

Introduction

Rethinking Leo Strauss

The title of this book is intended to suggest that those of us who have benefited from the work of Leo Strauss should look for ways to move beyond it, but also that moving beyond it is not as simple as abandoning it. Others, of course, will wonder why we should bother with Leo Strauss at all. For those readers, let me begin by summarizing as succinctly as I can why I think Leo Strauss is so important for understanding ourselves and our world: To my knowledge, no thinker of the twentieth century has examined more deeply the best thinking on the fundamental questions of ethics and politics and the reasons for the current state of affairs, which I would characterize, following Strauss, as a lack of confidence in Western political institutions and a half-hearted moral relativism. This introduction sketches out which aspects of Strauss's work I believe should be maintained, and also which might be respectfully reconsidered.

There are undoubtedly many different paths through the issues and controversies surrounding Leo Strauss. I believe, without having done any surveys, that my own path was not exceptional. In any case, it is a path I know fairly well, and it seems the best way to explain why I urge a rethinking of Strauss's thought. So I begin there.

1. Strauss, Historicism, and the Academy

In the mid- to late-twentieth century, the gravest political issue of the time, certainly the issue with the widest global reach, was the Cold War. The

existence of nuclear weapons gave this low-intensity war urgency, but what gave it intellectual importance was the struggle of ideas. It is hard for us to say how seriously liberal political philosophy was taken in the universities of the Soviet Union, but certainly in America, Marxism was taken very seriously indeed. In my experience as a student at the University of Massachusetts from 1975 to 1979, and then at the University of Chicago from 1980 to 1988, there were small contingents of devout Marxists on campus, mostly graduate students. The perception of Marx's importance, however, was shared by many beyond these devotees. Anyone attuned to the current political issues recognized that Marxist theory needed to be understood, in outline at least, by anyone aspiring to a career in the humanities or social sciences. On the other hand, classical liberal theory—the philosophical underpinnings of the American government—was viewed with skepticism in the academy. Indeed, although the writings of Locke, Montesquieu, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison were studied and even respected, no one with whom I was acquainted at the time sincerely believed that “all men are created equal” or believed that there were “unalienable rights” to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” These so-called rights were viewed as expressions of a limited “worldview,” the intellectual features of eighteenth-century Enlightenment culture, not theoretical principles with consequential political weight, except by convention. Indeed, it was generally understood, in the world of academia I was familiar with, that the Founding Fathers of American democracy were comparatively superficial thinkers, on the grounds that they did not have the benefit of the great breakthroughs of subsequent eras, in science by Darwin and Einstein, in history and economics by Hegel and Marx. They knew nothing of the critiques of Christianity and Western rationalism by Nietzsche and Heidegger, or the psychoanalytic revolution of Freud.

The thinkers of the German tradition, especially, seemed (and to some extent still seem to me) to have a much more comprehensive and profound understanding of the whole of philosophy than the thinkers of the British and American tradition did. Hegel's theory of history and Marx's theory of economics, for example, seemed to account for everything the Enlightenment thinkers thought and more with their apparently deeper understanding of how either the “world spirit” or the material world actually worked. I also found it hard to believe that the theory of human nature on which political philosophy relied before Freud's deep analysis of the human psyche could have been adequate. Thus, at the University of Massachusetts, there were courses offered in the Political Science Department devoted entirely to Hegel and Marx, and another devoted entirely to Freud, which I eagerly took, but there were no courses that I recall devoted entirely, say, to Locke or to Madison. If there were, I had no interest in them.

In the background, and often enough on center stage in academia, was the specter of relativism. Max Weber's distinction between facts and values was almost taken for granted in many circles.

Thus, there was a general sense in much of academia that, whatever disagreements there were among the great thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, history and human knowledge had made large strides forward since the time of the Founding Fathers and certainly since the time of the ancient Greeks. This sense of progress was associated with a certain way of reading the great works of political philosophy. To study Plato adequately, for example, one had to become fully acquainted with the worldview or *Weltanschauung*, which he shared with his contemporaries, understanding his dialogues in light of the antiquated assumptions that he had inherited as a man of his time. One did not consult Plato primarily for the purpose of gaining insights into the *nature* of politics and of the human soul, but one studied Plato, if at all, as one part of the pageant of Western thought, a part that might eventually be comprehended in a grand historical-philosophical vision, such as Hegel's, which necessarily surpassed by far the crude beginnings of philosophical insight we see displayed in the Platonic dialogues themselves. Such a vision would amount to an understanding of the whole sought by philosophers. I am here describing some of the fundamental features of what can be called *historicism*, or at least one form of it, a way of thinking that seemed to pervade academia at the time. I should add that elements of historicism seem to me to persist in the academy today, especially in the thought and literature associated with the fashionable term *postmodernism*. I have not made a serious study of postmodernism, but based on what I have seen, it seems to me connected with the historicist tendency to view the thought of the past, especially of the ancient past, as fundamentally limited, certainly in comparison with the breadth and complexity of current thought.

