

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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# Leo Strauss and Classical Political Philosophy

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Leo Strauss was born in Germany in 1899 and died in Annapolis in 1973. From 1969 until his death, he was a scholar-in-residence at St. John's, and he was, I believe, the only man ever to hold this position at the college. Despite our emphasis on teaching, as distinct from scholarly research, we made an exception to include Strauss on our faculty—and rightly so, since his scholarship was unusually congenial to our traditions at the college. As he wrote in an essay entitled “Liberal Education and Responsibility,” “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. . . . If I am not mistaken, this is the reason why liberal education is now becoming almost synonymous with the reading in common of the Great Books. No better beginning could have been made.”<sup>1</sup> Strauss’ remark about specializing in “the most weighty matters” or even in “the one thing needful” shows that he was as critical of the fragmentariness of American education as were the founders of our program. In a lecture in the 1950's Strauss spoke of contemporary specialization as “knowing more and more about less and less; the practical impossibility of concentration upon the very few essential things upon which man's wholeness entirely depends”; and he added that this specialization tends to be “compensated by sham universality, by the stimulation of all kinds of interests and curiosities without true passion; the danger of universal philistinism and creeping conformism.”<sup>2</sup> Strauss saw this tendency to an ever more specialized science, and its accompaniment, the growth of an ever more unscientific philosophy, “in which mere wishes and prejudices have usurped the place of reason,” as signs of a grave crisis within Western civilization. Now there have, to be sure, been many critics of excessive specialization and its effects upon contemporary life, though few, perhaps, with Strauss’ severity or sense of urgency. But what makes him stand apart is his unequivocal support of Great Books education as *the* counterweight to these evils. In this respect he, along with his students, is almost alone among American educators not directly connected to our program or to one of the few kindred programs at other colleges.

Strauss could not have thought so highly of Great Books education, or at

This paper was originally delivered, in a slightly different form, as a lecture at St. John's College, Santa Fe, on January 26, 1990.

least not reasonably so, if he had not freed himself, as we as a college have also tried to do, from the prevailing contemporary approach to these books. That approach, historicism, is to study the books as reflections of their particular historical contexts, or else to resign oneself to seeing them, as we are alleged to see everything else, through the lens of contemporary prejudice. Strauss argued vigorously against this historical approach to interpretation, and his polemic against it is among the most immediately accessible aspects of his work. Rather than studying the Great Books as expressions of the spirit of the times in which they were written, or in other words as matter for a decent burial, and rather than studying them to see how they look to the merely contemporary mind, Strauss took seriously the bold claim that at least some of the books make on their own behalf, namely the claim, to present the final and comprehensive truth about their subjects. And although Strauss did not accept any book as an unquestioned authority, the goal of his life's work was the same as the goal of many of our program authors, to discover the truth about the whole, or in other words to discover the one comprehensive truth about God, the world, and man.

In saying these things about Strauss, I am portraying him as a philosopher, which indeed he was. But the primary field of his work was not philosophy simply, but more narrowly *political* philosophy, or rather the *history* of political philosophy. And this self-limitation on his part was not merely for the sake of academic respectability within the American university system, though that concern may have played a minor role. For Strauss had an extremely high regard for political philosophy, as we can see clearly from the following remark in *The City and Man*: "In its original form political philosophy broadly understood is the core of philosophy or rather 'the first philosophy.'" This is, of course, a difficult remark, and I will have to return to it later, but for now let me leave it as a mere assertion on Strauss' part regarding the key importance of political philosophy within philosophy as a whole. As for Strauss' choice to concentrate on the *history* of political philosophy, rather than trying to elaborate a political philosophy of his own, there are several reasons for this, but the main one, I believe, was his conviction that the truth about the subject had already been discovered. Though it was not his way to stress this fact in his writings, he did indicate clearly enough that he thought *classical* political philosophy, which means above all the political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, was true. Accordingly, the most important purpose of his *historical* writings was to elucidate this truth, or to revitalize classical political philosophy, in a manner accessible to contemporary students, but in full accordance with the self-understanding of the classical authors themselves.

