

Interpretation

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Leo Strauss on Exoteric Writing*

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Abstract: Leo Strauss's claim that many philosophers of the past wrote exoterically is without a doubt his most fruitful contribution to the study of the history of ideas. However, to this day this claim remains highly controversial. To gain a better understanding of Strauss's position, this essay analyzes his three thematic discussions of exotericism, "Exoteric Teaching" (1939), "Persecution and the Art of Writing" (1941), and "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing" (1954). I show that each of the three essays begins its exploration of the phenomenon from a different starting point in order to emphasize a different reason that led philosophers to practice exoteric communication. Whereas "Persecution and the Art of Writing" highlights the threat of censorship and other forms of oppression, "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing" is almost completely silent on this topic and instead focuses on the tension that exists between philosophy and the political community. "Exoteric Teaching," the least known of the three texts, differs from the other two in its concentration on the reader's experiential response to exoteric writing or, as Strauss puts it, on "the irretrievably 'occasional' character of every worthwhile interpretation."

A writer who knows what he is doing can be expected to avoid repetition. Accordingly, the following essay argues that Leo Strauss's three thematic discussions of exotericism should be seen not as repetitions but as three independent attempts to introduce the reader to a threefold phenomenon. I will show in the first two sections that Strauss's published articles, "Persecution and the Art of Writing" (1941) and "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing" (1954), are primarily addressed to two different groups of readers and that each uses as its starting point a particular experience of those addressees.

* This essay is based on a talk I delivered at the invitation of Thomas L. Pangle as the Joe R. Long Lecture at the University of Texas at Austin on April 5, 2013. A shorter version was previously published in *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, ed. Martin D. Yaffe and Richard S. Ruderman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 203–14.

Taken together, Strauss's published accounts of exotericism enable the reader to think through the relationship between politics and philosophy with regard to exotericism. In the third and longest section, I will show how the fragment "Exoteric Teaching," written in December 1939 but published only posthumously, differs from the two aforementioned essays: "Exoteric Teaching" does not start from common experiences but instead highlights an exceptional experience made possible by exoteric writing—an experience which grounds "the irretrievably 'occasional' character of every worthwhile interpretation."¹

I. "PERSECUTION AND THE ART OF WRITING"

"Persecution and the Art of Writing" as well as other sources suggest that Strauss understood exotericism as a subject both timely and untimely when he began to publish on his new hermeneutic approach at the end of the 1930s. He was convinced, on one hand, that historicism had made it more difficult, or, to begin with, even impossible,² to take seriously the remarks about exotericism made by earlier thinkers.³ On the other hand, he hinted repeatedly at a unique opportunity for contemporary readers to understand anew the influence that persecution or censorship had on writing at almost any point in history. For political or religious persecution "was, as it were, the natural condition to which public expression of free thought had to adapt itself." Only the "discontinuation of persecution of free thought which took place in the

¹ Cf. Leo Strauss to Hans-Georg Gadamer, February 26, 1961, in "Correspondence concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*," *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1978): 5–6: "It is not easy for me to recognize in your hermeneutics my own experience as an interpreter. Yours is a 'theory of hermeneutic experience' which as such is a universal theory. Not only is my own hermeneutic experience very limited—the experience which I possess makes me doubtful whether a universal hermeneutic theory which is more than 'formal' or external is possible. I believe that the doubt arises from the feeling of the irretrievably 'occasional' character of every worthwhile interpretation." My edition of the complete correspondence between Gadamer and Strauss will be included in the forthcoming volume of Strauss's *Gesammelte Schriften*.

² In a handwritten plan for "Exoteric Teaching," Strauss wrote in 1939: "To-day the distinction between exoteric and esoteric teaching is wholly opposed—this opposition is due to the fact that modern philosophy has destroyed the possibility of understanding—and that class. scholarship has made tremendous progress" (*Reorientation*, 287; cf. "On the Study of Classical Political Philosophy" [1938], in *Toward "Natural Right and History": Lectures and Essays by Leo Strauss, 1937–46*, ed. J. A. Colen and Svetozar Minkov [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018], 128, and "Persecution and the Art of Writing," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* [Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952], 26, 31–32).

³ Based on his wide-ranging study of the history of philosophy, Arthur M. Melzer reaches the following conclusion: "The single most striking thing about the testimonial evidence is in fact not its quantity but its universality: it just shows up everywhere.... It is in fact difficult to name a single major philosopher from any time or place before 1800 who did not somewhere make open and approving reference to this practice, regarding either his own writings or those of others (or both)" (Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014], 25).

eighteenth century”—an event Strauss once calls “the most epoch-making event in the history of literature as such”—allowed this hitherto nearly universally known phenomenon to be forgotten.⁴ That Strauss saw the late 1930s and early 1940s as a privileged opportunity for recollection is due to the terror in Germany and Europe that forced him and many other thinkers to flee their homelands. In February 1938, Strauss wrote in a letter to a friend: “Our situation is becoming more and more medieval [*immer mittelalterlicher*], the difference between freedom of thought and freedom of expression more and more visible. That is ‘progress.’”⁵ The experience of this change, “an experience we are unfortunate enough to make to-day,”⁶ provided an occasion for Strauss to think through the relationship between politics and philosophy with regard to the effects of persecution.

In the preface to the book *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss points to the peculiar timeliness and untimeliness of exotericism: “In the article ‘Persecution and the Art of Writing,’ I have tried to elucidate the problem by starting from certain well-known political phenomena of our century. As I state in the Introduction, I became familiar with the problem mentioned while studying the Jewish and the Islamic philosophy of the Middle Ages.”⁷ This remark shows that in the first thematic account of the

⁴ “On the Study of Classical Political Philosophy,” 133. In the Fall of 1939 as well as in the Fall of 1940, Strauss announced a class on “Persecution and Freedom of Thought” at the New School for Social Research: “Down to very nearly the end of the 18th century persecution was, in a manner of speaking, the natural atmosphere to which free thought or the expression of free thought had to adapt itself. In order to understand the ultimate reasons underlying the struggle between the forces of persecution and of independent thinking, as well as the devices by the use of which independent thinkers succeeded in defeating persecution, it is helpful to refer back to the classical example of that struggle, the trial of Socrates; its meaning is discussed on the basis of the writings of Xenophon and Plato” (*Toward “Natural Right and History,”* 287; cf. 285–86).

⁵ Leo Strauss to Jacob Klein, February 16, 1938, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2008), 3:550: “Unsere Situation wird immer mittelalterlicher, die Differenz zwischen Freiheit des Denkens und Freiheit der Äusserung immer sichtbarer. Das ist ein ‘Fortschritt.’” Similar hints can be found, for example, in “The Spirit of Sparta and the Taste of Xenophon,” *Social Research* 6, no. 4 (1939): 535; review of *Spinoza and Religion* (1942), in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (New York: Free Press, 1959), 273–75; *On Tyranny* (1948), rev. ed., ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 27; and *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 5, 8, 22, 24, 32, 56, and 190.

⁶ “Lecture Notes for ‘Persecution and the Art of Writing’” (1939), in *Reorientation*, 293.

