

interpretation

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Leo Strauss and Liberal Education

WALTER NICGORSKI

University of Notre Dame

Leo Strauss wrote about liberal education, engaged in it as a teacher, and inspired it widely through the work of his students. This essay will review and highlight what he wrote about liberal education. It will then contend that his efforts for liberal education constitute a critical contribution to American higher education and, in turn, to American democracy. That he *intended* such a contribution could hardly be clearer. But that contribution is still in a seminal form, hardly realized and facing great challenges.

Leo Strauss wrote directly about liberal education twice. Both of these writings were initially prepared as speeches. "What is Liberal Education?" was delivered in 1959 at the graduation exercises of The Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults at The University of Chicago. "Liberal Education and Responsibility" was an address given in March 1960, to the Arden House Institute in Leadership Development, another enterprise in adult education. Strauss recounted in this address that his invitation was based on the expectation that he would explain two sentences in his commencement address of the previous year. In those sentences, Strauss had written, "Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant. Liberal education is the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society." A few years later Strauss prepared a single essay from substantial portions of the two earlier addresses and published it under the title "Liberal Education and Mass Democracy."¹

THE NATURE OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

Strauss wrote both precisely and colorfully about the end of liberal education. "Liberal education is education in culture or toward culture. The finished product of a liberal education is a cultured human being." Strauss understood culture to

This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 1983 American Political Science Association in Chicago. The revision has benefitted from comments by Professor Frederick Crosson of the University of Notre Dame.

1. This essay appeared in *Higher Education and Modern Democracy*, Robert A. Goldwin, ed. (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967), 73–96. "What is Liberal Education?" (hereafter referred to as "What is . . . ?") was reprinted from an official University of Chicago publication in *Education for Public Responsibility*, C. Scott Fletcher, ed. (New York: Norton, 1961), 43–51. The two key sentences that led to his second address on liberal education are found on page 46. That second piece, "Liberal Education and Responsibility," (hereafter referred to as "Liberal Education . . .") appears to have been published initially in *Education: The Challenge Ahead*, C. Scott Fletcher, ed. (New York: Norton, 1962), 49–70. The text of both addresses was reprinted after editing as the first two essays in

mean “the cultivation of the mind, the taking care and improving of the native faculties of the mind in accordance with the nature of the mind.”² Though Strauss suggested initially that this meaning of culture is the chief one today, he backed off almost immediately and confessed the gap between where he was headed and common usage. He observed that his “notion of liberal education does not seem to fit an age which is aware of the fact that there is not *the* culture of *the* human mind, but a variety of cultures.”³ Note that Strauss spoke of “the fact” of a variety of cultures and appeared to respect the view that “Western culture is only one among many cultures.” Strauss’s initial definition of culture (“the cultivation of the mind . . .”) was, it seems, intended as universal. That is, it was not, in the language of the day, “culture-bound.” Yet he was prepared to acknowledge that there is some kind of historical conditioning or material specificity in certain approaches to the development of the mind. There is something to be said for there being Western culture and Eastern culture just as there seems to be something to such distinctions as that between the English and the French minds.⁴ Strauss made clear that in the course of developing the mind one is by no means, insofar as it is possible, to listen exclusively to the greatest minds of the West.⁵

However, all of Strauss’s apparent concessions to the plurality of conditions in which the human mind works were done from the perspective that there is *the* proper culture and hence *the* proper excellence of *the* human mind. To acknowledge the fact of manifestations of the mind conditioned in various ways is not to accept the wholesale relativizing of culture that is embraced by many contemporaries who speak of a “variety of cultures” and who mean whatever patterns of behavior are cultivated in any group (e.g. “the culture of suburbia” or “the cultures of juvenile groups”). This relativized meaning of “culture” in common usage compelled Strauss to attempt another description of liberal education.

Education that is liberal has long been thought to be in some sense freeing. “Liberal education,” wrote Strauss, “is liberation from vulgarity. The Greeks,” he added, “had a beautiful word for ‘vulgarity’; they called it *ἀπειροκαλία*, lack of experience in things beautiful. Liberal education supplies us with experience in things beautiful.”⁶ The free or liberal man was once so called to distinguish him from the slave who lives for another human being or one who is slavish since “they have very little time for themselves, because they have to work for

Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968). References below, unless otherwise noted, will be to the text of the essays as they appeared in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*.

2. “What is . . . ?,” 3.

3. “What is . . . ?,” 4.

4. Note especially Pierre Duhem, *The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 55–106.

5. “What is . . . ?,” 7.

6. “What is . . . ?,” 8.

their livelihood and to rest so that they can work on the next day.”⁷ This free man, called in the classical tradition the gentleman or the *beautiful man* (καλὸς κἀγαθός), is possible only when he has sufficient material support to have the leisure both to receive an education toward freedom and beauty and to practice the partially realized virtues in politics and philosophy as he lives a life toward their full realization. Liberal education is then education in the beauty of virtue or toward the fullness of that beauty.⁸ It sets one apart.

Two aspects of Strauss’s first formulation of an understanding of liberal education can now be further illuminated. When Strauss took culture in his initial definition to mean “the cultivation of the mind,” he can be seen to have claimed that the peak of virtue is intellectual virtue or understanding of some kind. Another but wholly consistent way of appreciating this emphasis on the mind is to see it as a statement, true to Aristotle and Plato, that all the virtues in their completeness would have intellectual virtue at their core. Human virtues are of one fabric; in their perfection they are “inseparable from one another.”⁹ The mind’s role in all of them makes them distinctively *human* virtues.