It is dangerous to generalize, of course. There were certainly colleges and universities where other intellectual winds were blowing: Catholic universities and Great Books programs, philosophy departments studying Process Philosophy or Thomism; but it is safe to say that the experiences I am recalling were not unique. And even at universities like those in Amherst, there were counter-movements, which exercised a growing fascination for me. The Vietnam War had increased the interest in Asian religions on American campuses. Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, I remember, was very popular among students. I was able to take a course on mystical literature. We read from the Bible, from Buddhist sutras and Zen poets, from the writings of John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, all of which began to appeal

to me as a rebellion against the academic tendencies toward positivism and reductionism at the time. In fact, I first heard the term *reductionism* from one of the more open-minded professors, who used it to describe what he saw as a growing movement among the undergraduates of my generation away from the theories of Marx and Freud. I certainly felt the pull of this movement. In my senior year, I learned of Eric Voegelin's massive study, *Order and History*, which offered what seemed to be a serious counterproposal to Hegel's tomes in that it allowed history to remain an open-ended process, rather than a closed one, and was not hostile to the existence of mystery. In fact, it was Voegelin's new approach to history and his "new science of politics" that awakened my interest in political philosophy.

Voegelin's approach to the study of the ancients was, if not historicist in the sense that the philosophies of Hegel and Heidegger were historicist, fundamentally historical. I was open to this approach partly because nearly all the humanities courses were taught at the university more or less in this way. I remember being charmed and influenced in my undergraduate years by Becker's *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* and Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture*, and Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being*. These works purported to explain the underlying historical causes or cultural motivations, often unnoticed by the philosophers studied, which gave rise to their ideas. Similarly, the goal for Voegelin was to provide a new understanding of the intellectual and spiritual movement of history, and to find the place of philosophers like Plato and Hegel, and theologians like Paul and Augustine, within that historical framework. But the aim was to make political science, as he understood it, possible once again. "The existence of man in political society is historical existence," Voegelin declares at the very beginning of his work introducing a "new" science of politics, "and a theory of politics, if it penetrates to principles, must at the same time be a theory of history" (1).¹ This approach entailed that a simple return to the ancients for wisdom about the present was not possible, but that a new effort at "theoretization" was required. Voegelin states:

Much can be learned, to be sure, from the earlier philosophers concerning the range of problems, as well as concerning their theoretical treatment; but the very historicity of human existence, that is, the unfolding of the typical in meaningful concreteness, precludes a valid reformulation of principles through return to a former concreteness. Hence, political science cannot be restored to the dignity of a theoretical science in the strict sense by means of a literary renaissance of philosophical achieve-

ments of the past; the principles must be regained through a work of theoretization which starts from the concrete, historical situation of the age, taking into account the full amplitude of our empirical knowledge. (2–3)

Voegelin suggests that there are principles to which the modern historian of political philosophy can penetrate by looking carefully at the “historical situation of the age,” using “empirical” data, principles which apparently a simple return to the Platonic texts themselves will not yield, but which determined or influenced those texts in a way of which Plato himself was either not conscious or which did not rise to a level of importance that required expression in those texts.² It is the modern historian, using such data, who gives expression to the principles and their relation to the texts. This approach presupposes that the modern historical theorist can understand Plato in some ways better than Plato understood himself. Or if not, in any case, Voegelin seems to claim that the principles espoused by an ancient text on political theory are bound up in some inextricable way with the concrete situation of their time and therefore that those principles cannot be applied to modern political problems apart from an adequate understanding of history. This is an approach to the study of the ancient texts, criticized frequently and effectively by Strauss, which I now find narrow and limiting.

Nonetheless, at the time, those students with a philosophical bent, that is, with an urgent need for understanding the whole, with an impatience for narrow specialization, those respectful of, but not satisfied with, the intricacies of analytical philosophy, dissatisfied as well with the reductionist attempts at a comprehensive understanding of the whole, such as those of Marx or Freud, dissatisfied with the relativism of sociologists and political scientists and the nihilism of certain strands of existentialism, found this new understanding of history offered by Voegelin refreshing to say the least. To study history in this way, especially intellectual history, seemed to be identical with philosophy—the pursuit of wisdom about the whole. History understood in this way indeed seemed to me to embrace everything and did not eschew morality or spirituality. At the same time, however, there was, for me at least, an underlying anxiety that the relativists and nihilists might be right after all.

I came to Chicago, therefore, almost seven years after Strauss’s death, with all my questions framed in the then-current historicist fashion. I wanted to learn more about the historical origins of what Voegelin called “modernity.” I was told by my mentor in Amherst that I would become acquainted at Chicago with the ideas of Leo Strauss, whom he regarded as

a man of similar interests and concerns as Eric Voegelin. This advice turned out to be true. My first encounter was not with Strauss's writings, which seemed extremely elusive at the time and some of which seems so even now, but with his students, or rather with the students of his students. What was most intriguing to me, and to many other students at the time, about Strauss's thought was the now famous or notorious doctrine of esotericism. This is the idea that, before the broad acceptance in the Western world of the Enlightenment principle of freedom of speech, writers were not free to say all that they really thought. The trial and execution of Socrates had given rise, according to the understanding I had received from these students, to the use of a special kind of writing, a politically conscious rhetoric, one that would discreetly inspire free thought without doing harm to the vital air of political life—the air of public opinion—and the salutary beliefs held by non-philosophers that kept society safe for all. Strauss puts it most thoroughly and succinctly thus:

Philosophy or science, the highest activity of man, is the attempt to replace opinion about “all things” by knowledge of “all things”; but opinion is the element of society; philosophy or science is therefore the attempt to dissolve the element in which society breathes, and thus it endangers society. . . . Philosophers or scientists who hold this view about the relation of philosophy or science and society are driven to employ a peculiar manner of writing which would enable them to reveal what they regard as the truth to the few, without endangering the unqualified commitment of the many to the opinions on which society rests. They will distinguish between the true teaching as the esoteric teaching and the socially useful teaching as the exoteric teaching; whereas the exoteric teaching is meant to be easily accessible to every reader, the esoteric teaching discloses itself only to very careful and well-trained readers after long and concentrated study. (From “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing” in *WIPP* 221–222)

Consequently, one had to read the writings of just about any philosopher before 1800 with great care in order to find out what he really thought, for it was likely to be unorthodox and dangerous to public order.