Now Strauss was not the first philosopher to have tried to restore the thought of Plato and Aristotle as the true and comprehensive teaching. This had also been the aim of the medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers, beginning with Alfarabi in the tenth century and continuing until the disappearance of philoso-

phy from the Islamic and Jewish worlds several centuries later. Moreover, these medieval philosophers were also aware of the centrality of political philosophy for Plato and Aristotle. Alfarabi's summary of the philosophy of Plato, for instance, leads up to an account of the perfect city of the *Republic* and to a concluding discussion of how the cities of Plato's time might gradually have been converted to the way of life of the perfect city. And in his summary of the philosophy of Aristotle, Alfarabi writes that according to Aristotle some of the sciences that man desires "are firmer and some shakier than others. However," he continues, still speaking for Aristotle, "once [man] attains certainty about what he was investigating, this is the perfect science of what he wants to know and the end beyond which he can hope for no better assurance and reliability. This, then, is man's situation with regard to the *practical* sciences."<sup>4</sup> The importance of classical political philosophy for the medieval Islamic philosophers themselves can be seen from the fact that Alfarabi presented two of his own most important statements about God and the universe in works that also treat politics, and whose titles are *The Political Regimes* and *The Principles of the Opinions of the Citizens of the Virtuous City*. Or, to take another example, the Islamic philosopher Avicenna wrote in a work called *On the Division of the Rational Sciences* that "the treatment of prophecy . . . is contained in the books of [Plato and Aristotle] about the *Laws*."<sup>5</sup> Political philosophy, then, was of central importance to these medieval philosophers, both in their interpretations of the classics and in their own thought. But in part, perhaps, because the rise of modern science and modern secularism has made the physics and the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle seem largely incredible to so many of us today, Strauss limited himself—at least in his published work—to their political philosophy, and to political philosophy more generally, to a degree that distinguishes him from his medieval predecessors.

Let me turn now to Strauss' account of classical political philosophy. The guiding theme of this philosophy was and is the question of the best political order. And since the classics held that what most determines the character of political life is not the laws, but the class of human beings that makes the laws and that rules in broad daylight, the question of the best political order boils down to the question of what class should rule. Should it be the rich, the well-born, the common people, the priests, or some other class or some mixture of classes? Now this question, which must be treated as a settled one if society is to be stable, nevertheless comes to the surface of political life whenever the authority of the ruling class is challenged, as we recently saw happening, for instance, within the Communist world, or as we see in Algeria and South Africa, among other places, today. And whenever this question does come to the surface, it becomes obvious to all concerned, not just to the philosophers, that it is *the* fundamental political question. In other words, the guiding question of classical political philosophy emerges directly from political life itself. It is a question that concerns men and women as *citizens*, not as beings who look at

political life as spectators or from outside. Strauss always emphasized the importance of this direct connection between the guiding question of classical political philosophy and the actual concerns of prephilosophic political life. Admittedly, we are concerned as citizens with the best regime here and now, or the best regime *for us*, rather than the best regime simply, which is the theme of political philosophy. But the arguments we make in political controversy necessarily express themselves in universal terms. As Strauss puts it, "a man who defends democracy in Athens cannot help using arguments in favor of democracy as such."<sup>6</sup> Now in the foreground of the political struggle, certainly within the Greek world, but also elsewhere, was the controversy between the rich and the poor, or between the oligarchs and the democrats. The classical political philosophers held, however, that neither of these two parties could fully justify its claim to rule, but that the highest title to rule was based on human excellence or virtue. And in support of this view, the philosophers noted that the oligarchs and the democrats themselves *claimed* to be virtuous or good men, and also that they looked for exceptional virtue among their generals, judges, and other leaders.

