

Interpretation

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Interpretation

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The Place of Leo Strauss in a Liberal Education

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It is appropriate that we inquire into the place which Leo Strauss ought to assume in a liberal education, for he gave more thought to the subject of liberal education than did any other major political thinker of the twentieth century.¹ Though his views on the subject may be disagreeable to some egalitarians, I do not propose to criticize them, for I share them. Strauss's account of the nature of liberal education poses no problem. But a problem is posed by the question of whether his own work should be included in a liberal education. The question has arisen because of the critique of his work by Shadia B. Drury, who maintains that he was a hedonistic proponent of the views of Thrasymachus, Machiavelli, and Nietzsche and that he radically deprecated morality. I shall begin with an account of Strauss's views on liberal education, of why I share them, and of related matters; I shall then examine Professor Drury's critique with a view to answering the question of whether Strauss's work should be part of a liberal education.

"Liberal education," Strauss says, "is the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society" (*LAM*, p. 5 [*IPP*, pp. 314–15]). *Aristocracy* means rule by "the best" in the sense of those who are most virtuous; but since, according to Strauss, "virtue seems to require wisdom" we may assume him to mean by aristocracy rule by the virtuous and wise (*LAM*, p. 4 [*IPP*, p. 313]. cf. *NRH*, p. 140). Since he speaks of "aristocracy within democratic mass society," and since *democracy* means rule by the people, he cannot have in mind a pure aristocracy. He must be thinking of some combination of aristocracy and democracy—either a system in which the aristocrats and the people each have their own house of the legislature, or, what he more likely has in mind, given his predominantly American readership, a system in which an elite marked by virtue and wisdom makes available some of its members for popular election to public office or for appointment to such office by the people's representatives.²

Long before reading Strauss on liberal education, I argued for the creation of an American elite of this kind in view of two facts.³ First, the United States finds itself in a grave spiritual crisis which threatens its survival as a free people.⁴ Ever since I began to hold this view, the prospect of the country's being taken over by a homegrown tyranny has been greater than that of its takeover by a foreign power, and today the difference in likelihood of the two events is

greater than ever, owing not only to recent events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe but also to the continued growth at home of the kinds of spiritual and social disorder which enable wouldbe tyrants to get control of their own countries. Second, the crisis can, in my judgment, be overcome only through a spiritual renaissance among the agents of cultural formation—governmental officials, teachers, persons in the mass media, and clergymen. The elite ought, in my view, to be trained for all these professions.

Let me anticipate my conclusion by saying that for as long as I have contemplated these matters I have thought about the philosophical and theological works which should be included in the education of future American leaders.⁵ Looming large in these considerations has been the fact that the middle of the twentieth century was the time of a great flowering of political thought in this country, owing to Americans' need to come to terms with the immense spiritual, social, and political disorder of the century. One result was six masterful books originally presented as lectures under the auspices of the Charles R. Walgreen Foundation at the University of Chicago. The books are: two analyses of the spirit of modern times and how it developed, Strauss's *Natural Right and History* and Eric Voegelin's *The New Science of Politics*; two defenses of democracy from a neo-Thomist perspective, Jacques Maritain's *Man and the State* and Yves R. Simon's *Philosophy of Democratic Government*; and two realistic assessments of foreign affairs, Hans J. Morgenthau's *In Defense of the National Interest* and George F. Kennan's *American Diplomacy 1900–1950*.⁶

All six of these books should, in my opinion, help constitute the philosophical and theological component of the education of a new American elite. To them should be added: (1) Reinhold Niebuhr's works on democracy and realism from a neo-orthodox Protestant perspective, dating from the same period and having the same motivation as the Walgreen lectures; (2) certain classics of ancient and medieval thought, namely, Plato's *Republic* and, if possible, his *Gorgias* and *Laws*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and excerpts from his *Politics*, selections from St. Augustine's *City of God*, and St. Thomas Aquinas's *Treatise on Law*; (3) Strauss's and Voegelin's commentaries on Plato's *Republic* in *The City and Man* and Vol. 3 of *Order and History*, respectively, about which more will be said below; and (4) the classics of modern liberal thought, on the condition that an attempt be made to separate their truth from their error.⁷

As for Strauss himself on liberal education, instead of the term *elite* he uses the somewhat more prudent *gentlemen*: he calls the products of a liberal education gentlemen (*LAM*, pp. 6, 11 [*IPP*, pp. 316, 324]). He says that gentlemen differ from their inferiors by the fact that they regard virtue as an end in itself and not simply as a means to some other end (*LAM*, p. 12 [*IPP*, p. 326]). They are marked by character and taste (*LAM*, p. 11 [*IPP*, p. 324]). Ideally, they set the tone of society (*LAM*, p. 13 [*IPP*, p. 327]). The ultimate justification of their rule is that their virtue is a reflection of the virtue of philosophers (*LAM*,

p. 14 [IPP, p. 328]). But they are not the same as philosophers; they regard certain questions as settled, whereas philosophers are constantly re-examining even the most important questions (LAM, pp. 13–14 [IPP, pp. 328–29]). The end of philosophy, at least ancient philosophy, is “disinterested contemplation of the eternal” (LAM, pp. 19–20 [IPP, p. 337]).