The graduate students with whom I worked were fascinated by the notion of esoteric writing, and we spent many hours trying to determine what the esoteric teaching of Descartes or Plato or Machiavelli was. It was

only many years later that I came to understand or appreciate that esoteric reading was a secondary issue in Strauss's thought. But insofar as esotericism encouraged us to take the ancient authors seriously, it directed us to a much larger and more fundamental principle. For what Strauss was mainly concerned about was the pernicious effect of the pervasive historicism on the reading of great books in all academic disciplines having any interest in those books. Strauss himself addresses the connection between esoteric writing and historicism in his response to the critical review of his *Persecution and the Art of Writing* by George H. Sabine:

Historicism may be said to be the view, accepted by Sabine, that "there are presumptions implicit in what Carl Becker called the 'climate of opinion' of an age that no contemporary ever fully grasps, precisely because they are so deeply ingrained in the texture of thinking." In other words, even the greatest minds cannot liberate themselves from the specific opinions which rule their particular society. This view can be established more easily if all explicit statements of great thinkers must be taken to express their private thoughts than if this assumption is questioned. (*WIPP* 227)

The most beneficial effect of Strauss's work on esoteric writing, thus, was the concomitant understanding that the great thinkers of the past could indeed liberate themselves from the "climate of opinion" shared by their contemporaries, and that modern scholars approaching the texts from a historicist point of view often were misled by the protective rhetoric of the great thinkers into believing that these thinkers were in step with their times.³ The possibility of period-independent thought brought with it a whole train of consequences for the understanding of political philosophy and the reading of great books, among which the understanding itself of esoteric writing was a relatively minor one.

Strauss, therefore, brought to academia a way of reading that was, to students with a historical orientation, refreshing in its simplicity: instead of reading ancient texts as expressions of their times or within a historical framework, try to read them as their authors understood them (see, e.g., *CM* 9).⁴ The simplicity of this approach, however, can be easily misunderstood. The first objection one was likely to hear from academics at the time, and even as much today, is that understanding an author's intention is in principle impossible; all we have is the text itself and the historical context to illuminate it. Certainly, we can never be sure about an author's

intention. But it is merely dogmatic to assert that seeking the author's intention is futile or to abandon the distinction between more and less probable conjectures about that intention on the basis of textual evidence. If the author intended to write esoterically, obviously, the reader is obliged to read with that caution in mind; but he still has to make the case for esoteric readings on the basis of textual evidence: very difficult, obviously, but not in principle impossible. Nor does Strauss's approach aim, as I have sometimes heard, at "ahistorical" readings. Historical background is of course helpful and sometimes essential for discerning an author's intention. Plato makes frequent allusion to historical events or to Greek mythology and literature; Strauss and his followers make extensive use of such sources. Strauss's point is that we should not assume that an author's thoughts are bound or determined by a "climate of opinion" or a "Weltanschauung" or the socioeconomic class to which he or she belongs.

It always helps to be specific. One of the most extensive studies of esoteric writing by Strauss is provided by his book *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. According to Strauss's interpretation, as I understand it, Machiavelli developed his political philosophy partly as an attack against the Church and its teachings. In other words, Machiavelli was not just anticlerical, but anti-Christian. Many objections have been raised to this reading of Machiavelli, but I mention just one that I heard from a well-known professor, whom I admired, teaching at Chicago while I was there. The occasion was a visit from Harvey Mansfield, the noted student of Strauss's from Harvard, who gave a lecture on Machiavelli for the Political Science Department. In class the next day, the good professor explained, in response to Mansfield's lecture, that he could not imagine someone living at the time of the Italian Renaissance being so alienated from the Church or at least from Christianity as to hold such views as Mansfield and Strauss maintained that Machiavelli held. This is an instance, it seems to me, of a stunning irony. For, if anyone is bound by the "climate of opinion" to which he belongs, it is precisely one who would make such a sweeping historicist pronouncement about what a given philosopher might be capable of thinking owing to the limitations of his period. Although I am now no longer persuaded by all of Strauss's or Mansfield's subtler interpretations of passages especially in the *Discourses on Livy*, I am persuaded by textual evidence that Machiavelli harbored a robust anti-Church, anti-Christian agenda and that Machiavelli took pains to avoid shocking the reader with the full extent of that agenda until the reader was ready to receive it. If such rhetorical care amounts to esoteric writing, then Machiavelli seems to me a splendid example of an esoteric writer.