Plato and Aristotle agreed, then, that aristocracy, or rule of the best, was in principle the best political order. But this initial answer leads to a number of further questions. For one thing, the circumstances that would allow for a genuine aristocracy are extremely rare, if not impossible, and the attempt to establish such an aristocracy in the absence of these circumstances could easily lead to tyranny. Plato well knew, for instance, of the reign of terror in Athens under the rule of the Thirty. These men claimed to be restoring ancient virtue, but in fact they ended up making the discredited democracy, which had led Athens into the ruinous Peloponnesian War, seem like "the golden age." Accordingly, the classical political philosophers had to pay attention not only to the question of the best regime simply, but to the question of the best practicable regime in the various imperfect circumstances in which men live. But a still more important question concerns the very notion of virtue or excellence itself. Virtuous or good men were known, from political life, as men who "are willing, and able, to prefer the common interest to their private interest and to the objects of their passions" or who do what is noble and right "because it is noble and right and for no ulterior reason."<sup>7</sup> Yet it was recognized within political life that the common good could sometimes be better secured by men of dubious character. The Athenian Nicias, for example, whom Thucydides praises so highly for his dedication to virtue as understood by law, was a disaster as a general, whereas Themistocles, a man of questionable character, had been the savior of Athens and of Greece in the Persian War. As a result of these and similar difficulties, difficulties that arise directly within political life itself, the political philosophers were compelled to ask the Socratic question "What is virtue?" What, in other words, *is* the virtue that is at least implicitly admitted by everyone to be the highest title to rule?

The Socratic question “What is virtue?” is not merely a political question in the narrow sense, but what we would call a moral or ethical one as well. The reason for this emerges when we consider the fact just mentioned, that virtuous men are understood as those who, among other things, do what is noble and right *for its own sake*. For this implies that virtue is not merely a means to political ends, even to such noble ends as the community’s survival or its freedom. However useful it may be in the service of such political ends, it is more truly understood as an end in itself, and indeed the highest end. The question “What is virtue?” transcends the narrowly political for the following reason as well. In exhorting ourselves and one another to *be* virtuous, or to resist the path of easy pleasure, we tell ourselves and one another that virtue is *good* for us, or that it is the core of our true happiness. In other words, we assume that the highest qualities in the political sphere are also those that perfect us, or that satisfy our deepest needs, as individuals. In keeping with all this, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, which outlines the virtues of the individual, rather than discussing the best political order, and whose primary theme is happiness, rather than virtue, is the beginning of what he calls his “political science.”

The classical inquiry into virtue could not, however, rest with the conclusion that virtue is something good for its own sake or that it is the core of our true happiness. For even if these conclusions are true, they do not tell us precisely what virtue and true happiness are. Moreover, although virtue is not *merely* a means to serve the community—and so a politically effective leader is not necessarily virtuous—it is still understood as being directed toward the community’s good. Why this should be so, however, if virtue, or the happiness of being virtuous, is itself the highest end, is a difficulty. And even apart from that, the directedness of virtue toward the common good means that one cannot adequately know what virtue is without knowing that good. But what is the common good? This question is another sign that the inquiry into virtue must be continued.

The culmination of Strauss’ account of the classical response to the question “What is virtue?” is included in his interpretation of the *Republic*. The theme of the *Republic* is the peculiarly important and, in a sense, comprehensive virtue of justice. In his interpretation Strauss notes that Cephalus’ initial assumption about justice, namely that it consists in truthfulness and in restoring what one has taken or received from someone, presupposes that what people already possess is justly theirs, or more generally that the law has rightly determined what everyone is entitled to. But “Socrates shows with ease,” in Strauss’ words, “that Cephalus’ view of justice is untenable: a man who has taken or received a weapon from a sane man would act unjustly if he returned it to him when he asked for it after he had become insane; in the same way one would act unjustly by being resolved to say nothing but the truth to a madman.”<sup>8</sup> This Socratic conclusion rests on the premise, which is shared by Cephalus, that justice is something good, something good for all concerned. Since it is obvi-

ously not good for a madman to be given a weapon, justice cannot demand, or even permit, that we return one to him. But Socrates' argument also implies the more important conclusion that the law does not adequately settle the question of what justice is. For though some codes of law might include certain exceptions to the general rule that one must always return what one has taken or received, no law can adequately assign to everyone what is good and only what is good for him in all circumstances. Only wisdom, as distinguished from law, can fulfill that function, and this fact has enormous consequences. Let me quote Strauss at length on this point:

Not all men make good or wise use of what belongs to them, of their property. If we judge very strictly, we might be driven to say that very few people make a wise use of their property. If justice is to be good or salutary, one might be compelled to demand that everyone own only what is "fitting" for him, . . . what is good for him and for as long as it is good for him. We might be compelled to demand the abolition of private property or the introduction of communism. To the extent to which there is a connection between private property and the family, one would even be compelled to demand in addition the abolition of the family or the introduction of absolute communism, *i.e.* of communism regarding property, women, and children. Above all, very few people will be able to determine exactly what things and what amount of things are good for each individual, or at any rate for each individual who counts, to use; only men of exceptional wisdom are able to do this. We shall then be compelled to demand that society be ruled by simply wise men, by philosophers in the strict sense wielding absolute power. Socrates' refutation of Cephalus' view of justice contains then the proof of the necessity of absolute communism as well as of the absolute rule of philosophers.<sup>9</sup>

Socrates' refutation of Cephalus further implies that the most virtuous human beings, those who most truly deserve to rule, are the philosophers. Now as Strauss notes, this argument disregards a number of most relevant things, but it contains at its core the truth that no society other than one ruled by philosopher-kings asks its citizens to adhere to the strictest standards of justice. Indeed, even in the city where the philosophers rule—assuming, for the sake of argument, that it can actually exist—there are serious and unavoidable imperfections in what it holds to be justice. To take the most glaring example, this city asks its citizens to accept a dogma that Socrates himself speaks of as a "noble lie," the lie, namely, that its original citizens were all born from the earth, or from the motherland, and that its political hierarchy is supported by a god who, among other things, mixed three different metals into the souls of the three different classes of human beings. And the philosopher-kings themselves, insofar as they are engaged in ruling, must *act* at any rate as if they accepted this lie. Their perception of the truth about justice must be somewhat dimmed, the justice of their souls, in a sense, must be somewhat tainted, for them to act politically. The *Republic* teaches, moreover, that when the philosophers are engaged in philosophizing, they find such happiness in this activity that they

believe they are already far away in the “Isles of the Blessed.” As a result, it is only under compulsion that they are willing to rule. Though their title to rule seemed at first to come from a superior knowledge of how to assign to each citizen what is good for him, it turns out that what they know about political life, from their experience as philosophers, is above all its insufficiency.

Plato’s inquiry into justice leads, then, to the *paradoxical* conclusion that the truly virtuous or best life is not the political life at all, but rather the life devoted to contemplation, or philosophy. And Aristotle as well, if by a somewhat different route, comes to this same conclusion. The crucial result, and in a sense the *only* result, of classical political philosophy is the *knowledge* that political life *cannot* attain the justice at which it aims, but that it ultimately points toward a perfection attainable only by the individual who philosophizes. To quote Strauss, “philosophy—not as a teaching or as a body of knowledge, but as a way of life—offers, as it were, the solution to the problem that keeps political life in motion.”<sup>10</sup> And in the light of this solution, political life necessarily appears as life in a cave, a cave almost totally cut off from the light of the sun.

Now the classics knew that philosophy could not be without a political effect, and hence a political responsibility, and so they sought to make their effect a salutary one, not only for their students, but also for the communities in which they lived. In the language of the *Republic*, the classical political philosophers understood the compulsion to return to the cave. But they were extremely wary of any widespread popularization of philosophy, which they saw as a threat to both philosophy and society. Despite, or rather because of, the radicalness of their ultimate views, the classics were in general political conservatives. They were concerned that the habit of changing even bad laws would tend to undermine the merely habitual respect for law which they saw as a necessity for decent political life, and for a political life in particular that could afford to tolerate philosophy.

For a better understanding of what Strauss saw as the specific character of classical political philosophy, let me now turn briefly to his discussion of modern political philosophy, which originated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe in explicit opposition to the whole classical tradition. For my present purposes, I shall be stressing what Strauss saw as weaknesses in modern political philosophy. But let me say at the outset that he had a very great respect for it, as he did for all genuine philosophy, and that he studied it with great care and willingness to learn throughout his life.