Strauss spoke of liberal education as education “toward culture.” Here, in the first simple line of his first essay on liberal education, he pointed to the most important themes of all of his work, his persistent interest in the nature of philosophy and the relation between philosophy and the city. “Toward culture,” is, as we have seen, “toward wisdom,” “toward complete virtue.” Liberal education is a phase of the possible movement from common awareness through philosophy and to philosophy. Strauss distinguished liberal education from philosophical education or the life of philosophy.

In the light of philosophy, liberal education takes on a new meaning: liberal education, especially education in the liberal arts, comes to sight as a preparation for philosophy. This means that philosophy transcends gentlemanship. The gentleman as gentleman accepts on trust certain most weighty things which for the philosopher are the themes of investigation and of questioning. Hence the gentlemen’s virtue is not entirely the same as the philosopher’s virtue.¹⁰

Philosophy is essentially the “*quest* for the truth about the most weighty matters or for the comprehensive truth. . .”¹¹ It will be clear below that liberal education is, according to Strauss, largely accomplished through participating in philosophy. Yet it is not the life of philosophy itself; it is propaedeutic to philosophy, and in some ways, more “trusting” than philosophy. Liberal education is on the same line or “*quest*” toward the goal of philosophy. The fully cultured human being is really the end of philosophy, the perfected philosopher. Liberal ed-

7. “Liberal Education . . .,” 10.

8. “Preface,” *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, vii.

9. *Ibid.*

10. “Liberal Education . . .,” 13.

11. *Ibid.* Underlining is mine.

ucation in moving toward culture, takes its bearings from the end of philosophy but reaches its end at some point along a continuum toward full culture or wisdom. In taking its bearings from the end of philosophy, it seems that liberal education should be directed and shaped by those who explicitly move to that end, in other words, by philosophers. Even within the philosophic way of life the end of full culture is only more or less rather than simply and wholly attainable. Strauss once wrote of philosophy as a way of life as follows:

Being essentially quest and being not able ever to become wisdom, as distinguished from philosophy, the problems are always more evident than the solutions. All solutions are questionable. Now the right way of life cannot be fully established except by an understanding of the nature of man, and the nature of man cannot be fully clarified except by an understanding of the nature of the whole. Therefore, the right way of life cannot be established metaphysically except by a completed metaphysics, and therefore the right way of life remains questionable. But the very uncertainty of all solutions, the very ignorance regarding the most important things, makes quest for knowledge the most important thing, and therefore the life devoted to it, the right way of life.¹²

Philosophy's commitment to the questionableness of all solutions is at the root of its tension or "disproportion" with the city or the political. Insofar as liberal education is more trusting than philosophy, there seems to be some tension or disproportion between philosophy and liberal education. Insofar as liberal education is achieved through philosophy and moves toward philosophy, there is a tension between liberal education and the city or civic responsibility as conventionally understood.¹³ Strauss seemed to hold that there is a specifiable point along the continuum that marks the goal or end for liberal education. This point indicates the possession of a trusting inquisitiveness—an appropriate decency and loyalty in the political sphere marked by an awareness of and respect for the life and task of philosophy. The liberally educated man, in being between the city and philosophy, must experience in some sense the tension between the two.

THE MEANS AND CONDITIONS OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

Some of Strauss's most memorable lines are, "We are compelled to live with books. But life is too short to live with any but the greatest books."¹⁴ The attrac-

12. Leo Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy," *The Independent Journal of Philosophy* III (1979), 113–14.

13. That Strauss saw the situation this way is indicated in his discussion of modern philosophy's tendency to lower the end of philosophy to that "which is capable of being actually pursued by all men." He wrote, "We have suggested that the ultimate justification for the distinction between gentlemen and nongentlemen is the distinction between philosophers and nonphilosophers. If this is true, it follows that by causing the purpose of the philosophers, or more generally the purpose which essentially transcends society, to collapse into the purpose of the nonphilosophers, one causes the purpose of the gentlemen to collapse into the purpose of the nongentlemen." "Liberal Education . . .," 19.

14. "What is . . .?," 6.

tion of Strauss for the greatest books was not simply that of a philosopher economizing his range of attention and time. He thought that liberal education consists “in studying with the proper care the great books which the greatest minds have left behind . . .”¹⁵ This conviction about the primary means of liberal education led him to endorse the basic thrust, if not every organizational form, of the Great Books movement in America at midcentury. In his 1960 address at Arden House, he thought that “liberal education is now becoming almost synonymous with the reading in common of the Great Books.” Strauss then added, “No better beginning could have been made.”¹⁶

One might slip to explaining Strauss’s attraction to education via the Great Books through aspects of his biography, and there is something to be said for this even though it is wholly inappropriate to call it an “explanation.” What we know of his education and early interests in Germany and what we can track of his personal concerns through his publications manifest a life of thinking through the great issues posed by the greatest thinkers in the Western tradition and the Jewish tradition within that.¹⁷ His two addresses on liberal education occurred at a time when Strauss is thought to have been turning his attention in a special way to Socrates. The example of Socrates turned out, perhaps surprisingly to some, to influence and support not only the way Strauss thought about liberal education but also his attraction to the Great Books approach. Strauss seemed to relish a little known statement of Socrates provided by Xenophon:

Those who offer it [wisdom] to all comers for money are known as sophists, prostitutes of wisdom, but we think that he who makes a friend of one whom he knows to be gifted by nature, and teaches him all the good he can, fulfills the duty of a citizen and a gentleman. . . . And I teach them all the good I can, and recommend them to others from whom I think they will get some moral benefit. *And the treasures that the wise men of old have left us in their writings I open and explore with my friends.* If we come on any good thing, we extract it, and we set much store on being useful to one another.¹⁸

Socrates’ example seems to have influenced or fortified a special emphasis of Strauss in approaching learning and the great thinkers. Strauss appeared to share fully Socrates’ elevation of the “human” questions and his effort to redirect philosophy’s attention from natural and divine matters to human matters. In conventional terminology Strauss elevated moral and political philosophy over such ranging and profound inquiries as natural science, metaphysics and theology. Given Strauss’s understanding of philosophy as quest and its natural movement

15. “What is . . . ?,” 3.

16. “Liberal Education . . .,” 24.

17. See Walter Nicgorski, “Leo Strauss,” *Modern Age* 26 (Summer/Fall, 1982), 270–73, esp. note 3.

18. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.vi.13–14. Underlining is mine. Translation is that of E. C. Marchant from Xenophon, *Memorabilia and Oeconomicus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959).

to metaphysics, it should be clear that the priority Strauss assigned to moral and political philosophy is at most a chronological and pedagogical priority rather than one of inherent significance. The great moral and political issues thrust themselves with a special urgency on the eager student, the person of common sense, the citizen. Since the activity of the liberally educated person will be concerned “with the most weighty matters, with the only things which deserve to be taken seriously for their own sake, with the good order of the soul and of the city,” liberal education itself could be expected to emphasize these “weighty matters.”¹⁹ Not only is it useful pedagogically to begin with the horizon of the citizen, but it seemed for Strauss as for Socrates to be the useful and natural starting point for the philosophic inquirer. This Socratic practical orientation of Strauss meant that great writings could not all be seen to be of equal significance for the purpose of liberal education. There seemed to be more than his occasional learned playfulness in Strauss’s reputed remark that a liberal arts college could be founded around four books: Aristotle’s *Ethics*, Aquinas’s *Treatise on Law*, Kant’s *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* and an unmentioned text.²⁰ This remark was made at St. John’s College, America’s premiere Great Books college; it was there that Leo Strauss spent the last few years of his life and died. That seemed a fitting capstone to a life of thinking and writing about great books and then coming to advocate them as the chief means of a liberal education.

But there is still need to understand why Strauss advocated the study of the great books as the best mode of liberal education. There seem to be two reasons or two levels to a single reason. Strauss, like many others, talked of the great books and great minds as exemplars of human excellence. The task of liberal education is to draw students to such excellence by proper exposure to it. “Liberal education,” Strauss wrote, alluding evidently to the contemporary context, “reminds those members of a mass democracy who have ears to hear, of human greatness.”²¹

The other reason is evident from a full appreciation of what happens or can happen when a student has had a proper exposure to the great minds in their writings. Strauss states that the great books are to be studied “with proper care.” What that meant above all to him was that the great books must be studied with full attention to the important differences among them. It is in confronting and working through these differences that the mind of the student, and of the teacher, is truly drawn into the company of the greatest minds. Confronted with differences of such minds on the most important matters, the student is drawn away from anything like the experience of indoctrination and drawn into philosophy. “This philosophizing” of students and teachers “consists at any rate primar-

19. “Liberal Education . . .,” II.

20. Ted A. Blanton, “Leo Strauss,” *The College* (magazine of St. John’s College) 25 (January, 1974), 3.

21. “What is . . . ?,” 5, see also p. 6.

ily and in a way chiefly in listening to the conversation between the great philosophers or, more generally and more cautiously, between the greatest minds, . . .”²² But passive listening was not what Strauss had in mind though he so beautifully insisted that this listening that can liberally educate “demands from us the complete break with the noise, the rush, the thoughtlessness, the cheapness of the Vanity Fair of the intellectuals as well as of their enemies.”²³ In fact it takes something more than passivity even to hear much of a conversation, for Strauss noted that we students and teachers “must bring about that conversation.” for “the greatest minds utter monologues” which we must transform “into a dialogue.”²⁴

It seems reasonable to assume that the “more experienced” pupil’s contribution, namely the teacher’s, would be important in making this dialogue. That contribution is also needed in various and subtle ways because the dialogue between the greatest minds produces “a difficulty so great that it seems to condemn liberal education as an absurdity.”²⁵ This difficulty has been only partly revealed and is essentially the incapacity of the more experienced pupils (teachers) and less experienced pupils (students) to arbitrate the disagreements between and among the greatest minds. Strauss put the difficulty this way: “Since the greatest minds contradict one another regarding the most important matters, they compel us to judge of their monologues; we cannot take on trust what any one of them says. On the other hand, we cannot but notice that we are not competent to be judges.”²⁶ Whatever “trusting” may be involved in liberal education, here it is shown to involve nontrusting, to involve philosophy, and this is a philosophy that “must be on its guard against the wish to be edifying. . . .” So it is that “liberal education, which consists in the constant intercourse with the greatest minds, is a training in the highest form of modesty. . . .and at the same time a training in boldness.”²⁷

Now it is possible to appreciate the fact that Strauss’s enthusiasm for the report of Xenophon on Socrates’ reading “treasures that the wise men of old have left” is but a qualified enthusiasm. Socrates was reported speaking both of the importance of teaching one’s friends all the good you can and of how he and his friends when coming on any good in reading, extract it and are useful to one another. In commenting on this passage of Xenophon on two separate occasions, Strauss observed that this report indicates implicitly that not everything in those books of wise men was good and that the report was “defective since it does not

22. “What is . . . ?,” 7.