Machiavelli's need to employ esoteric writing appears to be somewhat different than the need Strauss finds in Alfarabi or in Plato. Machiavelli was

on the attack with a settled theory about the way political affairs should be managed. The esotericism of Plato and Alfarabi, on the other hand, appears to Strauss to arise from a desire to protect philosophy and society from doing harm to each other because the way of life of the philosopher is in inevitable conflict with the needs of society. Strauss, at least, is careful to say that this conflict arises from philosophy's habit of questioning the beliefs to which society demands adherence from its citizens. That Plato could have taken pains to prevent philosophical questioning from doing at least unnecessary damage to a healthy respect for society's laws or to public opinion seems incontrovertible to me; but there is a tendency among the followers of Strauss to assume that an esoteric reading must not only encourage philosophical questioning, but also yield something morally disturbing or even shocking.⁵

However this may be, if the authors of great books were able to transcend the "climate of opinion" of their times, then it becomes possible, as well as incumbent on the reader of such books, to take what those authors intended as serious attempts to understand the nature of human affairs. This is not to say that these authors have the eternal truth, only that they *might* have the truth and that we should read their books critically but with this possibility firmly in mind. This way of reading, to my mind now, constituted the biggest breakthrough in political thought that Strauss achieved. The relativism, the fact-value distinctions, and the historicism of much of academic discourse clearly implied that political philosophy, in the sense in which Plato and Aristotle had understood it, was not possible. Strauss rejected these views and proposed that we read the great books of political philosophy in order to replace, insofar as possible, *opinion* about the good, the noble, and the just with *knowledge* (WIPP 73). Thus, following Strauss in this sense, when we begin the theoretical study of ethics and of politics, we turn first to the thought and ideas of Plato and Aristotle in much the same way that students of physics turn first to the thought and ideas of Isaac Newton, not out of reverence or historical curiosity, but because in their respective fields, these thinkers have raised fundamental questions and offered principles that have proven coherent and fruitful since the time they were proposed. Certainly, great advances have been made afterward and new, important questions have been raised about the founding principles, but even those advances and new questions presuppose an understanding of the fundamental questions and alternative solutions raised by the foundational thinkers in these fields.⁶

In describing Strauss's proposal as an effort to replace opinion about ethical and political things with knowledge of them, I was careful to use the phrase "insofar as possible," for always the first objection to the rejection of

relativism is that it leads to “absolutism.” This is a false dilemma. There is no reason why we cannot allow for a measure—even a very great measure—of uncertainty in our pronouncements about the greatest things. Aristotle said long ago that uncertainty must be tolerated in ethical philosophy (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b). And we must not forget that Socrates, at the end of his life, refusing to give up his chosen path—the life of philosophy, the life of pursuing the truth about the good, the just, and the noble—admitted that he knew virtually nothing about such things, certainly in comparison to what a god might know. It is as blind and dogmatic to assert without proof that the truth about these things does not exist as it is to claim to have obtained the truth once and for all.

Another consequence of Strauss’s breakthrough is the freedom that the scholar of political philosophy now enjoys to compare and contrast the ideas of philosophers across the ages, without scrupulous attention to the “historicity” of thought. It should go without saying, for example, that Cicero has more in common philosophically with Plato or Aquinas or Richard Hooker than he does with his own contemporary Lucretius, although some historicist approaches would deny such a thing. When we contrast, for example, Hobbes and Cicero, we do so not for the purpose of understanding the difference in their times or cultures—although that is also possible—but above all for the purpose of understanding their theoretical differences on the question of natural right and perhaps to decide whose teachings are more adequate for explaining political phenomena in general. It is in fact the timeless or “ahistorical” aspects of their teachings that are sought and studied by Strauss and his followers, even though historical differences are fully acknowledged. It is essential, therefore, to understand the thought of Lucretius among the ancients, because he provides perhaps the richest link to pre-Socratic philosophy and shares so many premises, reductionist premises, with modern philosophers who rejected the Socratic tradition. Thus, examining the differences between Lucretius and Cicero probably helps us better understand the differences between classical and modern thought than studying the historical backgrounds of antiquity and modernity. And it may turn out—indeed, for Strauss it certainly seemed to be the case—that the ancient philosophers had a deeper and richer understanding of politics and humanity than the moderns do. Thus, a return to the ancients for wisdom even about the present is indeed possible, even if the concrete circumstances to which that wisdom is applied today are different.

Paradoxically, it was not until many years beyond graduate school, when I started reading Strauss’s work more warily and skeptically, after a long hiatus in which I had been teaching in a Great Books program, that

I began to appreciate that work adequately. It was by questioning some of his claims and testing his arguments that I came to realize how thoroughly Strauss had investigated the issues, how extensive the depth of his scholarship was, how thoughtful his synoptic visions of the history of political philosophy were. Even apart from these considerations, the independence of mind it required to break from the historicist way of thinking, especially that of his teacher Heidegger, and to rethink the question of natural right beginning from the standpoint, as he says, of “the simple experiences of right and wrong” (*NRH* 31–32), call not just for respect, but even for awe. Strauss once said, following Kant, that there is a distinction between a thinker who faces the fundamental problems directly and a scholar who studies the history of such thinkers (“Existentialism” 305), adding, “I know that I am only a scholar.” I have learned to take this admission with a grain or two of salt. In any case, I now know, better than I knew when I used to read Strauss in my youth less skeptically, that I am not the scholar Leo Strauss was.

