

Introduction

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In *The Enduring Importance of Leo Strauss*,¹ Laurence Lampert tells a compelling story of Strauss's engagement with the esotericism of Maimonides as exemplified in the former's correspondence with Jacob Klein between the years 1937 and 1939. In these letters, and in Lampert's engagement of them, one sees clearly the captivating excitement that held the young Strauss as he discovered both Maimonides's writing between the lines as well as the influences and analogous instances of esoteric writers that preceded him. Before Strauss's eyes, a philosophical world was opening up—one that included Homer, Hesiod, Xenophon, Plato, Aristophanes, Farabi, and Averroes.² As the Second World War raged on, and in the midst of professional and financial insecurities, Strauss lived in the urgent wonder of the philosophical life.

This excitement and wonder is doubtless present to all readers who try to engage seriously and thoughtfully with Strauss's own work. Perhaps one of Strauss's many virtues is to have conveyed precisely the excitement that he felt during his formative period to his readers during their/our own. To have shown, for example, that the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, the relation of the philosopher to the city, and the distinction between Jerusalem and Athens were living topics for reflection is no mean feat. From his early writings on Spinoza and on Medieval Jewish and Islamic thought, through the great lectures on natural right, Machiavelli, and the relation of the city to man in the 1950s and 1960s, up to the intensely difficult later works on Plato and

Xenophon, Strauss successfully re-originates such excitement for all parties interested in the history of philosophy. Recent scholarly endeavors have continued this excitement as concerns the thought of Strauss himself. The inauguration of the *Gesammelte Schriften*—with its inclusion of Strauss’s correspondence, unpublished drafts, and marginalia—has so far given readers a clear view of Strauss’s intellectual trajectory from Weimar Germany, through Great Britain, and into the beginning of his time in the United States. Similarly, the publication of Strauss’s University of Chicago course transcripts by the Leo Strauss Center (both online and in book form) have given readers a good sense of Strauss the teacher, who engaged students’ questions and worked closely through texts of thinkers familiar (Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes) and less-familiar (Grotius, Vico) to readers of Strauss’s publications. This has, in turn, created vital thematic and historical avenues for scholarly monographs and articles on Strauss. Be it the early Weimar Strauss, the Strauss of the re-orienting 1930s, the Strauss of political philosophy, or Strauss as close reader of philosophical texts, the quality and quantity of secondary literature has decisively established Strauss as a fixed star in the realm of philosophical research. Put differently, the original excitement over the history of philosophy has continued into Strauss’s own thoughts about that history and has led to several divergent lines of interest within Strauss studies—one such line being, not surprisingly, Strauss’s relation to the very practice of writing between the lines that he discovered in pre-modern thought. Moreover, this continuous transmission of excitement surrounding the lines of Strauss’s work and thought shows no signs of abating any time soon.

If the present volume makes a contribution to the excitement of Strauss studies, we hope it will be by paradoxically continuing to transmit the excitement of Strauss’s thought by reading him (to a certain extent) outside the lines already established by the current receptions of Strauss’s oeuvre. In placing Strauss’s thought in conversation with other contemporary³ thinkers and topics, we hope that this volume extends Strauss’s thought to hitherto unexplored areas of research. This extension seems a natural one to us insofar as many of the other thinkers (e.g., Foucault, Lefort, Tönnies, Derrida, Lacan, and Blumenberg) have been in conversation with similar thinkers in the history of philosophy. Similarly, many thinkers have a thematic affinity with Strauss (e.g., the question of religion in public life, the concern over law). Finally, certain topics (comedy) have been underexplored in Strauss circles. We believe

that inaugurating a conversation between Strauss and these thinkers/topics can only highlight the excitement and reach of Strauss's thought going forward.