But Professor Drury greatly overestimates the gap which Strauss holds to separate gentlemen from philosophers and the “contempt” with which he as a philosopher views gentlemen.⁸ Even if she were right, there would be no reason to disparage rule by gentlemen as Strauss conceives of them, though one might question his role in their education, especially if his works are as full as she says they are of challenges to the accepted answers to questions about good and evil which gentlemen regard as settled.

I have already anticipated my conclusion by saying that *Natural Right and History* and the chapter on Plato’s *Republic* in *The City and Man* should be incorporated into the education of a new American elite. This advice could not stand, however, if what Professor Drury says is true, for her critique of these two works is the centerpiece of her critique of Strauss. The heart of her book is her Chapters 4 and 5; the heart of her Chapter 4 is its critique of Strauss’s chapter on the *Republic*; and her Chapter 5 is devoted primarily to *Natural Right and History*. If what she says in these two chapters proves to be wrong, the charges of Machiavellism and Nietzscheanism which she makes later in her book will more or less take care of themselves. I propose then to concentrate on her critique of the two works of Strauss’s which I have singled out for their pedagogical value. But first I wish to explain why, of all Strauss’s works, I have singled them out in this way.

Strauss’s most important message, in my view, is that of the contrast between ancient and modern political thought. I think that his treatment of modern thought is too harsh when it comes to Locke, but that on the whole his contrast of ancients and moderns is necessary to understanding the current plight of Western civilization. It is also fascinating, for he treats the history of political thought like a story of good and evil. His contrast of ancient and modern thought can be found in its most abbreviated form in his article “On Natural Law,”⁹ in more extended form in his essay “What Is Political Philosophy?” (WIPP, Chapter 1 [IPP, pp. 2–57]), and in most extended form in *Natural Right and History*. I do not mean to say that the shorter works are mere summaries of the book, for they are not. But for as full an account as possible one must go to the book.

Strauss was without doubt a brilliant philosopher, but I believe Voegelin to have been greater, chiefly because Voegelin was alive to the spiritual dimension of ancient political thought as Strauss was not, and because Voegelin had a surer sense of the spiritual disorder at the base of modern political thought. The difference is revealed in their conceptions of philosophy. Equating philosophy with specifically ancient philosophy, Voegelin says that “philosophy by defini-

tion has its center in the experiences of transcendence,” or, in theological language, experiences of God.¹⁰ Strauss gives several definitions, of which the following is typical: “Philosophy, as quest for wisdom, is quest for universal knowledge, for knowledge of the whole.” He adds, “Philosophy is essentially not possession of the truth, but quest for the truth” (*WIPP*, p. 11 [*IPP*, pp. 4–5]). See also *LAM*, pp. 6, 13 [*IPP*, pp. 316, 327]).

The same difference can be shown by another point. In his *Republic*, Plato speaks of the *psyche*, or soul, as consisting of three parts—reason, spiritedness, and appetite. He considers the soul to be well ordered when reason is in the ascendancy, with spiritedness serving as its obedient servant and ally against appetite (441e). Professor Drury writes:

Strauss does not take Plato’s conception of the tripartite *psyche* very seriously. He believes that Plato was not describing the nature of the human *psyche*, but the different kinds of men in the world: the lovers of knowledge (the philosophers), the lovers of honor and reputation (the gentlemen and statesmen), and the lovers of pleasure (the vulgar). (P. 198)

This statement cannot stand in the face of Strauss’s article “On Natural Law” (*SPPP*, p. 138) and his chapter on Plato’s *Republic*.¹¹ But it is true that Voegelin places greater emphasis than Strauss on the order of the *psyche* and, what is especially important, that Voegelin conceives of the *psyche* as being ordered by attunement to transcendent reality, whereas Strauss does not.

On a more mundane level, Voegelin has a more profound sense of Athenian decline in the age of Thucydides and Plato, and of the parallels between the decline of Athens and that of the contemporary West. For all these reasons, I think Voegelin the greater philosopher. My understanding of the spiritual crisis of America and where it may lead is based largely on Voegelin’s work, and in particular on *The New Science of Politics* and the chapter on Plato’s *Republic* in the third volume of *Order and History*. I confess that much of the appeal of *Natural Right and History* and the chapter on the *Republic* in *The City and Man* is as a supplement and contrast to the two corresponding works by Voegelin.

While I am not a Straussian, I am not a Voegelinian either, although I have been influenced more by Voegelin and Niebuhr than by anybody else. I am a Christian and a liberal democrat. I am unenthusiastic about Professor Drury’s book for several reasons. The less important are that it has too many runon sentences, that it is an instance of the iconoclasm of which there is far too much in the world today, and that it is what Voegelin would call a positivistic history of ideas (notice the title, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*), albeit one with a liberal bias. More important is the fact that the book is unfair to Strauss, as I hope to show by comparing its quotations with what he actually says.

At the outset we noted that, according to Professor Drury, Strauss was a hedonistic proponent of the views of Thrasymachus, Machiavelli, and Nietzsche, and he radically deprecated morality. Later we established that her allegations of Machiavellism and Nietzscheanism are relatively unimportant. We are

left, therefore, with the charges of hedonistic Thrasymacheanism and radical deprecation of morality. Professor Drury makes the first charge in her discussion of Strauss's chapter on Plato's *Republic* and the second charge in her analysis of *Natural Right and History*. We shall begin with her discussion of the chapter on the *Republic*.

