for the sake of the community, because philosophy is prone to question and so (if openly expressed) undermine many of the most important opinions on which society rests. Political philosophy in this sense is more or less identical with what Strauss speaks of as the esoteric character of political philosophic texts.

Philosophy is driven into its potential conflict with society by the nature of philosophy, or of Socratic philosophy in any case. In contrast to earlier “pre-Socratic” philosophers, who sought to find the constituent elements of nature as a whole, Socrates examined the opinions of his interlocutors. For reasons we will discuss at greater length in chapters 2, 3, and 10 below, Strauss came to see this Socratic investigation of opinions as the proper response to the quest for a non-Cartesian starting point for philosophy by three modern philosophers who greatly influenced him: Husserl, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Political philosophy, then, in a fourth meaning stands for the proper way or approach to philosophy altogether. Political philosophy thus understood is not merely one branch of philosophy among many, but is “first philosophy.”

Strauss has a rich and by no means univocal notion of political philosophy. The multiple meanings of the term as he uses it give some idea of why he considers political philosophy itself to be the central theme of his political philosophy. First, so far as political philosophy generates answers to the questions of the good life and the good society, the very questions that implicitly if not explicitly animate political life, it gives human beings valuable and much-needed guidance with regard to the politically just and good. So far as political philosophy is a constituent part of philosophy per se, it is essential, Strauss argued, that it remain alive, for philosophy is itself the good human life. If political philosophy should prove impossible, then “the city,” that is, human political life, is greatly diminished, and the good or best human life is imperiled.

Just as “political philosophy” has multiple meanings within Strauss’s thought, so “the problem of political philosophy” contains a number of different but connected meanings. So far as political philosophy is “first philosophy,” the problem of political philosophy derives from the contest-ability of that approach to philosophy. That is to say, at its deepest level the problem of political philosophy concerns the validity of Socrates’s “second sailing,” the turn of philosophy toward opinion. So far as that turn propels philosophy out of the “ivory tower” and into the city, it provokes the problem of political philosophy Strauss most commonly addressed: the tension between philosophy as intransigent questioning and the city as based on unquestioning faith. So far as philosophy, in response to that problem, attempts to justify itself to the city, so far as it attempts to show the city that it is or can be a good citizen, helpful to the city in its concern for justice and social order by adopting the perspective of the city and developing that form of political philosophy which speaks directly to the city and its concerns in a supportive way, another dimension of the problem of political
philosophy emerges: the relation between political philosophy as an offshoot of political life and political philosophy as an offshoot or core of philosophy. This aspect of the problem of political philosophy can be well characterized as the tension—or apparent tension—between Aristotelian and Socratic-Platonic political philosophy. One solution to the problem of political philosophy as conceived in the manner of the ancients affirms the philosophic life as the best life and represents the aristocratic or virtuous life as the political reflection of that life. Political philosophy in that mode is inegalitarian and makes many compromises with the perceived necessities of existence. Political philosophy of that sort is also remarkably open to being accommodated to, or even taken over by, the city in the form of the religion of the city, as occurred within Christianity. Christianity or the biblical religions more generally provided a further problem of political philosophy: How can political philosophy maintain its inner freedom of inquiry when subordinated to the highest possible authority, the divine word? One solution that emerged to that problem is the position known as Averroism, which, Strauss argued, made no concessions at the level of philosophy to revealed religion, though it made many at the level of political philosophy as the public face of philosophy. So far as this solution was perceived to be inadequate, because it consigned political life to the sway of conflicting authorities, secular and sacred, and empowered clerical authority far more than reason indicated was appropriate, the classical solution in its Platonic, Aristotelian, and Averroistic forms was rejected for a new solution in which the philosophers turned more decisively to the people and developed a different way of justifying philosophy to the city in order to free both philosophy and political life from the hold of religion. Philosophy put itself at the service of the city, or of the most common elements of the city, and promised to be useful, promised to liberate equal human beings from the shackles of inequality and restraint. It promised, most generally, to work to “relieve man’s estate.” Political philosophy thus became the aid and sponsor of the new natural science, which brought a new kind of knowledge, no longer contemplative and the preserve of a few, but technological at its core and capable of being pursued by almost all. Voilà, the Enlightenment.