23. “What is . . . ?,” 8.

24. The obvious question regarding Plato’s dialogues was anticipated by Strauss when he observed that “the greatest minds utter monologues even when they write dialogues. When we look at the Platonic dialogues, we observe that there is never a dialogue among minds of the highest order

” “What is . . . ?,” 7.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. “What is . . . ?,” 8.

tell us anything as to what Socrates did regarding those passages. . . of which he did not know whether they were good.”²⁸ Strauss’s comments reflect a concern that the report, as it is, can give a false picture leading one to underestimate the difficulty of thinking through the mixed elements, good and bad, in great writings and the even more fundamental and graver difficulty of knowing how to recognize the good. Strauss seemed concerned that the report as it stands might be taken to reveal Socrates as unphilosophic in his relations with friends. Liberal education through engagement with the dialogue of great minds must involve the questioning and questing spirit of philosophy; it could not but be touched by the noble yet elusive full comprehension that philosophy seeks.

How then does one combine the trustfulness of the liberally educated gentleman with the trustlessness of the philosopher? How does one combine the resolution of pressing questions of good and evil required by the liberally educated with the dissatisfied pressing for complete understanding that marks the genuine philosopher? These questions simply bring to the foreground the tensions between the city and philosophy, philosophy and liberal education, and liberal education and the city. The writings of Strauss on liberal education lead readers to these questions. He did not prescribe norms or rules for what can be given or taught in liberal education as opposed to what must be questioned in philosophy; he did not assert in some universal way what can be expected from pupils and what would be unsettling to them; he did not give a clear and distinct line of separation between liberal education and philosophy. Strauss left these questions, as perhaps they must be left, to be worked out in accord with the abilities and dispositions of the teacher and student within the context of each experience of liberal education, of each struggle with the struggles of great minds.²⁹

For Strauss then, the means of liberal education were primarily the works of great minds approached in a certain way. The important conditions for this education are the qualities of the teacher and student and the institutional ambience in which they study. Compared with his extensive comments on the great books and the proper approach to them, Strauss said little explicitly and directly about these conditions. When Strauss spoke of the “proper care” with which the great

28. Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socrates* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 29. Also, “What is . . . ?,” 6.

29. In an earlier version of “What Is Liberal Education?” Strauss began the address by indicating that the substance of it constituted a “warning,” and that the listeners, because they have had a liberal education, would be able to avoid taking the warning as a “counsel of despair” (see Fletcher, ed., *Education for Public Responsibility*, 43). It seems that the warning is constituted by Strauss’s emphasis on the grave philosophical difficulties and challenges imbedded in liberal education and that the warning results in his raising a question or doubt for his listeners concerning whether they have attained a liberal education (recall that this is a commencement address). Yet these listeners are not expected to despair because they have received sufficiently of a liberal education that they know what they have is good even if it is not the whole of wisdom and thus a guarantee of the goodness of which they are aware. Perhaps Strauss’s intention was, however, to indicate that they will not despair because a liberal education gives a person perspective on and hence capacity to accept human limitations, specifically limitations on our capacity to attain complete wisdom.

books are to be read, he explicitly called for teachers (the more experienced pupils of the books) and students marked by *humility* and *docility* before the great minds and by *boldness* and *independence* in assessing oppositions and tensions. He also sought a disposition to *carefulness*, *seriousness* and *honesty* and the kind of *intellectual ability* that permits one not necessarily to surpass, which would be rare indeed, but at the least to be engaged by the thinking of great minds. The more experienced pupil, the teacher, would need as a rule to be marked by these qualities in the greater degree as well as by appropriate “perceptivity and delicacy” for the leader’s responsibility in liberal learning. In the light of such requisite qualities for liberal education and their variation from person to person, the best form of liberal education would be one-on-one or triadic, the student, the teacher and the great books. Education toward wisdom would have to be a personal encounter to answer sensitively and hence rightly questions like where to begin and how far to try to stretch or ascend. Socrates is known to have taught each individual as an individual.³⁰ This liberal education, concerned with the souls of those being educated, cannot be, as Strauss has said, akin to an industry or in any way machinelike.³¹

When on one occasion Strauss spoke quite explicitly and directly about the conditions of liberal education, his statement was remarkable in a couple of respects. Strauss began with an interesting, if not surprising to many, self-revelation.