In my judgment, the most shocking of the views which Professor Drury ascribes to Strauss in this discussion are the following: (1) of the antagonists Thrasymachus and Socrates, Thrasymachus has the better argument about justice; (2) Socrates does not hold justice to be "the natural order of the human *psyche* or any such fiction"; (3) "the only natural good" is the benefit of oneself as opposed to others; and (4) philosophy understood as a kind of *eros*, and not justice, is choiceworthy for its own sake. Taken together, these views add up to hedonistic Thrasymacheanism.

Professor Drury ascribes the first three views to Strauss on two successive pages (pp. 76–77). I plan to quote directly the ascription and the context in which it occurs and then to examine each alleged view separately, showing in each instance how she distorts what he actually says. This procedure may be considered exemplary for any future analysis of her treatment of his work. Superscript numbers in the quoted matter are in her text. It should be kept in mind that in the *Republic* Thrasymachus avers that "the just is nothing else than the advantage of the stronger," particularly the established government (338c–339a). Here, then, is what she says:

The originality of Strauss's interpretation of Plato's *Republic* rests in his claim that Socrates does not refute Thrasymachus; on the contrary, Thrasymachus's principle "remains victorious."¹⁰⁶ Nor does Socrates deny Polymarchus's view that justice consists in benefiting friends and harming enemies. Nor does he prove that the morally just life is the happy life or that justice benefits the just man, or that justice (in the moral sense) is a good that is choiceworthy for its own sake.¹⁰⁷ Such orthodox views about the *Republic* are fictions inherited from Christian Neoplatonism. Nothing could be further from the truth.

... [W]hereas Thrasymachus is depicted as a "wild beast," Socrates is naïve and "innocent."¹⁰⁸ But this does not fool Strauss. It certainly did not fool Thrasymachus. He knew that Socrates was a "dissembler, a man who pretends to be ignorant while in fact he knows things very well."¹⁰⁹ Far from being naïve and innocent, Socrates is "clever and tricky."¹¹⁰

Strauss admires the "cleverness with which Socrates argued badly on purpose,"¹¹² in order to show Thrasymachus that he is right, but not going about things the right way. Strauss explains that Thrasymachus's realization of this is the only thing that could have made him willing to listen silently to Socrates. ... Strauss insists that Thrasymachus is "tamed" by Socrates, but he is *not* "refuted."¹¹⁴

According to Strauss, Thrasymachus's view of justice is far from "savage"; on the contrary, it is "highly respectable."¹¹⁵

Strauss contends that the *Republic* substantiates the view that justice is a fabrication, a product of art, or of human convention.¹¹⁷ Contrary to popular belief, Socrates found nothing natural about justice. It is not the natural order of the human *psyche* or any such fiction. Justice . . . inevitably conflicts with everyone's inclination to prefer their [*sic*] own benefit, which is "the only natural good."¹¹⁹

The first four paragraphs of this quotation all relate to Professor Drury's assertion that, according to Strauss, Thrasymachus makes a better argument about justice than Socrates. Strauss does indeed say, as she maintains in the first paragraph of the quotation, that Thrasymachus's principle "remains victorious" (*CM*, p. 84). There is also some truth in her assertion in the third paragraph that Strauss does not hold Thrasymachus to be "refuted" by Socrates.¹² But Strauss speaks of the victory and nonrefutation of Thrasymachus as occurring only in the exchange between Thrasymachus and Socrates in the first book of the *Republic*. Strauss nowhere denies that in the *Republic* as a whole Socrates refutes Thrasymachus. Professor Drury clearly conveys the impression that Strauss makes this denial, and her reference to the first book of the *Republic* immediately before the quoted matter does not alter this fact. When, for example, at the end of the first paragraph she speaks of Strauss as rejecting "orthodox views about the *Republic* . . . inherited from Christian Neoplatonism," she is speaking of views about Socrates's performance in the *Republic* as a whole.

Several other points should be made about Strauss's true views on the relative merits of the arguments of Socrates and Thrasymachus. The list of Socrates's beliefs about justice which Professor Drury, in the first paragraph, says remain unproved by Socrates in the eyes of Strauss, are not even mentioned on the page which she cites in her Note 107. To be sure, Strauss says on this page that Socrates considers his proof of the general "goodness of justice" to be "radically inadequate," but Strauss is referring to but one short proof; at the bottom of the page he writes that "we *cannot yet* say with definiteness that justice is good."¹³ Similarly, Professor Drury is wide of the mark in Paragraph 4. On the page which she cites, not Thrasymachus's view of justice, but an opinion of which it is the consequence, is said to be "not only not manifestly savage but even highly respectable." The opinion is the commonplace one that justice consists in obeying the law (*CM*, p. 75).

Moreover, Professor Drury overlooks a passage on one of the very pages cited in her Note 114 in which Strauss explicitly states that, in the *Republic* as a whole, Socrates wins his argument with Thrasymachus. Strauss writes: "One might say that he [Thrasymachus] is Plato's version of the Unjust Speech in contrast to Socrates as his version of the Just Speech, with the understanding that whereas in the *Clouds* the Unjust Speech is victorious in speech, in the *Republic* the Just Speech is victorious in speech."¹⁴ The reference to the *Clouds*, a play by Aristophanes, need not concern us. The important point is that Strauss terms Socrates victorious.