For me now, what are most compelling or valuable in Strauss’s writings are less the close, intricate commentaries on ancient texts, such as his essays on Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* or *Hiero* or even such highly regarded essays as those on the *Republic* or the *Nicomachean Ethics* in *The City and Man*; I now find these essays less persuasive than I once did. It is rather Strauss’s broader, surveying essays, such as “What is Political Philosophy?” that is, his synoptic, intertextual assessments of the larger differences between ancient and modern thought to which I find myself increasingly turning for insight and illumination. Whatever one may think of Strauss’s interpretations in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, there is nothing in the other scholarship on Machiavelli to compare to the last eight or so pages of that book, where Strauss summarizes his assessment of the change in political philosophy that Machiavelli wrought or contributed to, both its strengths and weaknesses. Strauss’s interpretations of ancient literature also are not always respected by classics scholars, and although I am certainly more open to Strauss’s readings than they are, I am not unsympathetic to some of their criticism. But I would not give up Strauss’s work for any of the other scholarship, because Strauss’s commentaries always keep an eye, so to speak, on the big picture; they serve the larger purpose of helping us better understand the nature and consequences of these books for political philosophy as a whole and for the challenges philosophy faces in the modern world.

Strauss spoke often and abundantly about the crisis of modernity or the crisis of the West, which has its roots in the foundations laid by Machiavelli and Hobbes, but which was not addressed satisfactorily by the great

critics of modernity beginning with Rousseau and Nietzsche.⁷ For Strauss, the great question of our time is not the clash of civilizations, but the clash between the ancients and the moderns. Strauss's solution, consisting of a restoration of a classical moderation in our expectations of what can be accomplished in politics with a concomitant cultivation of philosophy as a way of life, at least for the few who are capable of it, implies skepticism regarding modern democratic liberalism and an ambivalence toward the American founding.⁸ This ambivalence arises for Strauss from his reservations regarding the foundations of modern political philosophy, where classical moderation is less conspicuous. I continue to share Strauss's concerns about the foundations of modern political thought as well as his conviction that the answer lies somehow in a restoration of ancient wisdom.

For these reasons, I consider it extremely fortunate for the practitioners and admirers of serious political thought that Leo Strauss came along when he did. Strauss, for so many of his beneficiaries, was the great liberator from historicism, the restorer of ingenuous and serious reading of philosophical texts, and the one who, as much if not more than anyone else, made it possible again to take the ideas of the great political philosophers seriously.

2. Some New Directions

Still, recognizing the magnitude of Strauss's vision and of his achievement, I see reasons to move beyond some aspects of Strauss's approach to the study of political philosophy. This book is an attempt to contribute to the advancement of political philosophy—it is hoped in the same Platonic spirit in which Strauss pursued it, if not with the same skill—by means of a critical dialogue with some of his writings and, more importantly, with the books he wrote about. This means questioning some of his own assumptions and principles, and even those of the great philosophers he wrote on—something which his students and readers are, perhaps understandably, reluctant to do. Strauss's writings, however, are sometimes treated like sacred texts. For they are often elusive to the point of being mysterious, and there is a temptation to see this elusiveness as evidence of some hidden wisdom that has yet escaped the puzzled reader. Although I certainly allow that possibility, I do not think it wise to assume it. The same is true for the texts, even the ancient, classical texts that Strauss commented on. It is all too easy to slide from an appropriate posture of reverence for the intellectual achievements of the greatest thinkers and scholars, on the one hand, to a state of unhealthy timidity and deference, on the other.⁹ The right approach seems to be to

labor to understand a difficult or problematic text with all the resources at one's disposal. If at the end, however, a proposal or argument even by Socrates or Aristotle seems unconvincing, it is reasonable and appropriate to reject it, explaining carefully the reasons why, and moving on to whatever seems like a sounder proposal, if one exists.¹⁰

The reader should not expect in this book a full treatment of Strauss's thought. It is not intended as another attempt to explicate, critique, or defend Leo Strauss. It is rather a call, especially to those who have benefitted from Strauss's work, to look in new directions, to escape certain aspects of Strauss's powerful influence, which has inhibited some of his beneficiaries (among whom I include myself) from looking at the ancient texts for themselves and making their own judgments about what they mean. Thus, the first four chapters of the book stay in fairly close dialogue with Strauss, but the last three are less focused on his work, aiming at other ways to think about political philosophy. I introduce here, in a summary way, my growing reservations about some of Strauss's thought.

Strauss seems to have been reluctant to embrace fully the classical theory of natural right, at least the dominant version of that theory as expressed in Aristotle and Aquinas (see *NRH* 146), apparently because of the "victory" of modern science, which has given the day to the mechanical over the teleological understanding of nature and therefore undermined the cosmological foundations of that theory.¹¹ Unsatisfied, however, with modern political thought, he seems to have believed that he had discovered a new way of reading Plato—or rather that he recovered an older and truer way of reading Plato. Probably as a result of studying Maimonides and Alfarabi, he began to read Plato esoterically, which guided him to a theory of natural right that is independent of any specific cosmology, because it rests on the Socratic knowledge of ignorance (*WIPP* 38–39). Now, knowledge of ignorance is not ignorance, as Strauss points out. What distinguishes the philosopher is his knowledge of the fundamental problems human beings face without necessarily having knowledge of how to solve them. If not Strauss, at any rate some of his students believe that this knowledge of fundamental problems is sufficient to rescue the philosopher from being either tragic or comic (*RCPR* 181–183).¹² Down-playing the importance of the theory of ideas, at least insofar as they might be beings independent of the human mind, Strauss understood Platonic natural right to rest on the way of life of the philosopher, rather than on any teaching; as such, philosophy represents a solution to the problem of human happiness.¹³ Ultimately, this line of thought led Strauss to the idea that there are two "roots" of morality, the philosophic root, arising from the need of the mind

for an understanding of the whole, and the demotic root, arising from the needs of the city, which in turn arise from the needs of the body (*NRH* 151–152; *RCPR* 163, 166).