⁷ “Preface,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 5; cf. 8. In the “Plan of a Book Tentatively Entitled ‘Philosophy and the Law: Historical Essays,’” Strauss wrote about “Persecution and the Art of Writing” in 1948: “What we can observe in the totalitarian societies of our time, i.e., in societies which as a matter of avowed policy suppress freedom of speech, supplies us with important clues to the understanding of the conditions under which many free minds of former centuries thought, spoke, and wrote” (*Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997], 469).

problem of exotericism he published, Strauss took as the starting point of his rhetorical strategy the personal experience many of his contemporaries had made with actual persecution and self-censorship. This allowed him to present in a more familiar way a problem that he himself had become acquainted with in turning to a rather unfamiliar environment—“to other ages, if not other climates.”⁸ To appeal to an audience acquainted with persecution, Strauss gave at the beginning of the article “Persecution and the Art of Writing” the fictional example of a nameless historian of religion who presents the heterodox results of his historical investigation “between the lines” in order to avoid censorship by the ruling totalitarian regime. Strauss called this somewhat odd tale “a simple example which, I have reason to believe, is not so remote from reality as it might first seem.”⁹ The case of the anonymous historian’s self-censorship was likely to resonate with many European refugees who knew from firsthand experience that regimes or societies at times endanger the freedom of expression and the freedom to philosophize publicly. That this example was, however, not meant to be more than a suitable starting point for Strauss’s rhetorical strategy—a strategy similar to the one he would use in *On Tyranny*¹⁰—is made clear by the course of the argument as well as by his later response to the criticism of the French scholar Yvon Belaval: “Belaval is quite right when he says that one cannot infer an *essential* antinomy between philosophy and politics from the *factual* persecution of philosophers by political authorities. I am quite certain that I did not make this mistake.”¹¹ An example, be it fictional as at the beginning of the article

⁸ “Introduction,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 8. The reference to “climates” could be understood as a reference to “intellectual climates” (“Persecution and the Art of Writing,” 29; “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing” [1954], in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 227–28) or to the difference of climatic conditions. The latter difference leads—according to, for example, Alfarabi, Ibn Khaldun, Montesquieu, and (last, but not least) Lessing—to the development of different national characters and, thus, to the essential multiplicity of religions. Cf. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Ernst und Falk*, in *Werke und Briefe* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2001), 10:29 (second dialogue): “Many of the smaller states would have quite a different climate, therefore quite different needs and satisfactions, therefore quite different habits and mores [*Sitten*], therefore quite different morals [*Sittenlehren*], therefore quite different religions.” Strauss refers to this passage in “Exoteric Teaching”: “It may be added that Lessing points out in ‘Ernst und Falk’ that the variety of religions is due to the variety of political constitutions: the religious problem (i.e. the problem of historical, positive religion) is considered by him as part and parcel of the political problem” (“Exoteric Teaching,” in *Reorientation*, 277).

⁹ “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” 24.

¹⁰ Cf. Eric Voegelin, review of *On Tyranny*, *Review of Politics* 11, no. 2 (1949): 241 and Alexandre Kojève, “L’action politique des philosophes,” *Critique* 41 (1950): 46 (this passage was omitted in the enlarged version of the essay which was, under the title “Tyrannie et sagesse,” included in Strauss’s *De la tyrannie* [Paris: Gallimard, 1954]).

¹¹ “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing,” 230, my italics. Cf. Yvon Belaval: “Pour une sociologie de la

“Persecution and the Art of Writing” or historical as in *On Tyranny*, cannot replace an argument; but it can serve as a tool to draw people into taking an argument seriously. Nevertheless, this popular rhetorical strategy comes at a price: readers who easily jump over the stumbling blocks Strauss put in their way¹² might be induced to limit the thesis first and foremost to the past or to narrow the problem of exotericism to very rare and extreme cases of religious or political persecution.¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example, called the question posed by Strauss an “extraordinary problem” (*Sonderproblem*) and felt obliged to make the following “countersuggestion”: “Is the conscious disguise, the camouflage, and concealment of one’s own opinion not in truth the rare extreme case as opposed to the frequent, nay, universal normal condition [*Normalsituation*]?”¹⁴ Strauss’s emphasis on the correlation of “persecution” and the “art of writing,” which is meant to highlight the relevance of the problem for his contemporaries in the 1930s and 1940s, also allows for such a marginalization of exotericism to an unusual historical phenomenon and might thus lead readers to exaggerate the importance of “persecution” as the primary cause of the “art of writing.”¹⁵

politique,” *Critique* 77 (1953): 864: “Encore une fois, de ces persécutions de fait avons-nous le droit de conclure à une antinomie essentielle? Sans doute pas, si l’on accepte avec M. Kojève...que le Politique finit par obéir au Philosophie.”

¹² Some of these stumbling blocks were pointed out by Christopher Bruell, “True Esotericism,” in *Gladly to Learn and Gladly to Teach: Essays on Religion and Political Philosophy in Honor of Ernest L. Fortin*, A. A., ed. Michael Foley and Douglas Kries (Landham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), 273–75.

¹³ For examples of this tendency see Catherine H. Zuckert and Michael P. Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 120–21; Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 5–7 and 59–60; as well as Vittorio Hösle, *Kritik der verstehenden Vernunft: Eine Grundlegung der Geisteswissenschaften* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2018), 380–89, esp. 382–84.

¹⁴ Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hermeneutik und Historismus” (1965), in *Gesammelte Werke* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1986), 2:421: “I do not want to question Strauss’s interpretations—they largely make sense to me—but I want to make a countersuggestion [*Gegenerwägung*] that is perhaps justified in these cases, but is most certainly so in others; for example, in the case of Plato. Is the conscious disguise, the camouflage, and concealment of one’s own opinion not in truth the rare extreme case as opposed to the frequent, nay, universal normal condition [*Normalsituation*]? Just as persecution (by governmental or ecclesiastical inquisition, and so forth) is only an extreme case compared to the intentional or unintentional pressure that society and the public sphere [*Öffentlichkeit*] exert on human thought. Only if one is conscious of the continuous transition from one to the other one is able to estimate the hermeneutic difficulty of the problem that Strauss has tackled.”

¹⁵ Adrian Blau goes so far as to claim that “Strauss’s own theorizing primarily addresses persecution” (Blau, “Anti-Strauss,” *Journal of Politics* 74 [2012]: 145). For a critique of this demonstrably false claim, see Dietrich Schotte, “The Virtues and Vices of Leo Strauss, Historian: A Reassessment of Straussian Hermeneutics,” in *Reading Between the Lines: Leo Strauss and the History of Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Winfried Schröder (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 62–63. For Strauss’s first and final word on the question of “persecution,” see below, note 54.

II. "ON A FORGOTTEN KIND OF WRITING"

"On a Forgotten Kind of Writing," Strauss's second thematic account of the problem of exotericism, pursues a different rhetorical strategy, which does not rely in the same way on the at once timely and untimely character of exotericism. At the beginning of the essay, Strauss writes that he was prompted to restate his earlier suggestion by a perplexed student and then gives a brief summary of the thesis laid out in "Persecution and the Art of Writing."¹⁶ Against all expectations, this summary does not mention the word "persecution" or the word "censorship" even once. Instead of using the still familiar phenomenon as an illustrative starting point (after all, Strauss explicitly reminds his readers of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy who had become the chairman of the Committee on Government Operations in the very year the article was written), Strauss presents a straightforward four-step syllogism for the essential and insuperable tension between philosophy and society as the ground for exotericism: "[1] Philosophy or science, the highest activity of man, is the attempt to replace opinion about 'all things' by knowledge of 'all things'; but [2] opinion is the element of society; [3] philosophy or science... thus endangers society. [4a] Hence, ...philosophers or scientists must respect the opinions on which society rests....[4b] They will distinguish between the true teaching as the esoteric teaching and the socially useful teaching as the exoteric teaching."¹⁷ One might expect that Strauss would point out that the fourth step of this argument is somewhat problematic.¹⁸ But accord-

¹⁶ Among Gadamer's papers at the Deutsche Literaturarchiv (Marbach) I have found a carbon copy of Strauss's letter to F. N. "Chip" Karmatz (entitled "Letter to the Editor of the *Chicago Review*" and dated December 24, 1953) which became "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing." The first paragraph of this letter reads: "Dear Sir: You have told me that a suggestion which I have made both in the classroom and in print has proved to be of interest to some of your readers but that it is not sufficiently clear to them. You mentioned that it would be helpful if I were to write a note on the matter for your *Review*. In order not merely to repeat what I have written elsewhere, I believe it will be best if I discuss here those objections to my suggestion which have been made publicly. I suspect that these objections arose out of difficulties similar to those that some of your readers have felt." David Janssens's "Fishing for Philosophers: Strauss's 'Restatement' on the Art of Writing," in *Leo Strauss's Defense of the Philosophic Life: Reading "What Is Political Philosophy?"*, ed. Rafael Major (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 173–90, is the only study that has adequately grasped the starting point of "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing."