In fairness it must be said that on the same page there is a passage that one might well wish were not there. Although the passage could be read as supporting her position, Professor Drury fails to quote it. It reads: "Plato makes it very easy for us to loathe Thrasymachus: for all ordinary purposes we ought to loathe people who act and speak like Thrasymachus and never to imitate their deeds and never to act according to their speeches. But there are other purposes to be considered" (*CM*, p. 74). One might well wish that at the very least Strauss had explained what those other purposes are.

If Professor Drury distorts Strauss's meaning about the quality of Socrates's argument, she also augments this distortion by misleading the reader about Strauss's interpretation of Socrates's intention. At issue are the second and third paragraphs. We shall begin with the second. None of the terms applied to Socrates is to be found on the single page cited in her Notes 108, 109, and 110; all the terms can, however, be found two pages later (*CM*, p. 77). Professor Drury makes it sound as if Plato, in Strauss's interpretation, depicts Socrates as "innocent," whereas in fact Strauss says that Socrates considers himself "innocent." More importantly, she makes it seem as if Strauss himself applies, or at least may apply, the terms "dissembler, a man who pretends," etc., and "clever and tricky" to Socrates, whereas in fact Strauss says that Socrates has these traits in the eyes of Thrasymachus. She makes especially unclear the source of the view of Socrates as "clever and tricky."

Then, at the beginning of the third paragraph, she plainly says that "Strauss admires the 'cleverness with which Socrates argued badly on purpose.'" Apart from the question of any possible admiration, Strauss's text is unclear whether such cleverness is ascribed to Socrates by Strauss himself or by Thrasymachus (*CM*, p. 84). But even if Strauss himself holds the problematic view, he reveals a perfectly innocent reason on the next page, where he writes, "What Socrates does in the Thrasymachus section would be inexcusable if he had not done it in order to provoke the passionate reaction of Glaucon . . ." (*CM*, p. 85). Strauss thinks that, if Socrates argues badly on purpose, he does so to further the development of the dialogue, not to convey a hidden meaning to Thrasymachus, as Professor Drury maintains later in the third paragraph. The upshot of our analysis of the second and third paragraphs is that, contrary to her suggestion, Strauss does not regard Socrates as a tricky dissembler who argues badly in order to tell Thrasymachus that he secretly agrees with him.

We come now to the fifth paragraph and Professor Drury's assertion that, according to Strauss, Socrates does not hold justice to be "the natural order of the human *psyche* or any such fiction," and "the only natural good" is one's own benefit. Professor Drury derives what she says about justice as a natural order from the first sentence of the paragraph, where she maintains that, in the opinion of Strauss, the *Republic* teaches justice to be a product, not of nature, but of art or convention. She bases this sentence in turn on three pages which she cites in her Note 117. The first two are in Strauss's chapter on the *Republic*, and the third is in *Natural Right and History*. On the first of the three pages

one can indeed find the idea that “justice arose” out of laws made by the majority; i.e., out of convention (*CM*, p. 87). Strauss, however, attributes the idea not to Socrates but to Glaucon, who expresses it as part of a case which he makes against justice in order to persuade Socrates to make a strong case for it.

The only reference to justice on the second page occurs in a discussion of the rulers of the best city. For them, Strauss says, justice “as dedication to the common good is neither art nor *eros*; it does not appear to be choiceworthy for its own sake” (*CM*, p. 102). Why it is not art I do not know. It is not *eros* presumably because the love of the rulers for the city is friendly (*philia*), not erotic (*eros*). It does not seem choiceworthy for its own sake presumably because the rulers identify (correctly, we may assume) the good of the city with their own good (412d). Whatever else this obscure passage means, it does not mean that in Strauss’s view Socrates regards justice as conventional rather than natural.

The page in *Natural Right and History* is part of a discussion of what Strauss calls “conventionalism,” which does indeed think justice to be a product of convention, not nature (*NRH*, p. 106). But this idea is not one which conventionalism shares with Strauss’s Socrates, as Professor Drury herself comes very close to saying elsewhere.¹⁵ So much then for the ultimate bases of her denial of the fact that in Strauss’s mind Socrates regards justice as the natural order of the soul. Strauss affirms this fact both in his article “On Natural Law” (*SPPP*, p. 138) and elsewhere in *Natural Right and History* (p. 127).

Professor Drury’s charge that Strauss deems “the only natural good” to be one’s own benefit can be dealt with quite briefly, for it rests on the citation of a single page. On that page occurs this sentence: “Glaucon thus rejoins Thrasymachus in holding that the good life is the tyrannical life, the exploitation, more or less concealed, of society or convention for one’s own benefit alone, i.e. for the only natural good” (*CM*, p. 88). But Strauss here is not expressing the controverted idea as his own; he is ascribing it to Glaucon and Thrasymachus. We thus conclude our analysis of the extended quotation of Professor Drury and of what she says in it about three of the four “most shocking” views which she attributes to Strauss in her discussion of his chapter on the *Republic*. We may now proceed to the fourth view, which is that philosophy understood as a kind of *eros*, and not justice, is choiceworthy for its own sake.

Professor Drury plainly ascribes this view to Strauss when she writes of “the philosopher” with whom she holds Strauss to identify, “The only thing he considers choiceworthy for its own sake is the philosophic *eros* or the pleasures of contemplation, friendship and conversation” (Drury, p. 81). If philosophy is the only thing choiceworthy for its own sake, justice cannot be such a thing. In this context she accuses Strauss of hedonism. She makes an explicit charge of hedonism on the basis of a questionable interpretation of several pages in Strauss’s *On Tyranny*. But an implicit charge of hedonism is contained in her assertion that Strauss considers philosophy as *eros* to be the only end in itself.