I own that education is in a sense the subject matter of my teaching and my research. But I am almost solely concerned with the goal or end of education at its best or highest—of the education of the perfect prince as it were—and very little with its conditions and its how. The most important conditions, it seems to me, are the qualities of the educator and of the human being who is to be educated; in the case of the highest form of education those conditions are very rarely fulfilled, and one cannot do anything to produce them; the only things we can do regarding them are not to interfere with their interplay and to prevent such interference.³²

When Strauss claimed that the qualities necessary for the *highest* form of education are very rarely found and not within the power of human making, he was evidently speaking of philosophical education and the education of the philosopher-prince. Since liberal education is significantly philosophical and since it is preliminary to philosophical education proper, namely the life of the philosopher, one would expect what Strauss has said about the rarity and given nature of the qualities for the highest form of education to be so in proportionate degree for liberal education. That conclusion is affirmed directly near the end of the same

30. That which is exemplified regularly in the dramatic accounts of both Plato and Xenophon is explicitly drawn attention to by Xenophon at the beginning of Book IV of the *Memorabilia* where Socrates is acknowledged to have varied his method in accord with the disposition of each person with whom he talked seriously.

31. “Liberal Education . . . ,” 25.

32. “Liberal Education . . . ,” 9.

speech where Strauss cautioned: "We must not expect that liberal education can ever become universal education. It will always remain the obligation and the privilege of a minority."³³

Strauss's intent, however, in noting that the qualities requisite for the higher forms of education are beyond human making must not be understood as a romantic abandonment of human effort to *cultivate* human excellence. Much of what Strauss said in both his essays on liberal education and throughout his work is indicative of the strenuous effort he regarded as necessary for such cultivation or acculturating. Two comments can help clarify Strauss's intent in having said "one cannot do anything to produce" the requisite qualities and that "the only things we can do regarding them are not to interfere with their interplay and to prevent such interference." First, Strauss almost immediately followed this statement with an example of advice he gives graduate students concerning teaching. This advice, often heard from Strauss, was to "always assume that there is one silent student in your class who is by far superior to you in head and in heart." Strauss then explained the implications of this as follows: "do not have too high an opinion of your importance, and have the highest opinion of your duty, your responsibility."³⁴ Strauss's example makes clear how seriously he took the responsibility to that rarely found highest type, the philosophic soul, who may be in our midst. So Strauss at the very start of his "Liberal Education and Responsibility" and before dealing with his more generally applicable topic, talked about the rarest of human types and the need for most to respond to this person, especially at the level of higher education, by stepping aside and not interfering.

The second comment bearing on Strauss's intent in putting the critical conditions of education beyond human *making* is to note that Strauss was speaking of the conditions for education during the college years and after. He was not undercutting human effort in the earlier years of the student to *cultivate* the qualities that later make possible liberal and philosophical education. Furthermore, even with respect to the college years and after, Strauss said that we are expected "to prevent interference" with the interplay of the qualified student and the qualified teacher. Preventing such interference with the challenging, delicate and personal experience of liberal and philosophical education requires some awareness of the forces that might or do interfere and some knowledge of a supportive ambience for such education.

Strauss gave some direction both with respect to preparation for liberal education and regarding a supportive ambience for this and yet higher education. Not surprisingly Strauss seemed to point primarily to a Greek model for education preparatory to liberal education. Besides providing the basic skills as reading, writing and reckoning, such education should consist primarily in "the formation of character and of taste." "The fountains" for this education are the poets.³⁵

33. "Liberal Education . . ." 24.

34. "Liberal Education . . ." 9.

35. "Liberal Education . . ." 11.

The taste for the beautiful would be coupled with those qualities of character—e.g. honesty, humility and boldness—which were noted above as requisite conditions for liberal education. Strauss recognized that the genuine refinement of character and taste required for liberal education was threatened by the pressures of common taste and conformism in a mass democracy. Strauss wrote boldly of this concern in “What is Political Philosophy?”:

Nor can we say that democracy has found a solution to the problem of education. In the first place, what is today called education, very frequently does not mean education proper, i.e., the formation of character, but rather instruction and training. Secondly, to the extent to which the formation of character is indeed intended, there exists a very dangerous tendency to identify the good man with the good sport, the cooperative fellow, the “regular guy,” i.e., an overemphasis on a certain part of social virtue and a corresponding neglect of those virtues which mature, if they do not flourish, in privacy, not to say solitude: by educating people to cooperate with each other in a friendly spirit, one does not yet educate nonconformists, people who are prepared to stand alone, to fight alone, “rugged individualists.”³⁶

Strauss apparently also thought that religious education often played an important part in securing the character formation that was useful to good political order and the basis for liberal and philosophical education. He spoke in 1960 of the “decay of religious education of the people” and added that “I mean more than the fact that a very large part of the people no longer receive any religious education, although it is not necessary on the present occasion to think beyond that fact.”³⁷ It is clear that in Strauss’s view religious education even when received had lost the central emphasis that once characterized it. That education based on the Bible had sought to bring “everyone to regard himself as responsible for his actions and for his thoughts to a God who would judge him.”³⁸ The demise of this religious education, thought Strauss, created a “felt need” in contemporary society for character education which many took to be a need for liberal education. Strauss wondered if certain proponents of liberal education, sometimes quite universal liberal education, correctly understood the problems of the time. He asked, “Is our present concern with liberal education . . . not due to the void created by the decay of religious education? Is such liberal education meant to perform the function formerly performed by religious education? Can liberal education perform that function?”³⁹ Strauss believed that modern democracy—the founding conception of its originators—was conceived to be dependent on the religious education of the people and the liberal education of the representatives of the people. The decay of both these forms of education seemed to explain “the present predicament” of mass democracy.⁴⁰

36. Leo Strauss, “What Is Political Philosophy?” *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1973), 37–38.

37. “Liberal Education . . .,” 18–19.