¹⁷ "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing," 221–22; cf. *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 257–58 as well as "A Giving of Accounts," *The College* 22, no. 1 (1970): 4: "I arrived at a conclusion that I can state in the form of a syllogism: Philosophy is the attempt to replace opinion by knowledge; but opinion is the element of the city, hence philosophy is subversive, hence the philosopher must write in such a way that he will improve rather than subvert the city."

¹⁸ In all three cases of the argument mentioned in the previous footnote, the argument's suppressed premise seems to be that philosophers need society. Cf., for example, "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*" (1954), in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 119 and 125–27.

ing to “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing,” the seemingly shaky premise of the argument is the second one. To strengthen his argument, Strauss immediately makes clear that the Platonic premise that opinion is the element of society “is accepted by many contemporary social scientists.”¹⁹ This strange way of assuring the reader of the truth of the premise—after all, agreement among the present-day academic community is hardly a necessary or sufficient condition of the truth—shows that Strauss is arguing, once again, *ad hominem* or *ex concessis*, that is, that he is accommodating the argument to his readers in taking their prejudices or preconceptions as his starting point. A perplexed student of the social sciences, the explicit addressee of the article, might very well share the position of “many contemporary social scientists” and, hence, be inclined to take Strauss’s train of thought seriously. However, Strauss once again had to pay a price for the realignment of his rhetorical presentation. The straightforward, or even blunt, account of exotericism entails, as before, the blurring of certain aspects of the problem: exotericism is treated with almost no regard for the reader’s personal experience. Neither censorship nor persecution, but a rather abstract sense of “respect” for the “opinions on which society rests” is presented as the primary cause of the “forgotten kind of writing.”



In his two published accounts of exotericism Strauss thus chose two very different ways of presenting one and the same thesis in order to appeal to two different audiences. In his first programmatic essay, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” Strauss addresses the readers of *Social Research*—the journal of the New School for Social Research, Strauss’s university at the time, whose faculty members were primarily fellow refugees from Europe. He appealed to these readers by starting from the all-too-timely phenomenon of political persecution and used this starting point to show that from the point of view of philosophy, exotericism is necessary because society can endanger the public exercise of philosophy. In “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing,” Strauss reoriented his argumentative strategy and argued in a syllogistic manner from such presuppositions as the readers of the *Chicago Review*, a popular literary magazine published by students of the University of Chicago, would be most likely to share. In this essay, he put the justification of exotericism the other way around—from the point of view of politics, exotericism is necessary because the public exercise of philosophy can endanger society. Hence, each essay presents the problem by starting from a partial point of

¹⁹ “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing,” 222; cf. 227 and 229. See, for example, George H. Sabine, review of *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, *Ethics* 63, no. 3 (1953): 220.

view. However, the limitations of the starting points may lead the reader to the comprehensive point of view of political philosophy in the strict sense in which Strauss defined it when he introduced the term in 1945: “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.”²⁰ With regard to exotericism, political philosophy therefore takes a higher point of view than both the partial points of view of philosophy and of politics as they are presented in “Persecution and the Art of Writing” and in “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing.”²¹

III. “EXOTERIC TEACHING”

“Exoteric Teaching” is, as far as we know, Strauss’s first attempt at a comprehensive and thematic explanation of the concept of “exotericism.” If read in light of the published accounts, the fragment, which was not published by the author himself, enables the reader not only to cast a unique glance at Strauss’s workshop and at the genesis of his hermeneutics, but it also allows him to see a profoundly different aspect of the phenomenon. Its peculiar approach distinguishes the essay, which was written in December 1939, not only from its next of kin, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” but also from most other studies, written and published mainly during the 1940s, in which Strauss applied his thesis of exoteric writing: while the principal subjects of these articles are writers from the Jewish and Islamic Middle Ages, “Exoteric Teaching” presents the issue exclusively from the point of view of what we may somewhat loosely call the Western tradition.

²⁰ “On Classical Political Philosophy” (1945), in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 93–94. Strauss’s most explicit statement on the limitations of his argument can be found in a footnote to the original version of “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” which was not reproduced in the book: “Only the exoteric teaching is of interest to the sociologist of knowledge, for only the exoteric teaching had, could have and was intended to have a popular appeal. But sociology is not enough: there were people who were not merely exponents of the society to which they belonged, or of any society, but who successfully endeavored to leave ‘the cave’” (*Social Research* 8, no. 4 [1941]: 503n21).

²¹ On the peculiar character of Strauss’s philosophical project which connects the art of writing, the philosophical life, and political philosophy, see Heinrich Meier, “The Renewal of Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion: On the Intention of Leo Strauss’s *Thoughts on Machiavelli*,” in *Political Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion*, trans. Robert Berman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 26–28.

“Exoteric Teaching” discusses the Enlightenment philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and the Neo-Protestant theologian Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, while mentioning such writers as Plato, Aristotle, Leibniz, Zeller, Kant, Ferguson, Rousseau, and Jacobi. The list shows, above all, that the essay avoids naming or citing any non-Western thinker. This silence is particularly puzzling in the case of Moses Maimonides, who played a crucial role in Strauss’s rediscovery of exotericism well before he conceived of “Exoteric Teaching.” Even more perplexing is the fact that, while Maimonides’s name does not occur in the typescript, the acronym for his traditional name Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon is mentioned in an early handwritten plan of the essay. In this plan, the heading for the penultimate section of the essay’s first part reads: “Lessing—Leibniz—Hobbes (vera—pia dogmata)—Spinoza—RMbM—.”²² In the corresponding section of the manuscript of “Exoteric Teaching,” Strauss later replaces Thomas Hobbes with René Descartes but does mention Maimonides at the end of the sequence of exoteric writers: “Leibniz is...that link in the chain of the tradition of exotericism which is nearest to Lessing. Leibniz, however, was not the only 17th century thinker who was initiated. Not to mention the prudent Descartes, even so bold a writer as Spinoza had admitted the necessity of ‘pia dogmata, hoc est, talia quae animum ad obedientiam movent [pious dogmas, that is, such as move the spirit to obedience]’ as distinguished from ‘vera dogmata [true dogmas].’ Despite, or because of, that admission, Spinoza rejected Maimonides’ allegorical interpretation of the Bible as ‘harmful, useless and absurd.’ Thus, he cannot be considered a genuine spokesman of the tradition.”²³ However, the typist did not transcribe the last two sentences—with the ambiguous personal pronoun that could refer either to Maimonides or to Spinoza²⁴—and Strauss also did not reinsert them later by hand. Whether this omission was a considered and, hence, authoritative decision or one of the typist’s many blunders overlooked during the preliminary proofreading cannot be determined with certainty, since Strauss never prepared “Exoteric Teaching” for publication. Another and more detailed plan of the essay slightly changes

²² “Early Plan of ‘Exoteric Teaching,’” in *Reorientation*, 287.

²³ “Exoteric Teaching,” 285–86 with n117. For Spinoza’s critique of Maimonidean hermeneutics, see *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, in *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Carl Bruder (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1843/1846), 3:120–23 (chap. 7, §§75–87). On this question, cf. *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft: Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-politischem Traktat* (1930), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2008), 1:224–26.

²⁴ The fact that Strauss left unclear whether it was “despite, or because of” this admission that Spinoza rejected Maimonides’s allegorical reading of Scripture lends further support to the supposition that the ambiguity of the personal pronoun was not a slip of the pen.

the heading for the passage in question but does not resolve the problem: “Lessing—Leibniz—Spinoza (—RMbM).”²⁵ How should one interpret the fact that Strauss here has put Maimonides’s acronym in parentheses? Do the parentheses indicate that Strauss wanted to include the ambiguous suggestion about Spinoza’s critique? Or do they show that Strauss decided to drop the reference to Maimonides altogether after writing the manuscript? However these questions might be answered, the textual difficulties highlight the fact that non-Western thinkers would have played only a minor role, if any, in “Exoteric Teaching.”