In support of this assertion she cites two pages where Strauss does indeed speak of philosophy as eros. But he speaks of philosophic eros as “quest for knowledge of the idea of the good” (*CM*, p. 112). Such a quest cannot be equated with what Voegelinian Platonists call “the erotic longing for God,” but neither is it the same as “contemplation, friendship and conversation.” Moreover, while Strauss goes on to speak of the idea of the good as “higher than the idea of justice” (*CM*, p. 112), this fact does not mean that he denies the status of justice as an end in itself.

Later Professor Drury maintains that for Strauss there is such a thing as “philosophical justice” (pp. 84–85). Such justice is not, however, the natural order of the soul. “Philosophical justice is indistinguishable from the hedonistic or erotic life of the philosopher” (p. 85). She goes on to repeat her charge that for Strauss philosophy (“or philosophical justice”) is the only good choiceworthy for its own sake (p. 85). As evidence for these assertions she cites several more pages, not only in Strauss’s chapter on the *Republic* but also in *On Tyranny* and Strauss’s *The Argument and the Action of Plato’s Laws*; but the sources fail to support her case. So as not to tax the patience of the reader and exceed the bounds of an article, I shall not examine each citation in writing, as I have generally done up until now; I shall deal with only the passage that is most germane, even though it is not in the work with which we are at the moment primarily concerned, the chapter on the *Republic*.

In *On Tyranny* Strauss (1) attributes to Socrates the idea that wisdom is the highest good, (2) identifies wisdom with “the philosopher,” and (3) refers to “the specific pleasures of the wise, such as, for example, friendly discussion” (*OT*, pp. 87–88). But even if we accept Professor Drury’s assumption that Strauss’s Socrates speaks for Strauss, this passage fails to prove that Strauss has a hedonistic conception of philosophy (pleasure can be a byproduct of it rather than its essence) or that he considers pleasure to be the highest good (wisdom is obviously not the same as pleasure). If we assume that Strauss’s Socrates speaks for Strauss, the passage does prove that Strauss regards philosophy *as wisdom* more highly than justice, even justice as the natural order of the soul, but this proposition is quite uncontroversial. For justice can still be an end in itself without being the highest good; i.e., wisdom and justice can both be ends in themselves, even though wisdom ranks higher.

In another work with which we are not at the moment primarily concerned, *Natural Right and History*, Strauss clearly rejects hedonism. He says of “classic natural right,” with which he plainly identifies, that it rejects “conventionalism” and with it the identification of the good with the pleasant. He writes, “The thesis of the classics is that the good is essentially different from the pleasant, that the good is more fundamental than the pleasant” (*NRH*, p. 126). We may therefore conclude not only that Professor Drury fails to show that Strauss holds philosophy as a kind of eros, and not justice, to be choiceworthy for its own sake, but also that independent evidence exists against Strauss’s holding this view.

Before we leave the chapter on the *Republic*, an attempt should be made to dispel possible confusion arising from the facts that the *Republic* speaks of two kinds of justice and that Strauss does not consider participation in the second kind to be choiceworthy for its own sake. It is true that the *Republic* teaches justice to be the natural order of the soul. More particularly, it teaches that the soul is just when each of its three parts performs its function well. But it also teaches that there is a parallel between the soul and the city, so that the city is just when each of its three classes performs well the function which it is best suited to perform (441d. Cf. *CM*, pp. 108–9). As a result, everybody makes his proper contribution to the common good.

Strauss repeatedly questions (1) the parallel (because it is based on an “abstraction from *eros*”) (*CM*, pp. 109, 111, 138) and, more importantly, (2) the status of participation in the second kind of justice as choiceworthy for its own sake from the standpoint of the individual faced with the question of whether to do his duty to his city.¹⁶ Moreover, Strauss repeats his questionings on the last page of the chapter, where they are especially obvious. I point all this out in order to prevent the reader from being surprised by what Strauss in fact does say.

Turning to Professor Drury’s critique of *Natural Right and History*, we find that she makes two major charges there. The first is that Strauss identifies with a version of “classic natural right” which knows no rules of morality for guiding governmental officials; it knows only a hierarchy of ends to be wisely pursued, any one of which may be the chief object of pursuit owing to the circumstances of the situation at hand (Drury, pp. 98–103, esp. p. 101; cf. *NRH*, pp. 157–63). Although she quotes Strauss as saying that “there are no valid rules of action” when in fact he says that “there are no *universally* valid rules of action” (Drury p. 101; *NRH*, p. 162, emphasis added), I think the charge to be largely true. I also think this version of “classic natural right” to be mistaken, for I identify with the version which does know universally valid rules, Thomistic natural law. But I do not think Strauss’s version to be indefensible or outrageous, especially since he tempers it in ways which Professor Drury overlooks. He implies universal rules when he writes:

Natural right must be mutable in order to be able to cope with the inventiveness of wickedness. (*NRH*, p. 161)

The true statesman in the Aristotelian sense . . . takes his bearings by the normal situation and by what is normally right, and he reluctantly deviates from what is normally right only in order to save the cause of justice and humanity itself. (*NRH*, p. 162)

Consequently, I do not think Professor Drury’s first major charge to be very serious.