There are two considerations that, to my mind, render this understanding of the Socratic-Platonic theory of natural right unsatisfactory, whether it belongs to Socrates-Plato or just to Strauss. First, in detaching Socratic-Platonic thought from the ideas (as beings independent of the human mind), and consequently from the metaphysical hypothesis of the idea of the good, Strauss leaves the claim of the superiority of the philosophical life on thin ice. A plain reading of Plato's *Republic* or *Phaedrus* or *Symposium* suggests that the philosopher's dignity arises above all from his contemplation of something divine and immortal, which the ideas seem to be.¹⁴ Whether the philosopher, as a mere human being, can escape the tragic or the comic is also not clear. Knowledge of ignorance certainly mitigates the deficiency of ignorance, but the deficiency remains. This unavoidable fact would seem to leave some room for the tragic and the comic even for the philosopher.¹⁵

Second, Strauss's understanding of Socratic-Platonic natural right leaves what he called the demotic virtues, the moral virtues, as they are commonly understood, essentially unsupported. If the demotic virtues are reducible to the needs of the body, then they are no longer recognizable as moral virtues. As Strauss himself famously said, "From this point of view the man who is merely just or moral without being a philosopher appears as a mutilated human being" (*NRH* 151). To the extent that such a theory leaves the demotic virtues unsupported, it leaves political life in general unsupported; for, obviously, political life involves much more than philosophy. Strauss worried that modern political thought had led to an impasse, in which political philosophy might even appear to be impossible. It seems to me that Strauss's understanding of Socratic-Platonic natural right leads to a similar, although perhaps not identical, impasse for political philosophy. And this is one important source of the anxiety about Strauss that has provoked the attacks, the charges of elitism and crypto-Nietzscheanism, with which we, the beneficiaries of Strauss's work, are certainly very familiar.

In fact, however, I now believe that Strauss's reading of Plato is fundamentally flawed. In this I am certainly not alone, except perhaps that I still consider myself a student of Strauss's work in so many other respects. What I am proposing is to retain the framework of Strauss's anti-historicist approach to political philosophy, but to look at Plato in a different way. This means recovering some aspects of the traditional way of reading Plato, including a reconsideration of the esoteric approach to reading the dia-

logues and an openness to the centrality of the theory of ideas in Platonic thought.¹⁶ Strauss's reluctance to fully embrace the theory of ideas perhaps has many sources. One of them seems to be Strauss's concern over the theory's metaphysical implications. For the theory of ideas as independent entities necessarily entails a transcendent source to sustain and unite them as ideas; otherwise, they are reducible to epiphenomenal properties of sensible or corporeal substances. This hypothesized transcendent principle, which Plato calls the idea of the good, could also have cosmological implications, which Strauss apparently thought modern natural science has made hard if not impossible to entertain; or it might lead to metaphysical dogmatism, which he apparently thought German philosophy, especially the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger, has made hard if not impossible to entertain.¹⁷

There is no question that modern science has undermined the teleological framework for the study of nature erected by Aristotle and adhered to for centuries by his successors. A series of revolutions in our understanding of nature and the cosmos, beginning with the theories and discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo, have shown that there is an all-too-human tendency to view the whole in light of the human. Premodern natural philosophy has thus been shown to be, in many important ways, anthropocentric. Aristotle's doctrine of the four causes, derived from an analogy with human art, carries no weight in the modern sciences of nature. I do not deny, therefore, Strauss's claim that modern science has stripped away the cosmological support (that Aristotle had provided) for the Aristotelian formulation of the theory of natural right. Whether other formulations such as the Socratic-Platonic (interpreted perhaps differently than Strauss interpreted it) or the Thomistic formulations may serve us better is another matter. In any case, the sense that modern science has triumphed in some way is shared by many and goes far beyond Strauss or his followers. It has contributed to a general view that the modern understanding of the whole is fundamentally superior to that of the ancients and that there is, therefore, little reason to turn to the ancients for wisdom even about human nature, contributing to the historicist understanding of all past thought. Now, Strauss repeatedly emphasized that modern science could not account for what was human in man (e.g., *RCPR* 32–34) and was certainly aware that modern natural science is fundamentally hypothetical (e.g., "Existentialism" 309). But the situation for modern science today is actually somewhat more dire than even Strauss realized. Modern theoretical physics, the foundation of all the modern sciences of nature, has in fact abandoned causal, mechanical hypotheses and embraced a kind of mathematical formalism that tells us little about what nature is and how it works at the level of the most fundamental

particles. Thus, although scientific evidence of intelligent design in nature is lacking or insufficient to convince the modern scientific community, modern science is still in no position to refute the existence of some kind of cosmic Mind as a cause in nature. So it is hard to know exactly what the “victory” of modern natural science to which Strauss refers actually has accomplished.