38. “Liberal Education . . .,” 15–16.

39. “Liberal Education . . .,” 19.

40. “Liberal Education . . .,” 18.

As great as were the forces and tendencies that Strauss saw working against the sound character education that was a necessary preliminary for liberal education, there were equally significant challenges awaiting the well-prepared student who might arrive at a college or university for a liberal education. To put the matter as positively as possible, Strauss was aware of the absence in higher education of the kind of person who could be an educator toward wisdom. What he looked for in educators was highlighted in the praise he once gave Kurt Riezler, a colleague during Strauss's days at the New School for Social Research. Riezler, wrote Strauss, was marked by "the virtue of humanity."

His interests and sympathies extended to all fields of worthy human endeavour. He could easily have become an outstanding scholar in a great variety of fields, but he preferred to be a truly educated man rather than to be a specialist. The activity of his mind had the character of noble and serious employment of leisure, not of harried labor. And his wide ranging interests and sympathies were never divorced from his sense of human responsibility.⁴¹

Notable in this praise is Riezler's "sense of human responsibility," freedom from "harried labor," and freedom from the often constricted humanity of the specialist. Strauss looked for these qualities in liberal educators and seemed to find the milieu of educational institutions unsupportive of such human qualities.

Strauss specifically wrote about the "ever increasing specialization, with the result that a man's respectability becomes dependent on his being a specialist." His personal response, also urged upon his students and friends, was that "we are indeed compelled to be specialists, but we can try to specialize in the most weighty matters or, to speak more simply and more nobly, in the one thing needful."⁴² In light of Strauss's view of the starting point for education and of what is entailed in the movement toward wisdom, it is clear that this specialization "in the one thing needful" is hardly akin to the specialization usually found in the modern university. Strauss's view, of course, challenged the radical egalitarianism among disciplines and subjects that pervades higher education and has made curricular structure and coherence a nearly impossible objective in many institutions.

Strauss noted the effects of increasing specialization not only on educators but also on what is experienced by the students. He specifically commented on "scientific education" being "in danger of losing its value for the broadening and the deepening of the human being." He then called attention to a widely known but wholly inadequate curricular response to increasing specialization.

The remedy for specialization is therefore sought in a new kind of universalism—a universalism which has been rendered almost inevitable by the extension of our spatial and temporal horizons. We are trying to expel the narrowness of specialization by the superficiality of such things as general civilization courses or by what has aptly been

41. Leo Strauss, "Kurt Riezler," *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies*, 234.

42. "Liberal Education . . .," 23–24.

compared to the unending cinema, as distinguished from a picture gallery, of the history of all nations in all respects: economic, scientific, artistic, religious, and political. The gigantic spectacle thus provided is in the best case exciting and entertaining; it is not instructive and educating. A hundred pages—no, ten pages—of Herodotus introduce us immeasurably better into the mysterious unity of oneness and variety in human things than many volumes written in the spirit predominant in our age.⁴³

With this statement Strauss revealed again his view of the capacity of the great books to educate in a way marked both by breadth and by depth.

Strauss was obviously concerned that contemporary educators knew not the leisure and the quiet that allowed thoughtful inquiry into the works of the greatest minds. Thus, we recall, he spoke of liberal education as demanding from us “the complete break with the noise, the rush, the thoughtlessness, the cheapness of the Vanity Fair of the intellectuals as well as of their enemies.”⁴⁴ Then at another time he spoke of liberal education as consisting “in learning to listen to still and small voices and therefore in becoming deaf to loudspeakers. Liberal education seeks light and therefore shuns the limelight.”⁴⁵ These words on shunning the limelight were reprinted in the collection entitled *Higher Education and Modern Democracy* wherein also appeared an essay by Allan Bloom titled “The Crisis of Liberal Education.” Bloom’s comments on the contemporary university seem to sum up the concerns of Strauss.

The university has become omniscient and sensitive to the needs of the community. As such, however, it is less a preserve for the quiet contemplation of the permanent questions which are often forgotten in the bustle of ordinary business and [for] the pursuit of those disciplines whose only purpose is intellectual clarity about the most important things, and more a center for the training of highly qualified specialists. This change has been consecrated by a transformation of name: What was once the university has become the multiversity.⁴⁶

And finally of those qualities that Strauss praised in Kurt Riezler and so evidently sought in educators, “the sense of human responsibility” seems the most difficult to find and probably is the key, when found, to avoiding the dangers of narrow specialization and of a harried, “much ado about nothing” pace of life in higher education. This claim can be understood only if one pays attention to what Strauss meant by human responsibility. It was Strauss’s analysis of the predominant character of modernity that led him to see that human responsibility had come, on a wide scale, to be understood to mean responsiveness to the standards set by public opinion. Strauss had concluded that in modern philosophy—Machiavelli and after—“the end of philosophy is identified with the end which is capable of being actually pursued by all men.” Strauss explained

43. “Liberal Education . . .,” 23.