Her second major charge, however, is quite serious. It is that Strauss radi-

cally deprecates morality, however conceived. Moreover, she bases this charge in part on the two most problematic passages in *Natural Right and History*. If the book can survive this charge, therefore, it can survive anything. If we assume that the book and the chapter on the *Republic* are Strauss's pedagogically most significant works, and thus the only works of his that many students are likely to read, a defense of the book ought to be based primarily on these two works. But first let us examine the charge. It is contained in two paragraphs, which I shall quote complete with superscript numbers:

For Strauss, moral virtue stands in relation to intellectual virtue as the city stands in relation to the philosopher, one is a means, the other the end⁶¹. . . . Moral virtue is therefore not a noble way of life desirable for its own sake. . . .

Strauss's view implies a radical deprecation of morality.⁶² In the course of his exchange with Jacob Klein, Strauss admits that in his scheme of things morality does not enjoy a particularly high status.⁶³ Indeed, for Strauss, as for his Aristotle, "intellectual perfection" is not only "higher in dignity" than moral perfection, it "does not require moral virtue."⁶⁴ This means that intellectual excellence can be attained by one who does not bother with morality or the "vulgar virtue."⁶⁵ Strauss's contempt for the morally virtuous man takes on extreme proportions when he describes the just or moral man who is not also a philosopher as a "mutilated human being!"⁶⁶ (Drury, p. 105)

Before we examine the evidence that Professor Drury musters to support these assertions, let us look at some counter evidence. In the chapter on the *Republic*, Strauss repeatedly says that "the philosopher," whom he presumably considers to possess "intellectual perfection," is a just man—indeed, the only just man (*CM*, pp. 115, 127, 135). We may assume him to mean that the philosopher possesses the first kind of justice, so that his reason is in control of his spiritedness and appetite, making him a moral person. Thus, whatever their precise relationship, "intellectual perfection" and morality go together.

As for *Natural Right and History*, Strauss says in it that "classic natural right," with which our analysis has shown him to identify, considers man to be "so constituted that he cannot achieve the perfection of his nature without the coercion of his 'lower impulses.'" This language is Professor Drury's own paraphrase (Drury, p. 93). As evidence she might have quoted, but did not quote, these statements from Strauss's elucidation of the tenets of "classic natural right": "The good life is . . . the life that flows from a well-ordered or healthy soul" (*NRH*, p. 127), which is "incomparably the most admirable human phenomenon" (p. 128); and the perfection of man's nature "includes the social virtue par excellence, justice" (p. 129).

Finally, let us look at a sentence from a third work, Strauss's *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*: "The philosopher is the man who dedicates his life to the quest for knowledge of the good, of the idea of the good; what we would call moral virtue is only the condition or by-product of that quest" (p. 172). While Strauss here clearly ranks philosophy higher than morality, he

nonetheless describes philosophy as a quest for knowledge *of the good*; and he sees philosophy and morality as going together, not necessarily in a means-end relationship (morality may be a by-product of philosophy). The sentence thus puts Strauss's conception of the relationship between philosophy and morality into a perspective somewhat different from that afforded by Professor Drury.

Of the pages that she cites in support of her assertions, I have examined all and found most to be more or less beside the point. The cited pages, however, contain two passages that are potentially quite devastating. Again to stay within the bounds of an article, I shall deal with only these two passages, both of which are in *Natural Right and History*, and a third in whose light they should be seen. In her Notes 61, 65, and 66, Professor Drury cites inter alia a page where this passage appears:

If striving for knowledge of the eternal truth is the ultimate end of man, justice and moral virtue in general can be fully legitimated only by the fact that they are required for the sake of that ultimate end or that they are conditions of the philosophic life. From this point of view the man who is merely just or moral without being a philosopher appears as a mutilated human being. . . . It . . . becomes a question whether . . . what Aristotle calls moral virtue is not, in fact, merely political or vulgar virtue. (*NRH*, p. 151)

The following passage occurs on the pages cited in Professor Drury's Note 64:

The natural law which is knowable to the unassisted human mind and which prescribes chiefly actions in the strict sense is related to, or founded upon, the natural end of man; that end is twofold: moral perfection and intellectual perfection; intellectual perfection is higher in dignity than moral perfection; but intellectual perfection or wisdom, as unassisted human reason knows it, does not require moral virtue.¹⁷

In the following analysis these two passages will be referred to as "the first passage" and "the second passage," respectively.

Let us begin by reading the first passage very carefully and recognizing that in it Strauss says that "moral virtue in general can be *fully* legitimated" (emphasis added) only as a means to the end of philosophy: it can thus be partially legitimated as choiceworthy for its own sake. Consequently, Professor Drury's first paragraph stands largely refuted. In the second passage Strauss says that "moral perfection" and "intellectual perfection" are both components of the natural end of man: whatever their relationship may be in other respects, therefore, in one respect they are equal. Here we find some evidence against the radical deprecation of morality to which Professor Drury refers in her second paragraph.