With the emergence of modern philosophy a new dimension of the problem of political philosophy emerged: the conflict between ancients and moderns or the conflict over which solution to the problem of political philosophy has greater validity. At first the moderns attempted to ground their enterprise of relieving man’s estate on a conception of nature as non-anthropomorphic, as a neutral array of forces, available for mastering, and yet as the source of norms of a certain sort for human life. As modernity progressed, it became ever clearer that this bifocal view of nature could not hold, and nature was replaced by history as a source of norms. So long as it could be said that history was progressive, this solution to the problem of political philosophy could appear viable. However, both practical and theoretical objections arose in the nineteenth century to this solution, and it soon appeared that history, now in the form of historicism, could no more supply an orientation for human life than could nature as grasped in the modern way. Thus the problem of political philosophy emerged in its most advanced or recent form: Can political philosophy remain viable or be restored? This is the moment at which Strauss takes up his philosophic task. His contribution is to attempt to demonstrate that we have come full circle: the present crisis of political
philosophy propels us back to the Socratic starting point on the basis of which a new or partly restored version of political philosophy can be constructed. Thus it is no accident that the most visible part of Strauss’s teaching is the call for a return to the ancients. All calls for return, he once said, are also calls for modification (TM, 167–73). There can be no such thing as a mere restoration. In Strauss’s case he calls for a return with a particularly important modification, meant to prevent the development of the accommodation that originally led to the emergence of modernity and ultimately to “the crisis of our time.” His call for return (see chapter 4 below) is a call to restore both Socratic philosophy and biblical religion in their pristine and inherently conflicting character. Rather than a synthesis, or apparent synthesis, of the two defining strands of the West, he would keep them apart and in respectful tension with each other. The failure to do that led to the break with Socratic philosophy the first time around, and he seeks to avoid an eternal return of the same. It is this array of issues that Strauss calls the theological-political problem, and it is thus easy to see why he identifies that problem (identical in important respects to the problem of political philosophy itself) as “the theme of [his] investigations.”

On Writing on Strauss—Again

Some years ago we published a book on Strauss, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. The title was courtesy of the University of Chicago Press marketing division. We did not mean anything so presumptuous as to claim that we had captured the truth about Strauss in the face of the many sources of difficulty that we have just presented. But we did mean the truth as opposed to the many errors and silly claims that were raised about Strauss and his alleged political influence in the early 2000s, especially at the time of the Iraq War. Much of that book had a somewhat polemical character to it, taking its bearings partly from the many things said about Strauss in the popular and scholarly presses. Fortunately, now that the theme of Strauss as alleged cause of the Iraq War and Bush foreign policy has used up its fifteen minutes of fame, attention can turn to where it always belonged—to Strauss as a thinker attempting to respond to the crisis of philosophy in the late twentieth century, in which his chief interlocutors were not foreign policy makers but thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger.

This book is thus different from our earlier book. It is much less polemical and aims to be both more comprehensive and more philosophic. Its central goal is not to defend Strauss from allegations of Wilsonian Machiavellianism or philosophic tyranny, but rather to explore the many manifestations of the problem of political philosophy in Strauss’s thinking. The several parts of the book are held together by the theme of “the problem of political philosophy” and by the various solutions to it posed within the tradition and by Strauss himself. In a sense, then, our book is an extended development and application of the themes Strauss explores in his most programmatic statement, his lecture series “What Is Political Philosophy?” Since “the problem of political philosophy” is so central to all aspects of Strauss’s thinking, we have naturally been led to discuss many aspects of his thought that on their face may seem unconnected. Although we make no claims to present here a fully comprehensive account of Strauss’s thinking, we have, following our chief topic, perforce produced a book quite comprehensive in scope.
The book is organized into three parts. Following Strauss’s presentation of the problem of political philosophy, in part 1 we begin with his critiques and responses to the two forms of modern thought that threatened to make political philosophy impossible: positivism (chapter 1) and historicism (chapter 2). Part 2 deals with Strauss’s novel understanding of the history of philosophy and the philosophers. In chapter 3 we present a brief overview of the new account of the history of political philosophy with which Strauss hoped to supplant the old version that formed the basis of both positivism and historicism. On the basis of that history, we show in chapter 4, Strauss argued against the characteristically modern assumption that human life and thought are essentially progressive. Instead, he urged, we ought to seek to recapture the two primary elements of Western civilization, understanding that they are essentially contradictory. In chapters 5–8 we examine more specifically the novel readings Strauss gave of several canonical political philosophers, both ancient and modern—Plato, Aristotle, Marsilius, Machiavelli, and Locke. In part 3 we then look at Strauss’s thought in relation to its twentieth-century context. In chapter 9 we respond to critics who claim that Strauss formulated the basic principles of his political philosophy under the influence of Carl Schmitt by showing how and why Strauss gradually became a supporter of liberal democracy. In chapter 10 we seek to bring out the distinctive character of Strauss’s response to the “theologico-political predicament” in which he found himself as a Jewish student of philosophy in Weimar Germany by contrasting it with the responses of two other similarly situated individuals, Hannah Arendt and Emil Fackenheim. In chapter 11 we examine Strauss’s understanding of the activity in which he saw himself to be primarily engaged, liberal education, and show that he thought it had the same dual character as political philosophy itself. In chapter 12 we describe the different appropriations of his thought by several of his leading students. Finally, returning to the place from which we began, we conclude by highlighting some of the more controversial aspects of Strauss’s thought.