The peculiar approach of “Exoteric Teaching” is reflected not merely in the essay’s silence about Maimonides, but first of all in its focus on Lessing and Schleiermacher. Neither thinker is prominently featured in Strauss’s published writings, but they were of considerable importance for the development of his thought during the 1930s. Recalling his early studies of Spinoza, Strauss remarked decades later that at this time “Lessing was always at my elbow.”²⁶ The influence of Lessing’s writings was, according to Strauss’s own account, subtle and initially unrecognized: “I learned more from him than I knew at that time. As I came to see later, Lessing had said everything I had found out about the distinction between exoteric and esoteric speech and its grounds.”²⁷ This subsequent reconsideration of Lessing, which took place around 1936/1937,²⁸ shows that the young Strauss’s thought was ripe for the discovery of exotericism years before he began to write “Exoteric Teaching.”²⁹ Schleiermacher, by contrast, was certainly not constantly at Strauss’s elbow during the 1930s, but (to continue the metaphor) he would frequently breathe down Strauss’s neck. According to “Exoteric Teaching,” it is Schleiermacher who “introduced that style of Platonic studies, in which classical scholarship is still engaged” and which Strauss would set out to replace with his own approach to ancient philosophy.³⁰ In a similar way, Strauss had to oppose Schleiermacher’s enduring influence in his early attempts to recover what he

²⁵ “Later Plan of ‘Exoteric Teaching,’” in *Reorientation*, 292.

²⁶ “A Giving of Accounts,” 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ See, above all, “Einleitung zu ‘Morgenstunden’ und ‘An die Freunde Lessings’” (1937/1974), “Sache Gottes oder die gerettete Vorsehung” (1937/1962/1974), and “Eine Erinnerung an Lessing” (1937), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2013), 2:522 and 607–8.

²⁹ The distinction is already present in *Philosophie und Gesetz: Beiträge zum Verständnis Maimunis und seiner Vorläufer* (1935), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:3–123, for example, 47, 82–83, 88–89, and 123.

³⁰ “Exoteric Teaching,” 279. On the role Schleiermacher played in shaping the scholarship on Plato according to Strauss, see below, note 65.

would later call the theologico-political problem. For not only is Schleiermacher one of the forefathers of the then-reigning “philosophy of culture,” but he also “inaugurated” the modern “philosophy of religion,” which Strauss in 1935 subjected to a sharp critique in “The Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns in the Philosophy of Judaism,” the programmatic first chapter of his *Philosophie und Gesetz*.³¹ Thus, the “great theologian,” as Strauss calls him in “Persecution and the Art of Writing,”³² looms rather large in the background of Strauss’s remarkable reorientation during the 1930s.

Although “Exoteric Teaching” eventually hints at an important lesson that can be learned from Lessing, its most substantive part is a discussion of Schleiermacher’s way of reading Plato and his argument against interpreting Plato as an exoteric writer.³³ As the introduction that Schleiermacher wrote for the first volume of his groundbreaking translation of the Platonic dialogues into German shows, he, like many earlier writers but unlike many of his successors, was very much alive to the problem of exotericism.³⁴ While doing away with what he sees as the most common misconceptions of earlier interpretations, Schleiermacher reports that past scholars “have formed the opinion, induced partly by individual statements of Plato himself [and] partly by a widespread tradition, which has preserved itself since antiquity, of an esoteric and exoteric [dimension] in philosophy, as if his proper wisdom were either not at all contained in Plato’s writings or only in secret allusions, which are difficult to locate.” While Schleiermacher’s attempt to refute the opinion that Plato wrote exoterically is complex because, according to his judgment, the concept is “utterly vague” and “has cultivated itself in the most manifold forms” (*hat sich*

³¹ *Philosophie und Gesetz*, 30 and 35; cf. 41 and 60. Fritz Bamberger calls attention to the ultimate target of Strauss’s “penetrating criticism” of Julius Guttman: “Strauss’ answer is implicit in his criticism. He recognized that Guttman’s concept of philosophy was strongly conditioned by Schleiermacher. He pointed out that it was in the tradition of Schleiermacher that Guttman, like other modern philosophers, had replaced the medieval concept of belief—rationalistic or supernaturalistic, but in any case intellectualistic—with one built on the ‘innerness of the religious consciousness’ (*Innerlichkeit des religiösen Bewusstseins*). Strauss rejected this concept” (“Julius Guttman—Philosopher of Judaism,” *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 5, no. 1 [1960]: 19–20).

³² “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” 28.

³³ It is no accident that Plato forms the contentious point of Strauss’s confrontation with Schleiermacher: “What philosophy is seems to be inseparable from the question of how to read Plato” (Seth Benardete, “Strauss on Plato,” in *The Argument of the Action: Essays on Greek Poetry and Philosophy*, ed. Ronna Burger and Michael Davis [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 407).

³⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, “Einleitung,” in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Lutz Käppel and Johanna Loehr (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), section 4, vol. 3, 15–59. Schleiermacher published his introduction for the first time in the first edition (1805) of *Platons Werke*. However, the corrections from the second edition (1817) reflect his mature position.

in die mannigfaltigsten Gestalten ausgebildet),³⁵ two views of exotericism stand out: (1) The pre-Platonic Pythagoreans declared certain *subjects* to be “esoteric,” such as the political teaching that they did not wish to discuss in public.³⁶ (2) Those post-Platonic thinkers who mixed Socratic philosophy with sophistry used the distinction between exoteric and esoteric to refer to two different *manners of treatment or presentation*: what could not be explained in a popular or “exoteric” lecture in front of laymen, but could very well be explained in a lecture for an expert audience, was here called “esoteric.”³⁷

Schleiermacher strongly denies that either of these two views of exotericism is correct in the case of Plato: “in whichever of the two senses one would want to apply these concepts to the Platonic writings and philosophy, in order to divide thereby both into two parts, one will get caught up everywhere.”³⁸ In Schleiermacher’s eyes, the latter view—according to which there is one genre of philosophic writings that is easy to understand, that is, popular or “exoteric,” and another genre of philosophic writings that is hard to understand, that is, scientific or “esoteric”³⁹—is fruitless with regard to Plato, because all of Plato’s writings are hard to understand and therefore he “could have confided his most difficult and most mysterious wisdom just as well” through

³⁵ Ibid., 23–24.

³⁶ “For among the first Pythagoreans this distinction [between an exoteric and esoteric philosophy] referred so immediately to the subject [*Inhalt*], that subjects were denoted as esoteric about which they did not want to talk beyond the bounds of their most intimate association; and it is to be supposed that their political teaching [*politisches System*] occupied the place of the esoteric [philosophy] far more than their metaphysical speculations, which were as imperfect as they were above suspicion. But at that time philosophy was bound up with a practical fraternization [*praktische Verbrüderung*] which afterwards did not occur again among the Hellenes” (ibid., 25).