Any further exegesis of the two passages must take place in the light of a

third passage, which occurs in Strauss's chapter on Aristotle's *Politics* in *The City and Man*. I was led to the passage by another of Professor Drury's citations, but it works against rather than for her case. It reads:

In order to grasp the ground of Aristotle's procedure, one must start from the facts that according to him the highest end of man by nature is theoretical understanding or philosophy and this perfection does not require moral virtue as moral virtue, *i.e.* just and noble deeds as choiceworthy for their own sake. It goes without saying that man's highest end cannot be achieved without actions resembling moral actions proper, but the actions in question are intended by the philosopher as mere means toward his end. . . . For Plato, what Aristotle calls moral virtue is a kind of halfway house between political or vulgar virtue which is in the service of bodily well-being (of self-preservation or peace) and genuine virtue which, to say the least, animates only the philosophers as philosophers.¹⁸

Here Strauss uses the term "moral virtue" in a restricted sense: he uses it to refer to just and noble deeds that are choiceworthy for their own sake. Again contrary to Professor Drury's first paragraph, he does not deny that "moral virtue" is choiceworthy for its own sake; it is so by definition. What he denies is that philosophy requires "moral virtue" as such. He goes on to say that philosophy depends on what for practical purposes is the same as "moral virtue"; *i.e.*, just and noble deeds, but just and noble deeds committed, not as ends in themselves, but as means to philosophy.

In the light of this fact three changes occur: (1) the second passage becomes quite innocent, (2) Professor Drury becomes misleading when she says in her second paragraph that for Strauss "intellectual perfection" does not require "moral virtue," and (3) she becomes downright wrong when she says in the next sentence that for Strauss "intellectual excellence can be attained by one who does not bother with morality." As for her attribution to Strauss in the same sentence of an equation of morality with "vulgar virtue," it should be clear from both the first and the third passage that Strauss regards "vulgar virtue" as but one kind of morality, and as a not very vulgar kind at that. Whether "moral virtue" is reducible to "vulgar virtue," as Strauss suggests it may be in the first passage, is indeed questionable, but the suggestion is no grave cause for offense.

We have yet to deal with three of Professor Drury's assertions, all in her second paragraph—her summary assertion that "Strauss's view implies a radical deprecation of morality," her assertion that Strauss admits to not regarding morality particularly highly, and her assertion that he portrays the moral but unphilosophical man as a "mutilated human being." In view, not only of all that has just been said about the quality of her evidence, but also of some counter evidence, the summary allegation cannot stand, and Strauss's admission is not very important.¹⁹ His use in the first passage of the term "mutilated human being" in the way which Professor Drury describes is indeed unfortu-

nate, but it is insufficient cause for keeping *Natural Right and History* out of the hands of impressionable undergraduates. It is true that to save the book I have had to rely heavily on a passage from Strauss's pedagogically rather insignificant chapter on Aristotle's *Politics*, but teachers could easily bring the passage into classroom discussions of *Natural Right and History*.

I thus conclude that both *Natural Right and History* and Strauss's chapter on the *Republic* should be incorporated into a liberal education intended to endow a gentlemanly elite with the wherewithal to initiate a spiritual renaissance in this country. In reaching this conclusion I have dealt rather severely with Professor Drury's book, but I hope to have dealt more fairly with it than she has dealt with Strauss's work. It should be added that one cannot help learning from somebody who has read as extensively as she in the works of Strauss and his students, and that she has an engaging style.

I have said nothing about her belief that Strauss was an esoteric writer, even though she elaborates on it at great length,²⁰ because I am not convinced that it is true. Strauss wrote with an economy of expression rather than expanding on points at length; he was not so careful as he should have been to distinguish clearly between his own views and those of the participants in dialogues which he was analyzing; he did not always say everything that was on his mind; his prose is at times obscure; he was an elitist; and he did not believe in religion or identify with conventional morality. But not even all this taken together adds up to a state of things in which he said one thing to a small group of philosophical initiates and something else to gentlemen and any members of the common people who might happen upon his work.

Although he despaired, as I do not, of reconciling reason and revelation, he made a powerful case not just for revelation but for a literal interpretation of it.²¹ Moreover, the version of "classic natural right" with which he identified is not so vacuous as Professor Drury would have us believe, and he did not consider himself above morality. In short, he is not a dangerous writer, though one might regret his failure to temper his elitism by urging upon elites a religiously grounded humility.

NOTES

1. The following abbreviations will be used in citing books written or edited by Strauss:

CM: Leo Strauss. *The City and Man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

HPP: Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, eds. *History of Political Philosophy*. 3d ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

IPP: *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, edited by Hilail Gildin. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989. This book is an enlarged version of *Political Philosophy: Six Essays by Leo Strauss*, edited by Hilail Gildin. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975. The book is mainly a collection of previously published articles and chapters by Strauss. It will be cited in parentheses after the citation of the original work.

LAM: Leo Strauss. *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989.

NRH: Leo Strauss. *Natural Right and History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953.

OT: Leo Strauss. *On Tyranny*. Revised and enlarged edition. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968.

SPPP: Leo Strauss. *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

WIPP: Leo Strauss. *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Strauss's views on liberal education are contained in *LAM*, Chapters 1 and 2 (*IPP*, pp. 311–45). For a detailed analysis of these writings, see Walter Nicgorski, "Leo Strauss and Liberal Education," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy*, 13, No. 2 (May 1985), 233–50.

2. Strauss considers these systems or variations thereon in *LAM*, pp. 12, 15, 18 (*IPP*, pp. 326, 330, 335–36).

3. "On the Education of a Democratic Elite," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 18, No. 1 (Winter 1979), 32–37.