The intended audience for our first book on Strauss was the reader interested in Strauss because of the swirl of controversy that followed him; we did not write primarily for those well versed in Strauss’s works. We conceive of the audience for this book somewhat differently. We still aim at the general reader, but this time we also seek to speak to fellow students and scholars of Strauss. Some parts of the book may prove too detailed for the general reader and other parts too general and well known for the specialist reader. We apologize to both. We could not figure out any other way to elucidate “the problem of political philosophy” as Strauss presents it.
Part I

Positivism and Historicism
LIKE MANY OTHER OF THE OUTSTANDING POLITICAL THEORISTS OF HIS ERA, STRAUSS WAS AN ÉMIGRÉ FROM GERMANY, DRIVEN INTO EXILE BY THE DISASTROUS EVENTS OF THE 1930S IN HIS HOMELAND. BORN A JEW IN AN OUT-OF-THE-WAY PART OF GERMANY, STRAUSS WAS OF COURSE VULNERABLE TO THE ANTI-JEWISH NAZI REGIME. HE LEFT GERMANY JUST AS HITLER WAS COMING TO POWER, TRAVELING FIRST TO FRANCE, THEN TO ENGLAND, AND, FINALLY, TO THE UNITED STATES, WHERE HE EVENTUALLY BECAME A CITIZEN AND ESTABLISHED HIMSELF AS ONE OF THE MAJOR POLITICAL PHILOSOPHERS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.

STRAUSS DESCRIBED HIS FAMILY HOME AS ONE DEEPLY IMMersed IN JEWISH OBSERVANCE BUT LACKING IN JEWISH LEARNING. IN HIS EARLY YEARS HE WAS MUCH ENGAGED IN THE POLITICAL ZIONIST MOVEMENT, BUT AT THE SAME TIME PROCURED A STANDARD GERMAN SECULAR PHILOSOPHIC EDUCATION. Two events were probably most decisive for setting him on the path that led to his mature philosophic orientation. The first was his education. He was primarily educated in the neo-Kantian tradition, the leading light of which in Strauss’s younger years was the German Jewish thinker Hermann Cohen. Cohen died before Strauss reached the university. His successor as leader of the neo-Kantian movement was Ernst Cassirer. Strauss ended up writing his dissertation at the University of Hamburg under Cassirer.

ALTHOUGH STRAUSS WORKED UNDER CASSIRER, CASSIRER DOES NOT APPEAR TO HAVE HAD A MAJOR IMPACT ON HIM. EVEN AS HE WAS STUDYING NEO-KANTIANISM STRAUSS WAS ATTRACTED BY MORE MODERN, MORE PHILOSOPHICALLY RADICAL MOVEMENTS. HE STARTED READING NIETZSCHE WHILE IN GYMNASIUM AND REMAINED IN THRALL TO HIM UNTIL AGE THIRTY OR SO. He was also exploring more formally some of the newer philosophic movements. Thus he went to Freiburg for a postdoctoral year in 1922 to study with Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. At that time he became aware of Husserl’s young assistant, Martin Heidegger, who was ten years Strauss’s senior. Strauss always admired Husserl, but the young Heidegger swept him away.

HE HEARD THE LATTER LECTURE ON ARISTOTLE AND WAS AWED BY THE SERIOUSNESS AND PENETRATION OF HEIDEGGER AS A READER OF OLD TEXTS AND THinker OF NEW THOUGHTS. STRAUSS WAS APPARENTLY NOT PRESENT AT THE FAMOUS DEBATE AT DAVOS IN 1929 BETWEEN CASSIRER AND HEIDEGGER, A BATTLE OF TITANS REPRESENTING THE OLD AND THE NEW THINKING, RESPECTIVELY, BUT HE WAS GREATLY IMPRESSED BY REPORTS OF HEIDEGGER’S PERFORMANCE. AT MARBURG HE ALSO MET HANS-GEORG GADAMER AND KARL LÖWITH, TWO LIFELONG FRIENDS.

HE CONTINUED TO PURSUE HIS JEWISH INTERESTS BY AFFILIATING WITH FRANZ ROSENZWEIG’S FREE JEWISH HOUSE OF STUDY IN FRANKFURT. HE LEFT THAT POST IN 1925 WHEN HE MOVED TO THE GERMAN ACADEMY OF JEWISH RESEARCH IN BERLIN, WHERE HE BEGAN WRITING HIS FIRST BOOK, SPINOZA’S CRITIQUE OF RELIGION. IN 1932 HE RECEIVED A GRANT FROM THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION THAT Enabled HIM TO DO RESEARCH FIRST IN PARIS, WHERE HE MET ALEXANDRE KOJÈVE (WITH WhOM HE SUBSEQUENTLY PUBLISHED AN EXCHANGE IN STRAUSS’S VOLUME On...