³⁷ “In later times, by contrast, that was principally called esoteric which could not be communicated in the popular manner of presentation [*in dem populären Vortrag*], to which, after the admixture of the Sophists with Socratic philosophers some condescended, and the distinction [between an exoteric and esoteric philosophy] therefore referred immediately to the manner of presentation [*Vortrag*], and only mediately, and on account of the other [that is, the manner of presentation] to the subject matter” (ibid.).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ever since Jacob Bernays’s *Die Dialoge des Aristoteles in ihrem Verhältniss zu seinen übrigen Werken* (Berlin: W. Hertz, 1863), German scholars have debated the question of exotericism intensively by the example of Aristotle’s multiple but enigmatic references to *exōterikoi logoi*. They seem to have settled on the view that the term primarily refers to a genre. Cf. Michael Erler, “Philosophische Literaturformen,” in *Der Neue Pauly: Enzyklopädie der Antike*, ed. Hubert Cancik (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2000), 9:874: “In Aristotle, but probably already in Plato, one can distinguish three areas in which philosophical texts were used: literary works (‘dialogues’) for the public; ‘exoteric’ exercises or public courses of instruction; and strictly academic lectures and discussions within the school.” See Konrad Gaiser, “Exoterisch/esoterisch,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), 2:865–67.

these writings.⁴⁰ The Pythagorean view, on the other hand, which implies that Plato spoke about certain issues only within the confines of the Academy and on principle never in writing, almost refutes itself because “in the field of philosophy nothing might be found on which a judgment could not be encountered in [Plato’s] writings, [expressed] either directly and clearly or at least according to its reasons [*den Gründen nach*].”⁴¹

Setting aside other differences for the moment, one cannot fail to notice that Strauss, who does not explicitly mention Schleiermacher’s critique of these two versions of exotericism in “Exoteric Teaching,” agrees with him in rejecting them. Like Schleiermacher, Strauss would object to those interpreters of Plato who follow (to use Schleiermacher’s vocabulary) either the Pythagoreans or the Socratic sophists. While both Strauss and Schleiermacher are convinced that the dialogues are the sole basis for understanding Plato’s teaching, the two groups in question give up the material completeness of the dialogues. The so-called Pythagoreans—very much like the proponents of the Tübingen School in the twentieth century—do not rely on the dialogues but have recourse to an oral tradition.⁴² Orality, while being the original form of philosophic communication and therefore a conceivable option for the transmission of the esoteric teaching,⁴³ has major defects: not

⁴⁰ Schleiermacher, “Einleitung,” 25–26. Schleiermacher’s critique of this version of exotericism is also directed against Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann, one of the most important interpreters of Plato at the time. According to Tennemann, Plato investigated subjects “about which most confused and most erroneous notions prevailed, but which had acquired such a reputation by virtue of their age, by virtue of their connection to holy truths, [as well as] by virtue of the protection of priests and the state, that they were considered to be an inviolable property of humankind.” Plato therefore “chose the dialogical form by which he could say truths without being responsible for them.” Based on these considerations, Tennemann asserts that it is likely that “the writings of his esoteric philosophy were written in a different form.” (Tennemann, *System der Platonischen Philosophie* [Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1792], 1:128. On the “esoteric” writings, cf. 114, 137, 141, 149, 162–64, and 264–66. See also Tennemann, *Geschichte der Philosophie* [Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1799], 2:205–22.)

⁴¹ Schleiermacher, “Einleitung,” 26. Cf. Plato, *Seventh Letter* 341c.

⁴² For a short but lucid introduction to the approach of this school, see Thomas A. Szlezák, “The Tübingen Approach,” in *The Continuum Companion to Plato*, ed. Gerald A. Press (London: Continuum, 2012), 303–4. Cf. also Vittorio Hösle, “The Tübingen School,” in *Brill’s Companion to German Platonism*, ed. Alan Kim (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 328–48. Unfortunately, Strauss’s position was not adequately portrayed in the fruitless controversy between Szlezák and Tanja Staehler in “Plato’s Unwritten Doctrines: A Discussion,” *Journal of Ancient Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2014): 160–66. On this question, see my review of Melzer’s *Philosophy Between the Lines* in *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 123, no. 1 (2016): 285–89.

⁴³ In “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” Strauss makes clear that those ancient philosophers who had become convinced of the essential difference between philosophers and nonphilosophers had to choose one of two ways but then discusses only the latter: “They must conceal their opinions from all but philosophers, either by limiting themselves to oral instruction of a carefully selected group of pupils, or by writing about the most important subject by means of ‘brief indication’” (“Persecution

only does oral communication require permanent political stability and perfect comprehension on the part of each successor, it also limits the potential audience to those who happen to be a link in the chain of the tradition.⁴⁴ Therefore, oral *traditio* is very unlikely to achieve the goal of preserving over time an undistorted *traditum* for the intended audience.⁴⁵ In light of these considerations it becomes clear that the observation of Plato's Socrates that writings are naturally accessible to all who can read is not only a warning but also a promise.⁴⁶

While the Pythagoreans and their modern successors tear apart the material completeness of the dialogues by assuming the existence of an oral tradition that communicates certain "esoteric" subjects independently of the writings, the Socratic sophists make the very same mistake in a different manner. According to their view, "exoteric" books are intended for nonspecialists outside the school, while other writings are "esoteric," that is, intended only for the students within the school. The main task for the interpreter is therefore to distinguish between the two genres and to disregard⁴⁷ all books that belong to the former since they contain exclusively "exoteric" matters that are philosophically well-nigh worthless.⁴⁸ This rather crude way

and the Art of Writing," 34–35, my italics).

⁴⁴ On this question, see the discussion of "Diaspora" in "The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*" (1941), in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 48–51.

⁴⁵ In the manuscript of "Exoteric Teaching," Strauss crossed out a sentence that seems to turn this line of argument against Schleiermacher: "[Schleiermacher] forgets the fact that Plato has not written his dialogues for his pupils only, but rather as a possession for all times, or that not all readers of Plato are pupils of Plato" (*Reorientation*, 280n50). For the expression "possession for all times," see Thucydides, *Historiae* 1.22.4.

⁴⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus* 275d9–e3. Cf. "Persecution and the Art of Writing," 35.

⁴⁷ According to a widespread though probably spurious tradition, Andronicus of Rhodes, Aristotle's eleventh successor as head of the peripatetic school, did not include the "exoteric" writings in his edition of Aristotle's works. —As I have indicated in note 39 above, Aristotle's usage of *exōterikoi logoi* has led many scholars to believe that the term always refers to a genre of writings. This view, which entirely ignores the crucial fact that there is no consistent antonym to "exoteric" throughout the *corpus Aristotelicum*, can easily be refuted on the basis of *Physics* Δ 10 because the *exōterikoi logoi* (217b31) mentioned here simply cannot be understood as referring to other writings by Aristotle.

⁴⁸ Hegel's critique of Tennemann's notion of exotericism (cf. note 40 above) in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* emphasizes the absurdity of a *material* division of exoteric and esoteric teaching: "How simpleminded! This makes it look as if the philosopher is in possession of his thoughts in the same way as of external goods. But the thoughts are something utterly different. Instead of the reverse, the philosophic idea is in possession of the human being. When philosophers elaborate on philosophic subjects, they follow of necessity [the course of] their ideas; they cannot keep them in their pockets. Even when speaking externally [*äußerlich*] to some people, the idea must be contained [in this speech], if the matter [*Sache*] has any content at all. It does not take much to hand over an external item [*Sache*], but the communication of an idea requires skill. The idea always remains something esoteric; hence, one does not merely have the exoteric [*das Exoterische*] of the philosophers. These notions are

of dividing a twofold audience by membership cards is problematic, not only because every successful school has to include a variety of disciples,⁴⁹ but also because it is to be expected that all writings become public eventually. Its political precariousness alone renders this “exotericism” impractical. Hence, Strauss was fully aware that if there is any need at all for exotericism, “no written exposition can be strictly speaking esoteric.”⁵⁰

After debunking these two views of exotericism in the introduction to his translation of Plato’s dialogues, Schleiermacher mentions a third view, which he does not ascribe to a specific group, one that for him is not even worth discussing in any detail: “And those indeed who trace back the distinction between the esoteric [and the exoteric teaching] merely to the quarrel with polytheism and with the popular religion, in fact dissolve [*aufheben*] [the distinction] completely and either make it into a legal protection [*rechtliche Verwahrung*]⁵¹—which would be highly insufficient because Plato’s principles on that topic are clear enough to read in his writings, so that one can scarcely believe that his pupils might have needed further instruction, the publication of which he shied away from—or into a childish performance [*kindische Veranstaltung*], which delights itself in saying in a loud voice behind closed doors what in fact may also be said publicly but only in a low voice.”⁵¹ This statement provides the first vulnerable point in Schleiermacher’s argument, which Strauss exploits in “Exoteric Teaching”: only because Schleiermacher refrains from calling a spade a spade, Strauss points out, is he able to lend credibility to the view that Plato did not rely on “legal protection,” that is,

superficial” (*Werke* [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986], 19:21–22). Cf. 76–77: “One does not have to make the distinction [of the esoteric and the exoteric] as if Plato had two such philosophies: one for the world, for the people; the other, the internal, saved for the confidants. The esoteric is the speculative that is written and printed and nevertheless remains hidden for those who have little interest in straining themselves. It is not a secret but still hidden.” See Strauss’s reference to Hegel in the later plan of “Exoteric Teaching” (*Reorientation*, 291).