Modern political philosophy, according to Strauss, can be contrasted with the classical in two different but related respects. For one thing, it no longer begins so directly with the primary questions that arise within political life itself, and secondly, it no longer culminates in praise of the philosophic, as opposed to the political, way of life. As for the first of these two points, the *initial* questions of modern political philosophy are not those that are “first for

us” as citizens, but rather questions that can arise only for someone who is already more or less detached from the perspective of citizenship. Thus, for instance, Hobbes and Rousseau both begin their chief political works with the claim that man is not naturally a political being, or in other words that the individual is naturally independent of all political authority. This claim is supported, to be sure, by arguments, but these arguments are not, or at least not for the most part, the kinds of arguments that would be acceptable within political life itself. And only subsequently do these authors turn to the question of why, or whether, the individual should submit to the fetters of political life at all. In other words, modern political philosophy begins from the primacy of the individual, or of rights, whereas classical political philosophy began by assuming the primacy of justice or duty. And although modern political philosophy might seem to begin from the guiding concerns of *modern* political life, modern political life itself, with its emphasis on individual rights, as distinct from duties, is largely the *creation* of modern political philosophy. And even within modern political life, the awareness that our political duties are not merely derivative from the concern to secure our own rights is sometimes vividly present to us. This is the case especially in wartime, when a country’s survival or independence is at stake, but not only then, as we can see to some extent even from the contemporary environmental movement, which regards itself as being responsible for the long-term future of the planet as a whole.

But to turn now to the second difference between modern and classical political philosophy, while modern political philosophy is *less* political in its *beginning point* than its classical rival, it is more political in its end. In contrast to what it sees as the utopian character of classical political philosophy, it is concerned with solving the political problem, to the extent that it can be solved, in strictly political terms. Hence its highest theme is not virtue or the best way of life simply, but rather the best arrangement of an actualizable political community. Its concern is with the rational political order, understood as one that is capable of realization, or one whose realization can even be guaranteed by human planning or by the historical process. This is what I meant earlier by saying that modern political philosophy does not culminate in praise of the philosophic, as opposed to the political, way of life. To be sure, much of modern political philosophy has been enormously concerned to lay the groundwork for a political life that would allow philosophers to speak and write in freedom, but this freedom is seen as freedom for all, not just for philosophy in particular. And even those modern philosophers, such as Spinoza and Hegel, who do praise the philosophic life as the best life do not include this praise in their *political* philosophy, at least not as an important theme.

Now to return to the first of these two differences between classical and modern political philosophy, one might say, on behalf of the moderns, that the classical beginning point was excessively naive. For one might argue that the concern for justice and the common good is characteristic at most of the so-

called respectable citizens, but not of most men, and in particular not of those men who really count, those who are sophisticated and bold enough to seize power and to hold onto it. The classics, however, thought that those sophisticates of political life who *believe* that they are merely using the community for their private ends are in fact far more deeply concerned with justice than they know. Not even such men as Alcibiades, Thrasymachus, and Callicles, as we see them presented in the Platonic dialogues, are able consistently to reject the demands of justice or the common good. Accordingly, the classics held that the concern for justice and nobility is the primary concern of human beings as such, and hence that a philosophy that presupposes the falsity or unnaturalness of this concern is itself arbitrary and naive.

In particular, moreover—and here is the main point—the classical political philosophers came to see that their own philosophic way of life, or the life of theoretical detachment, has to vindicate *itself* in political terms. Since even philosophers are human beings, and that means political beings, *before* they become philosophers, philosophy cannot understand itself fully until it understands its own relationship to the political sphere from which it arose. And the problematic character of this relationship was more easily grasped by the classics than it is today, or even than it was in the Christian world of the early modern era, inasmuch as philosophy in ancient Greece had not yet become respectable. As we know from the trial and death of Socrates, philosophy was distrusted and even hated by many well-meaning citizens. For these reasons, then, the classical philosophers were compelled to explain themselves to their fellow citizens and to vindicate themselves in strictly political terms. And it is ultimately in the light of this need for a political vindication of philosophy, rather than from any lack of sophistication, that we can best understand why classical political philosophy is so directly related to the concerns of political life itself, and also why it culminates in the praise of philosophy as the best way of life. To quote Strauss, “Plato’s *Republic* as a whole, as well as other political works of the classical philosophers, can best be described as an attempt to supply a political justification for philosophy by showing that the well-being of the political community depends decisively on the study of philosophy.”<sup>11</sup> And let me quote Strauss at greater length on this crucial point:

To justify philosophy before the tribunal of the political community means to justify philosophy in terms of the political community, that is to say, by means of a kind of argument which appeals not to philosophers as such, but to citizens as such. To prove to citizens that philosophy is permissible, desirable or even necessary, the philosopher has to follow the example of Odysseus and start from premises that are generally agreed upon, or from generally accepted opinions: he has to argue *ad hominem* or “dialectically.” From this point of view the adjective “political” in the expression “political philosophy” designates not so much a subject matter as a manner of treatment; from this point of view, I say, “political philosophy” means primarily not the philosophic treatment of politics, but the

political or popular treatment of philosophy, or the political introduction to philosophy—the attempt to lead the qualified citizens, or rather their qualified sons, from the political life to the philosophic life. This deeper meaning of “political philosophy” tallies well with its ordinary meaning, for in both cases “political philosophy” culminates in praise of the philosophic life. At any rate, it is ultimately because he means to justify philosophy before the tribunal of the political community, and hence on the level of political discussion, that the philosopher has to understand the political things exactly as they are understood in political life.<sup>12</sup>

The need for political philosophy, in order to justify the philosophic way of life, arises, in part, from the following consideration, which I have been presupposing up to now without stating it. Political philosophy is a *necessary* introduction to philosophy only if philosophy is unable to supply a *purely theoretical* foundation for its activity. Philosophy, as we know, existed in Greece well before the emergence of political philosophy. Its aim was to understand the cosmos or the permanent nature of the whole, an aim in the light of which human or political affairs might well seem paltry or insignificant. Now philosophy could *reasonably* dispense with a political justification if it could succeed in this its central endeavor. For however questionable the initial impulse toward philosophy might seem to be, no one can reasonably doubt that it is better to know the truth about the whole than not to know it, once that knowledge is attained. And the earliest philosophers seem to have thought, for the most part, that they had already attained that knowledge, or else that they were solidly on the way to it. But as we learn from Plato’s *Phaedo*, there was at least one philosopher who had grave doubts about the possibility of such a theoretical account of the whole. This philosopher was Socrates, and his youthful inquiries into nature, or into the causes of all things, raised so many questions that he came to wonder whether anything *could* be known with certainty about nature. And if nothing can be known with certainty about nature, the very claim that there *is* nature, i.e., a fundamental natural necessity, the claim which lies at the basis of all philosophy, is itself called into question. And if this fundamental claim of all philosophy is called into question, then so also is philosophy as a way of life. Rather than being the life of the wisest men, it might be, instead, as Aristophanes had suggested in the *Clouds*, the life of deluded boasters, of men who claim to know big things without knowing them in fact.

Socrates’ questions about natural philosophy finally led him to turn away from contemplating the beings directly, a pursuit which he compared to trying to look directly into the sun, and toward what he called his “second sailing,” or a consideration of the beings as they are reflected in the medium of speech. And though he doesn’t say so explicitly in the *Phaedo*, the first examples that he gives there of his new approach, as well as the Platonic dialogues as a whole, make it clear that his turn to the speeches was closely bound up with an emphasis on moral and political speeches in particular, on speeches about the

noble, the just, and the good. In other words, Socrates turned away from his exclusive preoccupation with theoretical philosophy toward political philosophy, and in fact became the founder of political philosophy. And since the emphatic and central conclusion of his political philosophy is that philosophy itself is the right way of life or the best way of life, we are permitted to assume that what motivated his turn to political things was chiefly the desire to *answer* the question of whether philosophy *was* the best way of life, of whether it was even a sensible way of life—a question that had become urgent for him in consequence of the failure of his youthful ambition to discover the causes of all things.