44. Note 23 preceding.

45. “Liberal Education . . .,” 25.

46. Allan Bloom, “The Crisis of Liberal Education,” *Higher Education and Modern Democracy*,

It follows that by causing the purpose of the philosophers, or more generally the purpose which essentially transcends society, to collapse into the purpose of the nonphilosophers, one causes the purpose of the gentlemen to collapse into the purpose of the nongentlemen. In this respect, the modern conception of philosophy is fundamentally democratic. The end of philosophy is now no longer what one may call disinterested contemplation of the eternal, but the relief of man's estate.⁴⁷

Later in the modern age even the relief of man's estate meaning "health, a reasonably long life and prosperity" as representing goals that derive from objectively superior desires is called into question. Strauss commented

Since science is then unable to justify the ends for which it seeks the means, it is in practice compelled to satisfy the ends which are sought by its customers, by the society to which the individual scientist happens to belong and hence in many cases by the mass. . . . If we look then only at what is peculiar to our age or characteristic of our age, we see hardly more than the interplay of mass taste with high-grade but strictly speaking unprincipled efficiency. The technicians are, if not responsible, at any rate responsive to the demands of the mass; but a mass as mass cannot be responsible to anyone or to anything for anything.⁴⁸

This is the world of philosopher-scientists or simply scientists (with philosophers seen as irrelevant) in which "human responsibility" takes on new dimensions. These new dimensions mean that it is a responsibility without the transcendent standard that gave meaning to the classical conception of liberal education that Strauss defended. No transcendent standard means no aspiration beyond the conventional in each society and that represents a collapse downward of the beneficent tension between society and liberal education, and between liberal education and philosophy.

DEMOCRACY, LIBERAL EDUCATION AND THE GERMANIC MODEL OF THE UNIVERSITY

In what has preceded, modern democracy may appear to be the villain in a drama in which genuine liberal education is the victim. Strauss has drawn attention to the qualities of the student and teacher and, by implication, to the ambience of the institution that provide the primary conditions for liberal education. He found contemporary conditions overwhelmingly unfavorable to liberal education and pointed at mass democracy as both a cause and symptom (hence not the ultimate cause) of the unfavorable conditions. The root cause is, of course, the modern attack on the possibility of philosophy in the classic sense and the popularization of this in an intellectual and moral egalitarianism that can be called mass democracy.

47. "Liberal Education . . ." 19–20.

48. "Liberal Education . . ." 23.

Strauss, however, did not totally despair in this situation though one would be false to his writings on liberal education to suggest that they were hopeful or optimistic. Also, and this is very important to note, Strauss did not find democracy and liberal education to be simply natural enemies. First of all, in the spirit of Socrates' appreciation for Athens, Strauss wrote

We are not permitted to be flatterers of democracy precisely because we are friends and allies of democracy. While we are not permitted to remain silent on the dangers to which democracy exposes itself as well as human excellence, we cannot forget the obvious fact that by giving freedom to all, democracy also gives freedom to those who care for human excellence. No one prevents us from cultivating our garden or from setting up outposts which may come to be regarded by many citizens as salutary to the republic and as deserving of giving to it its tone. Needless to say, the utmost exertion is the necessary, although by no means the sufficient, condition for success.⁴⁹

Thus Strauss drew attention to the fact that, at least to a degree, contemporary democracy in the name of freedom accommodates his and other efforts to advance a classic liberal education. But then, too, he indicated that if liberal education was to be more than tolerated in a democracy, great effort with no assurance of success is called for.

Furthermore, as Strauss implied here and said directly elsewhere, modern democracy more than accommodates liberal education; it requires such education if it is to function and survive as originally intended. Democracy and freedom require liberally educated leaders if they are not to slide into mass democracy and license and ultimately to self-destruction. Strauss's statement from his first writing on liberal education now comes into greater light. There he spoke of liberal education as "the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant."⁵⁰ The relation of Strauss's concern with liberal education to his larger enterprise is illumined by recalling his observation that "liberal democracy . . . derives powerful support" from a premodern mode of thought.⁵¹

Many, from the left and the right, have drawn attention to the failures and weaknesses of American society. It is seen at one time or another as too commercial, too materialistic, too narcissistic, too egalitarian, or too void of civic virtues. This is not the occasion to look at this vast and often depressing literature or to try to assess the fairness of various allegations of shortcomings. Here the point is simply to note that very few critics appreciate and point to the critical undergraduate years as one of the primary points of reform in American society. However one assesses the quality of life or moral character of American society,

49. "Liberal Education . . .," 24. Strauss also wrote "that liberal or constitutional democracy comes closer to what the classics demanded than any alternative that is viable in our age." See "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*," *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies*, 113.

50. Note 1, preceding.

51. Leo Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity," in *Political Philosophy: Six Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin, ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), 98.

those entrusted with the education of American undergraduates are, perhaps more than any others, at a pivotal point, a point of maximum leverage, with respect to the whole society. In the last years of adolescence and first years of adulthood, the leaders of nearly every significant sector of America, the media, business, law, among others, go to college. These college years are critical years for human development and most notably for the intellectual and moral aspects of development. It is not unreasonable to lay a goodly part of the blame for a failed society at the door of a failed education, specifically at the door of those educators who are charged with shaping and guiding a critical phase in the development of society's leadership. Leo Strauss had a good sense for the vital, critical role liberal education could play with respect to the overall quality and stability of American democracy.