That Strauss's oeuvre amounts to a sustained argument favoring (in Hans Jonas's Aristotelian coinage) "the nobility of sight" hardly comes as a surprise, and the contributors to part 1 ("Arts of Seeing and Reading") all address this aspect of Strauss's thought. Jade Schiff argues in favor of an affinity between Strauss's and Derrida's practices of reading—their "shared awareness of the perpetually problematic character of politico-philosophical and deconstructive inquiry points to their shared affinity for the Socratic style of investigation that calls into question what we think we know—about ourselves, our political commitments, our world." Matthew Sharpe similarly highlights the readerly qualities that Straussian and Lacanian inquiry share: "there is the near-psychoanalytic attention Strauss asks his readers to pay to 'ambiguous words' like 'rank,' 'virtue,' 'secret,' 'tyranny,' 'the wise,' 'wisdom,' or 'moderation' and 'courage' in revered thinkers. Are these not precisely what Freud calls *condensations*: words in whose double address Lacan spies the 'poetic spark' of metaphor?" In my own treatment of Strauss and Soloveitchik on law, I attempt to show how both thinkers make use of Husserlian phenomenological categories in order to "understand law as an *optic* through which certain fundamental phenomena come to light." Finally, in her treatment of Strauss and Lefort, Isabel Rollandi explores the question of how both thinkers read Machiavelli in order to accentuate the distinction "between *teaching* and *thought*" and the philosopher's "giv[ing] to think in pieces and, following his intention . . . reconstruct[ing] his thought" in the service of "contribut[ing] towards the recovery of the permanent problems."

In the recovery of the political horizon for philosophy, Strauss continuously does battle with historicism without denigrating history. Differently stated, in thinking about the differing perceptions of politics contained in ancient and modern philosophy, Strauss attempts to inoculate readers against viewing philosophy as under the aegis of history by consistently viewing history under the aegis of philosophy. In so doing, Strauss allows readers to appreciate the primacy of the political without giving short shrift to history. The contributors to part 2 ("History and

Politics”) evince a notable awareness of this aspect of Strauss’s thought. Jessica Radin’s comparative study of Strauss and Charles Taylor on religious pluralism shows how both thinkers appreciated the political character of modern society’s relation to particular religions: “For neither thinker is the accommodation of religion without limits—we must strive for moderation, for ‘reasonable accommodation’ that may sometimes mean excluding practices (in a given time and circumstance) as being intolerable. Yet there is both the risk and the hope that those circumstances can change.” Miguel Vatter’s contribution on Strauss’s relation to Foucault on Platonic political philosophy discloses that “[u]ltimately, both Foucault and Strauss agree that ‘political philosophy’ or ‘normative political thought’ is not what the western tradition has made of it: it is neither a discourse that seeks to understand the nature of political things, nor does it delineate a theory of justice for the sake of moralizing politics . . . ‘political philosophy’ is a practice that seeks to replace a democratic political life by the legitimate government of some over others.” The difference between the two is that where Foucault views natural right only as “the discourse that makes it possible to implant a pre- or supra-political government of others in a democracy,” for Strauss natural right refers to “a discourse for which the government of others is ‘by nature’ right or in accordance with the needs of the philosophical life.” Waller Newell showcases George Grant’s prolonged engagement with Leo Strauss in order to better show the former’s “deeply interesting contribution to contemporary political philosophy. Like Strauss, within the boundaries of political philosophy, Grant preferred the classical approach over the modern approach . . . like Strauss, Grant accepted the notion that the modern project for the conquest of nature embodied a paradigm shift from the classical search for the eternal order of the whole . . . Unlike Strauss and like Heidegger, however, Grant did accept the proposition that global technology summed up the essence of the modern project . . . And fundamentally, of course, Grant departed from Strauss in his central pre-occupation with Christian revelation in both its positive and its baleful effects.” Danilo Manca brings together Strauss and Hans Blumenberg concerning their respective renditions of the Moderns: Strauss and Blumenberg “share the idea that the radicalization of Descartes’s rhetoric of a new beginning can in no way work,” thus necessitating “pav[ing] the way for retrieving another way of living and thinking.” Finally, Peter Gostmann shows the benefits of studying Strauss and Ferdinand Tönnies from the standpoint of the sociology of philosophy by focusing “on the various social actors

and groups that Tönnies and Strauss introduce [in their elaborations of the thought of Hobbes]" and considering "the qualities attributed to these actors and groups, as well as the figures of argumentation and figures of speech that [they] apply to explain the interrelations of them." In so doing, he shows that—for all his sensitivity to the distinction between natural right and natural law in Hobbes—Tönnies's approach remains tied to historicism, while Strauss's reading is positioned on the side of ancient philosophy against modern philosophy in its concern over "the problem of the best possible regime."