⁴⁹ With one eye to the centrifugal forces within the philosophical school founded by Strauss himself, Heinrich Meier writes in his “Preface to the American Edition”: “For the school, no less than for the commonwealth, it holds true that different addressees have to be addressed differently, that they grasp the teaching differently and pass it on differently” (Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. Marcus Brainard [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], xix; cf. 15 with xvii–xx). For Strauss’s own critique of philosophical schools, see his “Restatement on Xenophon’s *Hiero*,” 113–16.

⁵⁰ “How to Study Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*” (1948), in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 187. Cf. “On a New Interpretation of Plato’s Political Philosophy,” *Social Research* 13, no. 4 (1946): 349: “According to the *Seventh Letter*, as well as according to the *Phaedrus*, no writing composed by a serious man can be quite serious.” Cf. Plato, *Seventh Letter* 344c1–d2 and *Phaedrus* 276d1–e3 and 277e5–278b4.

⁵¹ Schleiermacher, “Einleitung,” 26.

that Plato refrained from concealing his denial of the religious convictions of the city even though such impiety was forbidden in Athens under penalty of death.⁵² The ambiguity of the expression “polytheism and the popular religion” enables Schleiermacher, according to Strauss, to assert that Plato’s “principles” on the topic are easily recognizable in his writings. If, however, “Schleiermacher had used the less ambiguous expression ‘belief in the existence of the gods worshipped by the city of Athens,’ he could not have said that Plato’s opposition to that belief is clearly expressed in his writings.”⁵³ Thus, Strauss not only calls into question Schleiermacher’s criticism of exotericism for reasons of political caution, but he also provides a toehold for that argument in favor of exotericism that he would later elaborate most prominently in “Persecution and the Art of Writing”: if a writer tries to conceal an opinion from the censor for fear of persecution but nevertheless wants to communicate his true thoughts to the reader, he must write in a way that achieves both ends.⁵⁴

However, Strauss’s most important objection to Schleiermacher’s criticism is a different one. In “Persecution and the Art of Writing” Strauss makes clear that Schleiermacher’s major point against those interpretations that distinguish between Plato’s exoteric and esoteric teachings is his “unusually able

⁵² “Socrates was executed for not believing in the gods of Athens, in the gods of the city. By considering and reconsidering this fact, we grasp the ultimate reason why political life and philosophic life, even if compatible for almost all practical purposes, are incompatible in the last analysis: political life, if taken seriously, meant belief in the gods of the city, and philosophy is the denial of the gods of the city” (“The Spirit of Sparta and the Taste of Xenophon,” 531–32). “In the time of Xenophon, impiety constituted a criminal offence. Thus philosophy, which is essentially incompatible with acceptance of the gods of the city, was as such subject to persecution. Philosophers had therefore to conceal if not the fact that they were philosophers, at least the fact that they were unbelievers” (ibid., 534).

⁵³ “Exoteric Teaching,” 280.

⁵⁴ For the first elaborate version of this argument, cf. “The Spirit of Sparta and the Taste of Xenophon,” 534. In the very same article, Strauss indicates the limitations of this argument: “It would, however, betray too low a view of the philosophic writers of the past if one assumed that they concealed their thoughts *merely* for fear of persecution or of violent death” (ibid., 535, my italics). Strauss makes a similar remark in the “Introduction” to *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, where he calls persecution “the crudest reason” for exotericism (17). This remark, among others, allows the reader to see why the “Preface” claims that the “Introduction” states the problem “from the side of philosophy” (5). —According to Steven Jay Lenzner, by largely avoiding the topic in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* Strauss points to the fact “that persecution is of secondary importance when compared with the other concerns that prompt authors to write exoterically.” “In three of the book’s five chapters, including the ‘Introduction’ and the central essay on Maimonides, Strauss fails to employ ‘persecution’ even once” (Lenzner, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Freedom of Thought: The Rediscovery of the Philosophic Arts of Reading and Writing* [PhD diss., Harvard University, 2003], 26–27; cf. 24–25). See also Christopher Lynch, “A Presentation of Exotericism in Classical Political Philosophy,” in *Toward Natural Right and History*, 122–23.

argument...that there is only *one* Platonic teaching.”⁵⁵ Schleiermacher’s writings on Plato indeed emphasize, time and again, the unity of Plato’s thought, which is reflected in the unity of his teaching,⁵⁶ and Schleiermacher blames those who distinguish between exoteric and esoteric teachings for tearing this unity apart.⁵⁷ At the same time, Schleiermacher supports his rejection of exotericism by taking seriously the difficulties that had led some scholars to deny the unity of Plato’s philosophy or its doctrinal presentation. According to Strauss’s account in “Exoteric Teaching,” Schleiermacher explains the appearance of multiplicity in Plato that had allegedly misled many scholars with the observation that while there is only *one* Platonic teaching, “there is, so to speak, *an infinite number of degrees of the understanding of that teaching*: it is the same teaching which the beginner understands inadequately, and which only the perfectly trained student of Plato understands adequately.”⁵⁸

The seeming multiplicity that overshadows the underlying unity is, then, due to the process of understanding. In this process, the reader starts out with an imperfect and therefore fragmentary understanding of the teaching that will improve gradually and continuously *ad infinitum*. While the understanding thus changes, the teaching that is understood remains one and the same. Plato ensures, according to Schleiermacher’s theory, that this ongoing enhancement of the reader’s understanding has the character of a “self-activity” (*Selbsttätigkeit*).⁵⁹ Plato forces his readers to think for themselves by writing in the literary form of a dialogue, that is, by not teaching directly what the reader is searching for in a treatise but by “exposing the [reader’s] soul to the necessity to search for [the end of the investigation] and to guide [the soul] to the way on which it can be found.”⁶⁰ For this purpose, Plato, in Schleiermacher’s presentation, first brings the reader to realize his state of ignorance and then

⁵⁵ “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” 28, my italics.

⁵⁶ Cf. esp. Schleiermacher, “Einleitung,” 21–22.

⁵⁷ Cf., once again, *ibid.*, 24–25.

⁵⁸ “Exoteric Teaching,” 280, my italics. I here quote the wording of the manuscript and the alternative reading of the typewritten versions (280n44) because “degrees of understanding” shows more clearly than “levels of understanding” the connection of this statement to the one that occurs later in the essay: “The difference between the beginner and the philosopher (for the perfectly trained student of Plato is no one else but the genuine philosopher) is a difference not of degree, but of kind” (281).

⁵⁹ Schleiermacher, “Einleitung,” 30. Cf. also 29–33, 50, and 583. On the self-motion of the soul, see, for example, Plato, *Phaedrus* 245c5–246a1.