Remarkably, we now find ourselves in the same position in which Socrates found himself at the beginning of his philosophical career, as he describes it in the central passage of the *Phaedo*.¹⁸ He explains there that empirical/materialistic physics was unable to account for the good order he observed, not just in human affairs, but even in the cosmos. He decided to turn to an investigation of human speeches. Strauss, or at least many of his followers, have tended to view the Socratic Turn as a decision, prompted perhaps by Aristophanes’s satirical attack against Socrates, as a turn toward an investigation of the political or to an investigation of the relation between the philosopher and the city, rather than as a fundamental change in philosophy itself.¹⁹ It seems to me that this is to neglect Socrates’s clear indications in the *Phaedo* that Socrates turned toward the investigation of speeches and human affairs in order to find another route to the principle of cosmic order, the good, as a final cause in the universe (99C–D). This entailed a study of the human soul, which meant studying the human soul writ large (i.e., the city). Above all, it was a turn away from reductionism and materialism.

Another reason for Strauss’s reluctance to embrace the theory of ideas might have been a concern that it led, historically speaking, to metaphysical dogmas that exposed philosophy to the danger of religious supervision. Perhaps Strauss remained sensitive to Nietzsche’s indictment of Plato for “inventing” the pure mind and the idea of the good (Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil* 2), inasmuch as these dogmatic errors, according to Nietzsche, led to Christianity, which for Strauss represents a fatal conjunction of Athens and Jerusalem (see, e.g., *PAW* 21). Strauss sought instead to keep alive the tension between Athens and Jerusalem, emphasizing the incompatibility of the two distinct understandings of wisdom: “According to the Bible, the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord; according to the Greek philosophers, the beginning of wisdom is wonder. . . . We are confronted with the incompatible claims of Jerusalem and Athens” (*SPPP* 149); “a philosophy based on faith is no longer philosophy” (211); “No alternative is more fundamental than this: human guidance or divine guidance.”²⁰ This is a huge subject and I do not pretend to address it adequately in this book, but Strauss’s dichotomy does, I believe, influence his reading of Plato detrimentally. It leads to a characterization of philosophy that is closer to its pre-Socratic orientation toward nature, with “divine guidance” understood

as a product of mere convention, rather than to the Socratic orientation toward human speeches or *logoi*. Thus, Strauss and his followers tend to regard references to the gods in the Platonic dialogues, for the most part, as ironic or having a political or rhetorical rather than a theological purpose.

3. Overview

These considerations, as well as my suggestions for the advancement of Platonic political philosophy in some new directions, are to be developed and supported in the following chapters. I discuss the issue of modern science in the next chapter. Against Strauss's view, I am not going to argue for a renewal of the Aristotelian or teleological account of nature (cf. Bolotin, Nagel). But the notion that science has given us an understanding of nature adequate for us even to decide conclusively that sensible nature operates mechanically or non-teleologically is grossly premature. Not being any more of a natural scientist than Strauss was, but having devoted a considerable amount of time to studying the fundamental theoretical issues in physics, I also heavily rely on what some of the most prominent physicists of our time have said about the limitations of even their own discoveries. Modern science, like pre-Socratic physics, is inadequate for explaining the whole. If, however, the human soul is a product of the whole—the most highly developed product of the whole accessible to human investigation—it may provide a unique window into the nature of the whole, which modern natural science cannot provide. Looking at the human soul on its own terms, we are now free to take seriously what Socrates took seriously: the human soul seems oriented toward some transcendent good about which modern science can say nothing. We thus include a re-examination of Plato's presentation in the *Phaedo* of Socrates's departure from natural cosmology and his search for the good through an investigation of human speeches and then of moral and political matters. The culmination of this search appears in the *Republic*, in which we find the transcendent principle of "the good." This doctrine appears to support (although it does not dogmatically assert) some kind of teleological understanding of man and, by implication, of the whole. This of course becomes the foundation of the classical theory of natural right.

Next, I turn briefly to some of Nietzsche's claims about Platonic philosophy and about Socrates. Nietzsche's treatment of Plato has been highly influential even among philosophers who reject his other controversial claims. There certainly has been no critic of Plato more ruthless, not to say more vicious. And Nietzsche's influence in the twentieth and even in

the twenty-first centuries can hardly be overstated. This influence indeed touched Leo Strauss, both directly and indirectly. Nietzsche's influence on Strauss's teacher, Heidegger, is well known. Heidegger's student Strauss said in a now famous letter to fellow student Karl Loewith that, from age twenty-two to age thirty, Nietzsche "so dominated and bewitched me . . . that I literally believed everything I understood of him" (Zuckert, *The Truth* 32, 83). Nietzsche is especially attractive, it seems to me, to the philosophically minded young. Certainly, this was true in my case. As a graduate student under the influence of Strauss's writings and students, the first philosopher I could bring myself to read in a non-historicist way (i.e., the first philosopher in the Western tradition before Eric Voegelin) from whom I thought I could learn something as from a wise teacher, was Nietzsche.²¹ And I drank deeply. The *Birth of Tragedy* opened a new world to me. Partly to confirm Nietzsche's analysis of Socrates there, I became increasingly interested in Plato. At some point, however, lovers of Plato and of Nietzsche have to face and address the incompatibility of the two philosophers. For a while, I was able to reconcile them with an esoteric reading of Plato and the belief that Nietzsche did not adequately understand Plato as an esoteric writer (see Velkley 48–49, 53). I believed, perhaps without a full appreciation of the complexity of Strauss's thought, that this was also Strauss's solution. In later years, however, as I became increasingly skeptical of the esoteric reading of Plato, the incompatibility of Plato and Nietzsche began to resurface. I had to confront it again, which I did only quite recently. It seems to me now that Nietzsche's legacy to the modern world poses yet another obstacle to reading Plato well. In chapter 3, therefore, I argue that Nietzsche's distorted account of Socrates gains plausibility only within Nietzsche's philosophically reductionist framework. We can summarize the difference between Nietzsche and Socrates by saying that Nietzsche elevated "life" over the examined life.