Now as I mentioned earlier, modern political philosophy is hardly concerned with the question of philosophy as a way of life, and certainly not with a vindication of philosophy that would begin from strictly political premises. And this is true of modern philosophy in general. But we can perhaps understand why the early modern philosophers failed to see a necessity for such a political vindication of their own activity, since modern philosophy claimed to have discovered a method for succeeding, where the ancients had failed, in giving a true and adequate account of the whole. Or rather, modern philosophy claimed that the whole is unintelligible in itself, but that precisely on this basis we are free to construct principles of understanding that will allow for the clear and distinct account of all possible experience. It is true that the first premises of modern philosophy or science, such as the principle that all bodies tend to preserve their state of motion uniformly in a straight line, or the principle that “substance is that which is by itself and is conceived by itself,” are at odds with common sense. But it was hoped that these premises would justify themselves, and hence philosophy or science as a whole, by their success. And this hoped-for success was seen from the beginning not merely as theoretical, but as practical as well, since the new natural science could be used in the service of unprecedented relief of man’s estate. In keeping with this practical hope, it was also hoped that modern *political* philosophy would prove its worth by its success in helping to bring about, for the first time, a rational society. A philosophy that could adequately comprehend our experience of the world, and at the same time bring about a life of rational well-being for the human race, might well seem to be able to dispense with a political self-vindication along classical lines. Buoyed up, then, by this hope of succeeding where the ancients had failed, modern philosophy did not much dwell on the question of whether philosophy itself was possible or good, and in particular it did not dwell on the problem of finding the natural beginning point for resolving this question.

For Strauss, however, the questionableness of philosophy was a matter of central concern from early in his life—long before he saw his way back to classical political philosophy—and indeed it is of central concern for any thoughtful individual in our century. For in the first place, the practical consequences of philosophy and science have shown themselves, in our era of world

wars and nuclear weapons, to be extremely mixed blessings. But beyond that, the assumption that philosophy is both possible and good has been radically challenged from within the philosophic tradition itself. Indeed, the two ruling powers of the contemporary intellectual world, positivism and the historical consciousness, have combined to call this assumption into question. Positivism regards modern natural science as the paradigm for all genuine knowledge, and it asserts that the only objects of knowledge are facts as distinct from values. Hence it must hold, in particular, that reason is unable to validate the choice of philosophy as a way of life or of science as a vocation. And the historical consciousness, which Strauss saw as the necessary, if unintended, consequence of positivism, goes even further; it asserts that all human thought, including the basic premises of philosophy or science, is merely relative to a particular historical epoch. And if this is so, as Strauss clearly understood, not only is philosophy unable to attain its original goal of wisdom about the whole, but its very endeavor is arbitrary or absurd. Now in the light of this situation, many contemporary heirs of the philosophic tradition—existentialists, for short—have decided that that tradition has to be destroyed and replaced with a new kind of thinking that would accept and even affirm the merely subjective character of all principles of thought and action. But Strauss never took that step. He was prevented from doing so in part, I think, by his good fortune in having been raised as an orthodox Jew. Though the existentialist response to the apparent failure of philosophy and science impressed him greatly, he was also deeply impressed, both as a thinker and as a human being, by the traditional Jewish alternative to philosophy.

By the time of Strauss' youth, it had long been assumed by most educated men in Europe that orthodox Judaism, along with the supernatural claims of Christianity, had been refuted by the Enlightenment of the early modern era. But the apparent self-destruction of reason that was occurring in Strauss' youth led him to wonder whether reason had in fact refuted religious orthodoxy. The refutation of orthodoxy that had been thought to have been accomplished once and for all by Spinoza and others when reason was in its heyday was never seriously called into question by the existentialists, despite the fact that they no longer accepted the rationalist premises, such as those of modern science, that had been the basis of the alleged refutation. Their "irrationalism," if I may call it that, thus depended crucially on the rationalism that they allegedly had dispensed with. And this holds even for those prominent existentialists who chose to return to Judaism, since the Judaism that they returned to preserved important features of the Enlightenment, in particular its denial of at least some Biblical miracles. By contrast, Strauss saw the necessity to reopen the controversy between Enlightenment and orthodoxy. And since Jewish orthodoxy, in keeping with the Biblical prohibition against eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, was opposed to *all* philosophy, Strauss saw this controversy between Enlightenment and orthodoxy as part of the larger one between philos-

ophy (and all its heirs), on the one hand, and the Bible, on the other. Now from his examination of this controversy, Strauss concluded as a young man that it could not be resolved on theoretical grounds alone, since the basic premise of orthodoxy, namely that God is omnipotent, and hence stronger than any so-called natural necessity, can no more be refuted than it can be proved. The efforts of modern philosophy to refute orthodoxy indirectly, by showing that the world, or at least the world of our experience, can be made intelligible without the assumption of an omnipotent God, did nothing, in Strauss' view, to change this situation. And since he saw no way to attain theoretical certainty as to whether philosophy or orthodoxy is true, Strauss drew the tentative conclusion that philosophy as a way of life rests on an act of the will, as does orthodoxy, and hence that the antagonism between them is ultimately not theoretical but moral.