Two additional observations on Strauss's effort to turn democracy to liberal education are necessary. First, like Jefferson, Strauss encouraged the development and emergence to leadership of a natural aristocracy. Strauss wrote that the way of moving from mass democracy to democracy as originally intended was by founding through liberal education an aristocracy within democratic mass society. Without underplaying the important differences between Strauss and Jefferson on the nature of liberal education, it seems useful to note that both Jefferson and Strauss did not see liberal education as universal or for everyone, and yet both were aware that many who could benefit from liberal education were untouched by it in their times because of the lack of material or other conditions supportive of that education. The point is that each thought that much was to be done by way of reforming education and extending the opportunities for liberal education before one reached the limits of the liberally educable in the societies they knew.

A second observation concerns that frequently heard charge that humanistically educated people have been known to be indecent and enemies of constitutional democracy. Cases cited vary from Nazi leaders to cursing revolutionaries of organizations like the Students For a Democratic Society. It may suffice to say that this charge and whatever examples are cited often fail to distinguish between the decorative effect of humanistic learning and the rigorous experience of liberal education as described by Strauss.

Strauss did, however, take up harder cases of the sort under discussion here. He cited Marx, "the father of communism," and Nietzsche, "the stepgrandfather of fascism" as being "liberally educated on a level to which we cannot even hope to aspire." Here Strauss may have erred on the side of the generosity to these learned adversaries, for he proceeded to report that their failures have helped us understand anew a portion of wisdom (that is, have helped us to a fuller liberal education in a certain respect). In the light of those failures, it is easier to see, according to Strauss

that wisdom cannot be separated from moderation and hence to understand that wisdom requires unhesitating loyalty to a decent constitution and even to the cause of constitutionalism. Moderation will protect us against the twin dangers of visionary expect-

tations from politics and unmanly contempt for politics. Thus it may again become true that all liberally educated men will be politically moderate men. It is in this way that the liberally educated may again receive a hearing even in the market place.⁵²

In the first pages of *Natural Right and History*, Strauss reflected on the present dominance in America and the West of German thought of an earlier period in the twentieth century. He commented on the irony that this is not “the first time that a nation, defeated on the battlefield and, as it were, annihilated as a political being, has deprived its conquerors of the most sublime fruit of victory by imposing on them the yoke of its own thought.”⁵³ The destructive yoke that Strauss had in mind was a relativism, emerging from positivism or historicism, that attacked the very basis of natural right and thus the foundation of the American political tradition. One would be unduly sanguine to say that at present that yoke had been broken, yet many developments, including the force of the thought and teaching of Leo Strauss, have worked to check the spread and grip of that relativism whether in its “intellectual” or casual forms.

However, the hope of reviving and extending liberal education requires more than having the better argument against various forms of relativism. It requires support structures and an environment informed by a proper understanding of liberal education and its conditions. America’s universities and indirectly her colleges have, however, largely been shaped by the model of the great German universities of the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ This was explicitly true of that great university in Chicago which sheltered and encouraged Leo Strauss for so long. The German universities passed to America their ambitions for ever more specialized knowledge and the resulting progress of the sciences, and they passed too the structures to sustain that enterprise. These were the intellectual “communities” that developed the ideas that so troubled Strauss. These were the intellectual “communities” so notorious for intense individualism, personal rivalry and the absence of civic virtue.⁵⁵ Leo Strauss never wrote about a broad reform of the universities. In fact, it appears that he saw that road of reform as so hopeless that he consciously kept his specific recommendations to the “modest, pertinent and practical” course of urging teachers of all subjects to teach with an emphasis and approach that encourages “whatever broadens and deepens the understanding” as opposed to that which at best “cannot as such produce more than narrow and unprincipled efficiency.”⁵⁶

52. “Liberal Education . . .,” 24.

53. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 2.

54. For a selective history and analysis of the emergence of the modern university, see Charles Wegener, *Liberal Education and the Modern University*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). For the impact of the German university model on the American liberal arts college and a defense of the traditional mission of the latter, see Earl McGrath, *Values, Liberal Education and National Destiny* (Indianapolis: Lilly Endowment, 1975).

55. For an examination of “the failure of the German university” that was found to be characterized by neglect of education and a self-centered, at best amoral, and fragmented way of life, see Frederic Lilje, *The Abuse of Learning* (New York: Macmillan, 1948).

56. “Liberal Education . . .,” 19.

Leo Strauss was in this, as in all matters, a champion of the “modest, pertinent and practical” course. But he was also one who called for the “utmost exertion” in joining him at efforts “salutary to the republic” and deserving to give to it its tone. Those efforts were to be directed at inspiring genuine liberal education. This was his salutary action for American democracy as well as for human excellence. Had Leo Strauss never written about liberal education and spelled out its nature, means and conditions, his students would still have been able to recognize the truth of Strauss’s claim “that education is in a sense the subject matter of my teaching and my research.” And his students—namely those who have heard him directly or indirectly and sought to heed him—would know that his example and teaching required attention to and efforts for liberal education. In a situation where the tone and structure of higher education is set largely by the model of the German research university adapted in certain ways to the requisites of mass democracy, those efforts for liberal education need to be great, constant and, of course, prudent.