⁶⁰ Schleiermacher, “Einleitung,” 31. On rhetoric as *psychagōgia*, see Plato, *Phaedrus* 261a7ff. and 271c10ff. Cf. also Plato, *Gorgias* 452e9–453a5 with Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen*, in Gorgias von Leontinoi, *Reden, Fragmente und Testimonien*, ed. Thomas Buchheim, 2nd ed. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2012), 2–16. See my review of Ulrike Weichert’s study of Strauss’s hermeneutics in *Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 21, no. 1–2 (2014): 302.

relays the actual thought to the reader indirectly in two ways. On one hand, Plato achieves this indirect communication by “weaving contradictions into a riddle to which the intended thought is the only possible solution” and giving “in a seemingly strange and accidental manner such allusions as will be found and understood only by him who searches genuinely and independently.”⁶¹ On the other hand, he communicates indirectly by dressing up “the actual investigation with another [investigation], not as if with a veil but as if with an adnate skin [*angewachsene Haut*], which conceals from the inattentive [reader] [*dem Unaufmerksamen*], but only from him, that which actually ought to be observed or found, but which for the attentive [reader] [*dem Aufmerksamen*] sharpens and chastens the sense for the internal coherence.”⁶²

At first sight, Schleiermacher’s remarks about Plato’s two sets of literary devices come very close to Strauss’s own way of reading Plato. Both put emphasis on the fact that Plato teaches in his dialogues through riddles, contradictions, and brief indications, as well as through a meaningful differentiation between the foreground and the background of the text. Unsurprisingly, Strauss praises Schleiermacher in “Exoteric Teaching” for making “five or six extremely important and true remarks about Plato’s literary devices, remarks the subtlety of which has, to my knowledge, never been surpassed or even rivaled since.”⁶³ This proximity between the two thinkers is due to that fact that, unlike many other interpreters, both Schleiermacher and Strauss believe that the literary form of the dialogue merges the advantages of spoken and written communication and therefore has to be seen as Plato’s answer to Socrates’s critique of writing in the final exchanges of the *Phaedrus*.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, closer consideration exposes a deep disagreement between Schleiermacher and Strauss regarding the proper solution of the problem of the Platonic dialogue—a disagreement that manifests itself in two ways.⁶⁵ First, while Schleiermacher stresses the continuous character of the process of understanding, according to Strauss understanding is

⁶¹ Schleiermacher, “Einleitung,” 31.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ “Exoteric Teaching,” 280.

⁶⁴ Cf., for example, Schleiermacher’s “Einleitung,” 29–30 with Strauss’s *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 52–53. It should be noted that Plato’s Socrates does *not* consider writing speeches something shameful (*aischron*) in itself (Plato, *Phaedrus* 277d1–278b4).

⁶⁵ In a letter to Eric Voegelin, February 25, 1951, Strauss credits Schleiermacher as the first one to discover the “problem of the dialogue.” In the same breath, he calls Schleiermacher’s “solution” to this problem “demonstrably false” (*beweisbar falsch*) (*Glaube und Wissen: Der Briefwechsel zwischen Eric Voegelin und Leo Strauss von 1934 bis 1964* [Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2010], 88–89).

characterized not by continuity but by discontinuity. Second, what Schleiermacher takes as an indefinite multiplicity of degrees of understanding turns out, in Strauss's view, to be a strict duality of the Platonic teaching.

In Strauss's eyes, it is this implicitly assumed continuity of the advancement of understanding that has caused Schleiermacher to misinterpret Plato: "Schleiermacher tacitly assumes that the way from the beginning [of the process of understanding] to the end is continuous, whereas, according to Plato, philosophy presupposes a real conversion, *i.e.* a total break with the attitude of the beginner."⁶⁶ Against Plato, Schleiermacher thus describes the phenomenological structure of understanding not as a *periagōgē* but as a continuous process. While Schleiermacher could argue that he was forced to depart from Plato's view (since Plato might have been wrong about the structure of understanding), Strauss shows the high price Schleiermacher had to pay for understanding Plato supposedly better than Plato understood himself. Schleiermacher's assumption of continuity made him blind not only to "the difference between the morality of the beginner and the morality of the philosopher...which is at the bottom of the difference between exoteric and esoteric teaching,"⁶⁷ but also to the very form of rhetoric that, in Strauss's eyes, is employed by Plato. This form of rhetoric, to come to the second point of disagreement between Schleiermacher and Strauss, is compatible with both the material completeness of the dialogues and the unity of the author's thought because it comprises in one and the same text two kinds of teaching, each of which addresses a different audience.⁶⁸ One teaching is conveyed by the explicit

⁶⁶ "Exoteric Teaching," 281. For the meaning of this "conversion," see *Socrates and Aristophanes* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 314. Cf. *City and Man*, 93 and *On Political Philosophy: Responding to the Challenge of Positivism and Historicism*, ed. Catherine H. Zuckert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 78.

⁶⁷ "Exoteric Teaching," 282. Strauss's most radical discussion of this problem, which in Plato comes up as the difference between *aretai politikai* and genuine virtue (for example, *Phaedo* 82a10–b3), can be found in "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*" (1943): "It is hardly necessary to add that it is precisely this view of the non-categorical character of the rules of social conduct which permits the philosopher to hold that a man who has become a philosopher, may adhere in his deeds and speeches to a religion to which he does not adhere in his thoughts; *it is this view, I say, which is underlying the exotericism of the philosophers*" (*Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 139, my italics).

⁶⁸ In his review of Schleiermacher's *Platons Werke*, the classical scholar August Boeckh criticized Schleiermacher's rejection of exotericism and suggested an alternative: according to Boeckh, Plato's true teaching, which he communicated straightforwardly in the Academy, can also be found in some "more or less 'dark corners'" (*mehr oder weniger "dunklen Winkeln"*) of his writings: "Accordingly, the difference of the esoteric and the exoteric [teaching] is based neither on the subjects nor on the external form of the presentation alone, but on the higher or lower degree of the unveiled scientific explanation, in such a way, that the exoteric [teaching], like the myth, has an externally manifest side, which the uninitiated accept, but it also has an internal meaning, which is intelligible only for the initiated.... Plato [in his writings] would have acted coyly in a curious fashion if he would have had

statements that the author deposits in plain view on the surface of the text, while the other teaching is indicated only “between the lines.” This twofold presentation is the reason why the process of the reader’s coming to understand such a text is characterized by discontinuity rather than continuity.

As opposed to Schleiermacher, Lessing would fully agree with Strauss regarding the two points in question: his “experience of what philosophy is and what sacrifices it requires”—an experience which Strauss explicitly calls a “conversion”—led Lessing, according to “Exoteric Teaching,” “in a straight way to the distinction between the two groups of men...and therewith to the distinction between the two ways of presenting the truth.”⁶⁹ Lessing concurred, in other words, with Strauss’s account of Plato’s hermeneutic claim according to which the advancement from the surface teaching of a book to its “hidden” teaching is experienced by the reader as something like a radical turnaround.⁷⁰ But whereas the agreement regarding the strict twofold exotericism is supported in “Exoteric Teaching” with unambiguous quotations from Lessing’s *Ernst und Falk* and from his writings on Leibniz, Strauss illustrates the agreement regarding the experiential discontinuity of understanding by having recourse to a break in Lessing’s life around 1771. While much evidence can be marshaled in favor of Strauss’s interpretation of this biographical break, there is more direct evidence that supports Strauss’s original point. The agreement regarding the experiential discontinuity of exotericism becomes unexpectedly apparent in Lessing’s emphatic approval of Clement of Alexandria’s statement that a careful author can lead his readers to the truth, which indicates in writing what is unwritten.⁷¹ Commenting on this passage, Lessing writes: “He who learns nothing from books except what can be found in the pages of the books, has not made even a half-use of the books.

no esoteric [teaching] [*nichts Esoterisches*]” (August Boeckh, “Kritik der Übersetzung des Platon von Schleiermacher” [1808], in *Gesammelte kleine Schriften* [Leipzig: Teubner, 1872], 7:7).

⁶⁹ “Exoteric Teaching,” 283. For the “sacrifices,” cf. “The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*,” 56: “Freedom of thought being menaced in our time more than for several centuries, we have not only the right but even the duty to explain the teaching of Maimonides, in order to contribute to a better understanding of what freedom of thought means, i.e., what attitude it presupposes and what sacrifices it requires.”