In studying this moral antagonism between philosophy and orthodoxy, Strauss did not take for granted the soundness of the contemporary consensus that philosophy could not vindicate itself. But he did, it seems, come close to accepting that conclusion. For from the perspective he had now reached, the young Strauss came to regard all philosophy as stemming from a revolt against orthodoxy, and he saw the ultimate and purest justification for this revolt in the atheism of Nietzsche, which did not even claim to be based on reason, but rather on the courage to face the terrible truth of man's forsakenness. But Strauss objected that since Nietzsche had no adequate grounds for certainty that his atheism was in fact the truth, its ultimate basis was mere belief, and that "being based on belief is fatal to any philosophy."<sup>13</sup> For it is inconsistent, Strauss argued, that philosophy, or "the life devoted to the quest for evident knowledge," should itself rest on an "unevident, arbitrary, or blind decision."<sup>14</sup>

Despite the strength of the case against philosophy, however, Strauss could not disregard certain facts that kept calling for it as a necessary pursuit. For one thing, the abandonment of reason does not lead to orthodoxy in general, but in each case to some particular orthodoxy, and the various orthodoxies make conflicting claims. Some of these claims, moreover, are meant to be evident to the light of reason. Strauss noted that Jewish orthodoxy, for instance, "based its claim to superiority to other religions from the beginning on its superior rationality (Deut. 4:6),"<sup>15</sup> i.e., on the superior rationality of the laws of Moses. Even Nietzsche and the existentialist opponents of philosophy could not, according to Strauss, avoid making claims that were meant to be intrinsically or theoretically true. Considerations such as these helped confirm in him the suspicion that "it would be unwise to say farewell to reason." He began therefore to wonder "whether the self-destruction of reason was not the inevitable outcome of modern rationalism as distinguished from pre-modern rationalism, . . ."<sup>16</sup> Strauss was assisted in coming to see this new possibility by his study of the medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers. For from these teachers he learned for the first time that Plato and Aristotle had sought to vindicate philosophy in the face

of religious, if not strictly Biblical, objections, and that they had done so in the only appropriate manner, namely by beginning from the moral and political premises agreed to by their adversaries. The discovery of this fact, that classical thought had appropriately confronted this deepest of challenges to philosophy, was naturally an important event in Strauss' life. It was this discovery that led him to return to the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle and to set out himself on the path of political philosophy as "the first philosophy."

Let me conclude with one final remark. Though Strauss was clearly convinced that classical political philosophy had appropriately confronted, at least in principle, the challenge to philosophy posed by Biblical revelation, there is dispute among his students as to whether he thought that this issue had been resolved. But even if Strauss failed to resolve it, this would not have been grounds for despair in his view. For he believed that the unresolved conflict between the Biblical and the philosophic notions of the good life is the main unfinished business of Western civilization and the secret of its vitality. In Strauss' words, "The very life of Western civilization is the life between two codes, a fundamental tension. There is therefore no reason inherent in Western civilization, in its fundamental constitution, why it should give up that life."<sup>17</sup>

#### NOTES

1. *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 24.
2. *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 31.
3. *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 20.
4. Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), p. 74, emphasis mine.
5. *Philosophy and Law*, trans. Fred Baumann (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1987), p. 103.
6. *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), p. 85.
7. *What Is Political Philosophy?*, p. 86.
8. *The City and Man*, p. 68.
9. *The City and Man*, p. 69.
10. *What Is Political Philosophy?*, p. 91.
11. *What Is Political Philosophy?*, p. 93.
12. *What Is Political Philosophy?*, pp. 93–94.
13. *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, p. 256.
14. *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 75.
15. *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, p. 256.
16. *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, p. 257.
17. *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 270.