As with his approach to history, Strauss's approach was never simply to denigrate the very category of "culture" but, instead, to view it from a philosophical standpoint. It is in this vein that the contributors to part 3 ("Culture and Critique") approach the constellation of dialogic reason, comedy and mockery, nihilism, and one's relation to society and its traditions. In his conversation between Strauss and Habermas, Rodrigo Chacón argues that "[i]n their own self-understanding, Strauss and Habermas are critical thinkers . . . the work of critique consists in the dialectical overcoming of fixed oppositions into an expanded conception of reason . . . insofar as [Strauss and Habermas] were guided by problems which, in Strauss's words, are 'coeval with human thought,' they also advanced the work of reason in its movement towards self-consciousness." Alexander Duff treats a facet of Strauss's critique of Heidegger that has (to my knowledge) gone underappreciated in the still small literature on the two thinkers: "namely, his criticism of Heidegger for being inattentive to the comic or the laughable in human experience." For Duff "Heidegger's Socrates takes no account of Socratic irony, his noble dissimulation. He misses the status that opinion has in Socratic philosophy, where opinion is the matrix of thought because it contains a distortion of the truth." Ingrid Anderson explores the convergence concerning nihilism between the thought of Strauss and that of Albert Camus: "Both formulate . . . nihilism as a resounding "No!" directed toward a justifiably disappointing liberal democracy . . . Perhaps most revealing is their shared assertion that resistance to German nihilism and its successors requires a re-discovery of and renewed adherence to some semblance of absolute universal values, values that are not created by the forces of history, but identified *in* history as enduring and therefore fundamental." Menachem Feuer (in like manner to Duff's considerations) wonders about Strauss's conception of comedy: "Attention to Strauss's observations on the differing uses and divergent meanings

of humor and comedy may prompt us to think differently about the meaning and place of comedy in his work.” By means of a thoughtful journey through his readings of Aristophanes, Maimonides, Spinoza, and Nietzsche, Feuer’s Strauss shows readers that “the main thing for both the Socratic/Platonic approach to philosophy and the Jewish approach to Prophecy is that chance and comedy displace fate and tragedy.” Finally, Philipp von Wussow explores the relation between Strauss and Walter Benjamin, showing that “the two figures of interwar German-Jewish thought represent two different ways of conceptualizing the dialectics of modernity and premodernity, two models of viewing society and culture from the outside, and two different foundations for the understanding of the political in its relation to culture.” Whereas “Strauss took his bearings from Socrates to avoid the political battleground of culture,” Benjamin worked through “‘documents of culture’—modern literature, art, and everyday culture” in order to achieve a standpoint not simply entrenched in the ideologies of modern life.



We hope that we have conveyed something of the excitement with which these contributions were composed to the readers who read them. We believe that each essay opens the door to potentially important avenues of research and thought. From our perspective, the depth of Strauss’s thought is measured not only by how he engages with earlier philosophers, but also by how he converses with—and allows himself to be conversed with by—contemporary figures and ideas as well. That Strauss is, himself, a contemporary thinker in no way obscures his importance in retrieving and re-originating earlier thought (the former may, in fact, even be a precondition for the latter). Our claim is, rather, that the transhistorical philosophical life remains alive today and is visible to readers in these conversations. In reading Strauss outside the lines, we seek to continue and deepen the line that leads back to the philosophical life in the thought and work of Leo Strauss.

Notes

1. Laurence Lampert, *The Enduring Importance of Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

2. Ibid., 7–31.

3. We interpret “contemporary” capaciously enough to include a figure such as Ferdinand Tönnies. Given the historical reach of Strauss’s own studies, however, the nineteenth century is not so far distant from today as to prohibit such an interpretation.