

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Fall 2022

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Catherine H. Zuckert, ed., *Leo Strauss on Political Philosophy: Responding to the Challenge of Positivism and Historicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018, xxxviii + 232 pp., \$35 (paper).

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In the early 1950s, the students of Leo Strauss began to make transcripts of his lectures at the University of Chicago. Not long after, audio recordings of his lectures began to be compiled. Errors were almost unavoidable in the written transcripts, and over the years the audio files began to lose quality. Strauss himself never edited or corrected either, but beginning in 2008, the Leo Strauss Center at the University of Chicago initiated a project to preserve the audio files and improve the old transcriptions, so that today acceptable if not perfect records of most of Strauss's course lectures are readily available via the internet.

A few of these new course transcripts have been studied by leading Strauss scholars and printed as books by the University of Chicago Press in the Leo Strauss Transcript Series. At present, there are four titles in the series, with three of these devoted to individual authors or particular works by individual authors: Paul Franco has edited *Leo Strauss on Hegel* (2019), Richard Velkley has done *Leo Strauss on Nietzsche's "Thus Spoke Zarathustra"* (2017), and Robert Bartlett has produced *Leo Strauss on Plato's "Protagoras"* (2022). The fourth title, *Leo Strauss on Political Philosophy: Responding to the Challenge of Positivism and Historicism*, is the transcript of Strauss's 1965 course "Introduction to Political Philosophy" and the subject of the current review. This course consisted of sixteen lectures, the first seven of which take up the challenge of positivism and then historicism, the next two of which offer an overview of the moderns Hobbes, Rousseau, and Kant, and the final seven of which are devoted to Aristotle's *Politics*. Only the first nine lectures are

contained in the printed book. Volume editor Catherine Zuckert—who was herself a student in the course in 1965 (213n1)—explains that considerations of space made it impossible to print the last seven lectures on the *Politics* (xxvi). Fortunately, those seven lectures have also been edited by Zuckert and her assistants and are available for free in a PDF download from the Leo Strauss Center website. If we want to get a sense of how a contemporary course on the “introduction to political philosophy” should be organized in Strauss’s view, it is vital to study all sixteen lectures even though only the first nine are printed in the book.

The basic structure of the course begins with the two principal obstacles to the study of political philosophy in our time, namely, positivism and historicism, for these two positions deny the very possibility of political philosophy. Once these roadblocks are neutralized or at least rendered questionable, it is possible to turn to political philosophy directly. But turning to political philosophy directly means, Strauss asserts, turning to the study of the history of political philosophy, for even positivism and historicism indirectly admit the importance of such study. In turning to the history of political philosophy, however, the first problem that confronts students is understanding the battle between the ancients and the moderns. Hence the need for the two lectures on the moderns followed by seven on the ancients, although these seven are almost exclusively about Aristotle’s *Politics*. What we are left with, then, is a course titled “Introduction to Political Philosophy” that is disproportionately focused on positivism, historicism, and the *Politics*. Zuckert notes (213) that Strauss offered courses with a similar structure in a seminar on Aristotle’s *Politics* in 1960, in a course titled “Basic Principles of Classical Political Philosophy” in 1961, and in another seminar on the *Politics* in 1967. The implication would seem to be that Strauss viewed the pattern of eliminating positivism and historicism in order to enable a return to the *Politics* as the foundational course of study for beginning political thinkers in our age. Indeed, the “Introduction to Political Philosophy” course was open to undergraduate students as well as graduate students (xi).

In the first section of the course, on removing obstacles, Strauss begins with two lectures explaining in some detail the rise of positivism in the work of Auguste Comte; from Comte he turns to Georg Simmel and then to Max Weber. The treatment of Simmel is still substantial, but relatively little is said about Weber, whose views Strauss had treated at length in *Natural Right and History* (henceforth *NRH*) in 1953. The figure for whom Strauss displays the most respect in this first section of the course, however, is Ernest Nagel.

In *The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation* (1961), Nagel had, in Strauss's view, accepted much of his criticism of positivism articulated in *NRH* (106), even while attempting to rescue other aspects of positivism. The comments on Nagel elicited a number of questions from students in the class meeting; Strauss was forced to delay answering some of them until the beginning of the subsequent or sixth lecture.

That sixth lecture begins in an unanticipated manner, however, for Winston Churchill died the day before it was delivered. Strauss begins with an eloquent comparison between Churchill and Hitler and a sobering reminder of the limitations of political science in the face of tyranny; he also claims that Churchill's *Marlborough* is the greatest historical work of the past century and that Churchill's writings were as important as his political deeds. He concludes his comments on "the indomitable and magnanimous statesman" by reminding his students of the greatness of Churchill and by exhorting them to fulfill their highest duty by reminding themselves of political greatness, asserting that first step toward such greatness is liberating themselves "from the supposition that value statements cannot be factual statements" (123). Of course, in praising Churchill, Strauss has just delivered a series of value statements that he asserts to be factual statements. In other words, Strauss implies that it is not possible to praise and prefer Churchill unless there are value statements that are also factual statements. That Churchill was a much better human being than Hitler is one such statement combining facts and values.