⁷⁰ Seth Benardete emphasizes this structure of understanding: “Something happens in a Platonic dialogue that in its revolutionary unexpectedness is the equivalent to the *periagōgē*, as Socrates calls it, of philosophy itself” (“Strauss on Plato,” 409). The fact that the progress of understanding is experienced as a turnaround does not imply that it happens automatically or could forgo external effort. Rather, as Strauss writes once—and only once—“inquisitorial brutality and recklessness” are necessary “for extorting his serious views from an able writer who tries to conceal them from all but a few” (“How to Study Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*,” 185).

⁷¹ Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.1.10.1.

He who is not enabled by books to learn to understand and judge also what they do not contain; whose mind is not sharpened and enlightened by the books, would be hardly worse off if he had not read any books.”⁷² Another, perhaps less subtle, sign of the striking agreement between Strauss and Lessing is that Lessing simply calls the experience made possible by such carefully written books *die Platonische Entwicklung*, “the Platonic development.”⁷³

Of course, Strauss’s metaphorical description of the hermeneutic experience as a *periagōgē* is itself in need of interpretation and may be best elucidated by giving one or two concrete examples. In “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” Strauss lists several material disagreements, rooted in the principles of modern scholarship, between contemporary historians and their predecessors.⁷⁴ One of these examples is the gulf between the older and the more recent understandings of Thomas Hobbes’s attitude toward religion: Strauss asserts that while many earlier “philosophers and theologians believed that Hobbes was an atheist,” most present-day historians “tacitly or explicitly reject that view.”⁷⁵ In a footnote to this statement, Strauss refers to the studies of five contemporary scholars who oppose the older opinion that Hobbes was an atheist. Among these studies is Strauss’s own book *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft*, which was published more than a decade earlier and in which Strauss asserts that Hobbes came very close to atheism, but was not “an atheist in the theoretical sense of the term.”⁷⁶ While Strauss thus merely alludes to his earlier misinterpretation and recent reassessment of Hobbes’s attitude toward religion,⁷⁷ the reference to his own book

⁷² Lessing, *Sogenannte Briefe an verschiedene Gottesgelehrten, die an seinen theologischen Streitigkeiten auf eine oder andere Weise teil zu nehmen beliebt haben*, in *Werke und Briefe*, 10:196: “Wer aus den Büchern nichts mehr lernt, als was in den Büchern steht, der hat die Bücher nicht halb genutzt. Wen die Bücher nicht fähig machen, daß er auch das verstehen und beurteilen lernt, was sie nicht enthalten; wessen Verstand die Bücher nicht überhaupt schärfen und aufklären, der wäre schwerlich viel schlimmer dran, wenn er auch gar keine Bücher gelesen hätte.”

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ In the central paragraph of the essay, Strauss lists seven items: (1) the distinction between ancients and moderns, (2) Averroës’s attitude toward religion, (3) the Greek physicians’ attitude toward religion, (4) the distinction between exoteric and esoteric teaching, (5) Eusebius of Caesarea’s attitude toward religion, (6) Thomas Hobbes’s attitude toward religion, and (7) the lucidity of the plan of Montesquieu’s *De l’esprit des loix* (“Persecution and the Art of Writing,” 27–29).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 28. Even today, “the dispute over the sincerity of Hobbes’s professions of faith” is “one of the most fundamental and divisive splits in Hobbes scholarship” (Devin Stauffer, *Hobbes’s Kingdom of Light: A Study of the Foundations of Modern Political Philosophy* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018], 83n2; cf. 86 [with n6], 127–28, and 132n8).

⁷⁶ *Die Religionskritik Spinozas*, 145.

⁷⁷ For this reassessment, cf. “On the Basis of Hobbes’s Political Philosophy” (1954), in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 182–89. Cf. *Natural Right and History*, 199n43. On Strauss’s and Hobbes’s approach,

in the footnote of “Persecution and the Art of Writing” is meant to illustrate the typical consequence of the rejection of exotericism. The assumption that there is only one doctrine for all practical purposes amounts to taking the author’s words at face value. By doing so, the reader closes his eyes to the fact that authors in the past did hide their thoughts for political, philosophical, and didactic reasons, or that not everybody has come into the world to bear witness unto the truth in front of everyone.⁷⁸ As Strauss knew from firsthand experience, thinking through the reasons that induce a writer to present his thought in a twofold manner for a twofold audience can be tantamount to a complete turnaround of one’s understanding of that writer. While the young Strauss’s Hobbes was an agnostic, the mature Strauss recognized Hobbes as a philosopher who “expressed himself with great caution in writings which he published with his name on their title pages” but who anticipated in his thought the infamous heretical fragments by Hermann Samuel Reimarus, which were published by Lessing a century later.⁷⁹

The only example for the revolutionary potential of a hermeneutic reorientation even more impressive than the reevaluation of Hobbes is the change in Strauss’s understanding of Maimonides’s *The Guide of the Perplexed*. While Strauss referred to Maimonides in *Die Religionskritik Spinozas* as a “believing Jew,”⁸⁰ a series of careful studies written during the 1930s brought to light the philosopher Maimonides.⁸¹ According to Strauss’s own account, this new interpretation of Maimonides that was sparked by an *aperçu* on Plato was

see Heinrich Meier, “The Renewal of Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion,” 62n77.

⁷⁸ While Christian authors have often used “milk,” instead of “solid food,” in order to communicate the One Truth, Karl Barth calls the distinction between “exoteric” and an “esoteric” teaching *einen unchristlichen Gegensatz*, an “unchristian opposition” (*Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert: Ihre Vorgeschichte und ihre Geschichte* [Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946], 400). Using the examples of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, Frederick J. Crosson underlines the differences between the philosophical tradition of exotericism and the Christian tradition of “latent” teaching: “A central difference is that in the Christian tradition the manifest teaching expressed in similitudes and metaphors and parables aims at communicating the truth, at bearing witness to the truth, in a form in which it is able to be understood (at least partially) by all. There is only one doctrine, presented in different depths of meaning to the two audiences” (“Esoteric versus Latent Teaching” [2005], in *Ten Philosophical Essays in the Christian Tradition* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015], 24).

⁷⁹ “On the Basis of Hobbes’s Political Philosophy,” 189.

⁸⁰ *Die Religionskritik Spinozas*, 238 and 254.

⁸¹ See, above all, the article “The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*,” which was written in 1938 but published for the first time in 1941. For the role Maimonides played in Strauss’s understanding of exotericism, cf. also “Quelques remarques sur la science politique de Maïmonide et de Fârâbi” (1936) and “Der Ort der Vorsehungslehre nach der Ansicht Maimunis” (1937), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:125–58, esp. 137–38, 144–45, 148, and 152–56; see also 134n28 with Strauss’s marginal note (160); and 179–90, esp. 183–87.

crucial for the development of his own understanding of exotericism.⁸² The fact that neither Maimonides nor Hobbes played a decisive role in “Exoteric Teaching,” whereas Lessing did, shows not so much that the essay should be understood as an autobiographical supplement that informs the reader of a further source of Strauss’s insight, but rather that the *periagōgē*, which we associate with the name of Plato, can be experienced when studying philosophers from any time or place who engage in exoteric teaching.

⁸² Cf. “A Giving of Accounts,” 3: “Maimonides was, to begin with, wholly unintelligible to me. I got the first glimmer of light when I concentrated on his prophetology and, therefore, the prophetology of the Islamic philosophers who preceded him. One day when reading in a Latin translation Avicenna’s treatise *On the Division of the Sciences*, I came across this sentence (I quote from memory): the standard work on prophecy and revelation is Plato’s *Laws*. Then I began to understand Maimonides’s prophetology and eventually, as I believe, the whole *Guide of the Perplexed*. Maimonides never calls himself a philosopher; he presents himself as an opponent of the philosophers. He used a kind of writing which is in the precise sense of the term, exoteric.”