I then turn my attention in chapter 4 to what can be called a post-Straussian reconsideration of the "problem of Socrates." I include another look at the central passage in Plato's *Phaedo* on the Socratic Turn, giving due weight to the theory of ideas and questioning the need Strauss saw for an esoteric reading of the Platonic dialogues. Strauss himself provides no extended commentary on the *Phaedo*. Scholars working in the Straussian framework have written such commentaries, but most of these assume an esoteric teaching and do not question the Straussian view of the theory of ideas. I argue that the Socratic Turn was fundamentally a turn away from pre-Socratic materialism, employing the ideas in a non-dogmatic way as hypotheses for finding an alternate route to the principle of the good that seemed to Socrates to hold the cosmos together. It is a route through human speeches and through the

human soul, which is open to the ideas and is itself a source of wonder and mystery. Less concerned, perhaps, than Strauss was about the cosmological implications of modern science or of Nietzsche's attacks, I find less urgency than Strauss did to read Plato in a way that overcomes these concerns. In this new light, Socrates's arguments in favor of the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo* appear not as exoteric, specious efforts to buttress the religious beliefs of non-philosophers, but tentative, unfinished attempts to confront and explain the mysteries of the soul and its capacity for virtue and knowledge. Socrates seeks to re-enchant his interlocutors with the world, because he himself is enchanted by its strangeness and mystery. I suggest a non-esoteric reading of the dialogues that emphasizes the anti-reductionist nature of the Socratic Turn. I then consider several passages in other dialogues in the light of this understanding of the Turn: parts of the *Phaedrus*, of the *Republic*, and of the *Gorgias*. This approach recovers some of the traditional ways of reading the dialogues that Strauss sought to challenge. This chapter, therefore, is likely to be more convincing to readers who have already entertained some doubts about Strauss's esoteric readings of Plato, but who wish to keep alive Strauss's fundamental questions about the human condition and about the status of the classical theory of natural right vis-à-vis the moderns. It is in this sense that I speak of a "post-Straussian" reading of Plato.

Holding in mind these reservations about Strauss's thought, I turn next to the great question Strauss asked about the crisis of modernity near the end of *Thoughts on Machiavelli*:

Modern man as little as pre-modern man can escape imitating nature as he understands nature. Imitating an expanding universe, modern man has ever more expanded and thus become ever more shallow. Confronted by this amazing process, we cannot cease wondering as to what essential defect of *classical* political philosophy could possibly have given rise to the modern venture as an enterprise that was meant to be reasonable. (298, my emphasis)

Chapters 5 and 6 were conceived to a great extent in an attempt to find some answers to Strauss's great question. Answering this question in light of the departure from Strauss requires rethinking some of the thought of the ancient philosophers themselves whom I venerate as much as Strauss did. I turn, therefore, from questioning Strauss to questioning Plato, which is cause for even greater trepidation. We must, however, be open as well to the limitations of classical philosophy exposed by the accomplishments of

modern thought, including the accomplishments of modern science. Indeed, the backlash against Platonic thought, which we see especially in Machiavelli but which had begun much earlier, in fact, by Plato's own pupil, Aristotle, cannot be ignored. We cannot avoid the suspicion that there must be some truth, perhaps a half-truth, buried somewhere in this backlash. So we must try to understand whatever "essential defect" in the Platonic philosophy might have given rise to the revolt.

In chapter 5, therefore, I examine some new insights into nature that modern science has provided, insights that might cause us to alter some of Plato's assumptions even about human nature and, consequently, about politics as well. Plato's theory of politics as given in the *Republic* and his theory of nature as given in the *Timaeus* have a common feature: In each case, order is imposed from above on things below in a top-down manner by an intelligent supervisor, by the philosopher-kings in the former and by the Demiurge in the latter. There is little if any sense in Plato that order can, so to speak, emerge from below in society or even in sensible nature spontaneously. Now, the concept of order arising from below is present in a way in the thought of Aristotle, where it results in a teleological account of nature. But we see the same concept explored in a non-teleological framework at the beginning of the modern era in Machiavelli's theory of politics, in which the conflict of the two "humors" motivating the dominating and dominated classes of any society result in one of three possible states; principality, liberty, or license (see the first paragraph of *The Prince*, ch. 9). This quasi-mechanical view of political behavior received significant support from the Scientific Revolution and the rise of modern physics, which revealed a deeply mathematical order in the movement and interactions among the most elementary particles of nature. To some extent present in Hobbes and Locke, the new understanding of nature provided by modern physics is conspicuous in the economic theory of Adam Smith, who made an explicit connection between the laws of supply and demand and the Newtonian theory of gravity. The idea of order arising from below, even from nature's most elementary known particles, favors a more democratic theory of politics and a more limited role for government than Platonic philosophy envisions. In exploring the differences and consequences of the Platonic and modern views of nature, this chapter returns to the subject matter of chapter 2. Superficially, it may appear that the two chapters are in conflict, because the former examines the limitations of modern natural science and the latter uses insights from modern natural science to critique Plato's view of nature; but there is no conflict. The fundamental difference between chapters 2 and 5 is that in the former I emphasize the inability of modern science—modern physics