4. I have argued this point most recently in "Western Civilization in the Light of the Philosophy of History," *Modern Age*, 33, No. 3 (Fall 1990), 249–58. I developed the point fully for the first time in "Eric Voegelin, the Christian Faith, and the American University," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 16, No. 2 (Spring 1977), 130–35. On how Strauss's followers view "the crisis of liberal democracy," see Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Soffer, eds., *The Crisis of Liberal Democracy: A Straussian Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

5. See the conclusions of my "Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Political Thought: A Review Article," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy*, 6, No. 1 (Fall 1976), 65–77; "Progressivism and Political Science: The Case of Charles E. Merriam," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy*, 8, No. 3 (May 1980), 174–87; and "On the Education of a Democratic Elite."

6. For a comparison of Strauss's and Voegelin's views on modernity, see my "Strauss and Voegelin on Machiavelli and Modernity," *Modern Age*, 31, Nos. 3–4 (Summer–Fall 1987), 261–66. Simon's book also contains a good discussion of the nature and functions of authority. A review of the book by Strauss is reprinted in *WIPP*, pp. 306–11. See also my "Realism Reconsidered: Morgenthau, Kennan, Niebuhr, and Voegelin," *The Cresset*, 50, No. 2 (December 1986), 17–21. Other books based on Walgreen lectures are Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, John H. Hallowell's *The Moral Foundation of Democracy*, and Clinton Rossiter's *The American Presidency*. Kurt Riezler, whom Strauss eulogizes in *WIPP*, Chapter 10, also gave a series of Walgreen lectures, published as "Political Decisions in Modern Society," *Ethics*, 64, No. 2, Part II (January 1954), 1–55.

7. For an example of such an attempt, see my "John Stuart Mill and Pornography," *The Cresset*, 49, No. 5 (March 1986), 24–25.

8. Shadia B. Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), pp. 82, 248. Although Stephen Holmes describes this book as a "marvellously clear overview," I hope to show that its clarity was purchased at a great price in accuracy. See his "Truths for Philosophers Alone?" *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4,522 (December 1–7, 1989), 1319.

9. Originally published in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* in 1968, the article is reprinted in *SPPP*, Chapter 6.

10. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, Vol. 2, *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), p. 275.

11. *CM*, p. 109. A shorter version of Strauss's chapter on Plato's *Republic* can be found in the chapter on Plato which Strauss wrote for *HPP* (*IPP*, pp. 167–245).

12. It should be pointed out, however, that in the only actual use of the word *refuted* on the five pages to which Professor Drury refers in her Note 114 Strauss speaks of Thrasymachus as being refuted, rather than as not refuted, at one point in the *Republic* (*CM*, p. 83). This fact, while relatively unimportant in itself, is indicative of the care with which Professor Drury quotes Strauss.

13. *CM*, p. 83. Emphasis added. Cf. what Strauss says later (*CM*, p. 129): "By the end of the seventh book justice has come to sight fully. Socrates has performed the duty laid upon him by

Glaucon and Adeimantus to show that justice is choiceworthy for its own sake, regardless of its consequences, and therefore that it is unqualifiedly preferable to injustice.”

14. *CM*, p. 74. This passage patently contradicts Professor Drury’s assertion later in her book, with reference to her Chapter 4, which we are now examining, that for Strauss “the ‘Just Speech’ cannot be required to give a rational account of itself without being destroyed by the ‘Unjust Speech’ ” (Drury, p. 180).

15. Drury, p. 93; note the last paragraph on “classic natural right,” which Professor Drury describes as “Socratic” (p. 90).

16. *CM*, pp. 128, 138; see also *CM*, p. 102. Just as the first kind of justice is not the same as what Professor Drury calls “philosophical justice,” so the second kind, contrary to what one might expect, is not the same as what she calls “political justice.” The concepts of philosophical and political justice are the creations, not of Strauss in his chapter on the *Republic* (as Professor Drury would have us believe), but mainly of Professor Drury herself. See Drury, pp. 80, 84–85; but also see *OT*, p. 94.

17. *NRH*, pp. 163–64. Professor Drury quotes the last five words of this passage (“does not require moral virtue”) three times in her conclusion (pp. 198, 200, 201). It is, therefore, all the more important that the meaning of the words be explained.

18. *CM*, pp. 26–27. On the distinction between “vulgar virtue” and genuine virtue, see also *NRH*, p. 121.

19. The admission occurs in “A Giving of Accounts: Jacob Klein and Leo Strauss,” an exchange published in *The College of St. John’s College, Annapolis, MD*, 22, No. 1 (April 1970), 4, cited in Professor Drury’s Note 63. This exchange adds little or nothing to what we already know from the passages just examined. The key passage in the exchange is this statement by Strauss: “That the philosophic life, especially as Plato and Aristotle understood it, is not possible without self-control and a few other virtues almost goes without saying. If a man is habitually drunk, and so on, how can he think? But the question is, if these virtues are understood only as subservient to philosophy and for its sake, then that is no longer a moral understanding of the virtues.”

20. Drury, Preface and Chapters 1, 2, and 10, especially p. 191. Professor Drury also thinks that Strauss interprets Plato as an esoteric writer. She writes, “. . . Strauss believes that Plato uses Thrasymachus as his mouthpiece” (p. 26). I hope that the foregoing study disproves this assertion.

21. Leo Strauss, “The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy,” *The Independent Journal of Philosophy*, 3 (1979), 116–18 (*IPP*, pp. 305–10). Cf. *SPPP*, p. 151.