The continued treatment of Nagel and the wayward separation of facts and values at the beginning of lecture 6 reaches the conclusion that Nagel may have avoided some of the problems of positivism but not the crucial ones, and that in any case Nagel succumbed in the end to historicism, which is, in Strauss's eyes, the more dangerous position anyway. His treatment of historicism is built around interpretations of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. The first of these authors avoided the difficulties of historicism only by positing an untenable "absolute moment"; the second by lapsing back into the metaphysics of the "will to power." Heidegger is the philosopher, Strauss suggests, willing to follow historicism all the way to its end. Perhaps unanticipated in Strauss's treatment of historicism is his extended criticism of the English scholar R. G. Collingwood, whom he suggests is more accessible to his English-speaking student audience than the enigmatic Heidegger and his cryptic study of *Sein* and *das Seiende*. Strauss had published a long review of

Collingwood in 1953, however, and relies on that study especially in chapter 7 of his introductory course.

As already indicated, after refuting or at least casting doubt upon positivism and historicism, Strauss insists that even those two doctrines must accept the need to study the history of political philosophy. This step in the “argument” of the course’s design is the least clear part of the entire volume, at least to this reviewer. That historicism would need to fuse philosophy and history is surely correct, but it is less clear why such an interest in the history of political philosophy is necessary to the positivist (169–71; cf. xxi–xxii). In any case, the eighth and ninth lectures take up the question of the war between the ancients and the moderns—beginning with the moderns. Strauss published *Thoughts on Machiavelli* in 1958, but Machiavelli’s voice is not emphasized in these course lectures as much as that of Hobbes, whom Strauss views as being a very visible founder of modern political philosophy. Strauss also has rather more to say about Rousseau in these chapters, and his comments on Kant are more extensive here than in his other published works. As has already been intimated, in turning to the ancients, Strauss’s treatment of Aristotle is much more complete here than in his published writings. Sometimes Strauss simply reads from Aristotle’s text—or has a student (in one extended case, “Mr. Bruell”) read from it—and follows up with his own running commentary.

In the general note to the Leo Strauss Transcript Project printed at the beginning of the book, editor in chief Nathan Tarcov states, “However enlightening the transcripts are, they cannot be regarded as the equivalent of works that Strauss himself wrote for publication” (ix). This is surely true, but it is also impossible to read the transcripts without simultaneously thinking about Strauss’s published writings. In reading the transcript for “Introduction to Political Philosophy,” it is therefore difficult not to think about how these lectures cast light upon *NRH* (1953, but based on the Walgreen Lectures of 1949) and *The City and Man* (1964).

Both the course “Introduction to Political Philosophy” and *NRH* begin by removing the same two obstacles to political philosophy, namely, positivism and historicism, although “Introduction” begins with positivism and *NRH* begins with historicism. Both works also go on to treat of classical or ancient versus modern natural right, although “Introduction” begins with the moderns and *NRH* with the ancients. For reasons such as these, it would seem that *NRH* is confirmed as Strauss’s introductory book for political philosophy just as “Introduction to Political Philosophy” is his introductory course. There are, however, also notable differences between the two. The positivist

treated most in *NRH* is Weber rather than Comte. *NRH* also features Burke and Locke rather than Kant and Nietzsche.

What is most obviously different about “Introduction” and *NRH*, however, is the extensive treatment of Aristotle’s *Politics* in “Introduction” but its almost complete absence from *NRH*. Strauss’s most extended comment on the *Politics* in his published writings is the first essay of *The City and Man*—although even there he writes mostly about the *Nicomachean Ethics* rather than the *Politics* and seeks to establish primarily that Aristotle was the inventor of political science but not political philosophy. In short, in order to grasp the significance of the *Politics* to Strauss’s plan for introducing students to political thought in our time, the course transcripts turn out to be essential or—to use a word Strauss frequently relies on—“crucial.”

What is “obviously” missing in Strauss’s introductory course is much emphasis on Machiavelli, on Plato, or on Alfarabi, Maimonides, and whole period of medieval political thought. This reviewer presumes to suggest that Strauss viewed his thoughts on the first and the third of these topics as too advanced for an introductory course. In the final lecture of “Introduction to Political Philosophy” he says that he emphasizes Aristotle’s *Politics* over the works of Plato simply because Aristotle spoke in his own name and is hence easier for beginners to grasp. It is interesting to contemplate that even in “leaving out” material from his course, Strauss displays a keen awareness of the needs of his audience.

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Words from languages not rooted in Latin should be transliterated to English. Foreign expressions that have not become part of English should be accompanied by translation into English.

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