

The Use and Abuse of Utopianism

On Leo Strauss's Philosophic Politics

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Abstract: Much has been written in the last few years regarding Leo Strauss's political attachments, especially with respect to his purported influence over American neo-conservatives. Problematically, Strauss scrupulously avoided explicit ideological entanglements, rarely addressed particular policy debates, and left little guidance for the statesman or thoughtful commentator interested in drawing practical political inferences from his philosophical writing. To add further ambiguity to already muddy waters, Strauss's discussion of the relation between prudence and philosophic insight coupled with the many and incompatible roles he assigns to the philosopher within the city make it unclear if there is anything at all that philosophy can teach us of political significance. The following essay aims to explain Strauss's view of the political function of philosophy in light of his distinction between classic and modern utopianism and what he calls in *On Tyranny* "philosophic politics."

Keywords: Leo Strauss, political philosophy, political theory, prudence

Sydney Smith once wrote, "I never read a book before reviewing it; it prejudices one so."¹ While few would sincerely defend this reinterpretation of blind review, it certainly accommodates the increasing freight of demands placed on publication in a hyper-accelerated age of "business at the speed of light."² The burden of these demands is never more salient than in the intersection (if not internecine conflict) of academia and public affairs; scholarly rigor is often attenuated, if not simply overwhelmed by the need

for timeliness. More simply, for a recent monograph to make the current affairs section of a popular bookstore it is not enough that it be recent, it must also be current. While such exacting attention to the dispatch of delivery might be a virtue in daily reportage, it is often a vice for work that requires patient, painstaking meticulousness.

This proverbial tug-of-war between the scholar and his publisher's timetable is prevalent in the recent spate of interest in the political philosopher and German émigré, Leo Strauss (1899–1973). Best known for his theory of esoteric writing (given its most detailed exposition in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* [1952]), Strauss was a central figure in the critique of positivistic social science; the renewal of interest in natural law theory; and the attempt to curb some of the excesses of modernity (for example, relativism and historicism) through a reinvigoration of the study of classical thought. It might reasonably strike some as surprising that Strauss has become a subject of such contentious debate, especially given that he wrote virtually nothing on contemporary public policy, foreign or domestic, and generally abstained from the theater of public polemics. For all the academic controversy Strauss generated during his lifetime, he managed to "conceal his eccentricity beneath the persona of a medieval rabbi."³ However, Strauss's general obscurity has recently and quickly transformed into infamy; it would be hard to imagine one writing this line only a few years ago: "A specter is haunting America, and that specter is, strange to say, Leo Strauss."⁴

While his philosophical thought has suffered from conspicuous and often pointed neglect,⁵ the current controversy surrounding his work is motivated less by a reexamination of Strauss's scholarly achievements than by allegations of his influence on the neoconservative cabal that has, according to some, hijacked American foreign policy. According to various interpretations of those alarmed by Strauss's sway over current policy, his now-powerful adherents in

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the Bush administration have managed to remake American policy in the service of their imperial ambitions; out of loyalty to the conservative Likud party in Israel; as an expression of their ethnocentric dismissal of non-Western cultures (particularly Islamic cultures they perceive as incongruent with civilization itself); or out of recognition that a decisive *dénouement* to the Crusades has presented itself. Whatever the interpretation, the common thread is the belief that such measures have been secured by a peculiarly Straussian demagoguery, apparently modeled on Strauss's interpretation of the noble lie in Plato's *Republic* (Book III). In this view, just as Plato advocated and practiced the public dissemination of salutary falsehoods to shield the nonphilosophic many from truths that would undermine their fidelity to the city, modern-day players such as Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle contrive apocryphal stories of weapons of mass destruction to galvanize public support for their campaigns. On the basis of this tendentious logic, there is a direct path that runs from Strauss's understanding of Platonic rhetoric to the invasion of Iraq.

The majority of this criticism, however, is proffered independent of either a serious, sustained analysis of Strauss's political theory or its implications for concrete policy formulation, and therefore cannot accurately assess the actual scope and breadth of his influence on our government. Much of it is too encumbered by partisan ire to present a balanced account, and reduces to an intemperate propaganda of its own.⁶ Conversely, even the literature that has shown great sympathy for Strauss's thought, while certainly more even-handed in its representations, have tended to obscure the issues by assuming either that there are no specific policy inferences that can be drawn from Strauss's theoretical labors or that such implications are hopelessly nebulous.⁷ Much of it is too quickly contented with introductory treatments that are designed to counter the more febrile caricatures that have gained unfortunate currency; this approach often yields a reasonable and astute scholarly rendering, but forestalls more daring interpretations that are not compelled to make the most meretricious misinterpretations the necessary point of departure.⁸ Generally speaking, these commentators have correctly emphasized that above all else Strauss was a philosopher and that his thought does not easily translate into policy directive. On the other hand, they have also tended to overlook the many ways in which Strauss's work can be illuminating for our current foreign policy and for policy in general.⁹

Still, even before Strauss's work became a popular object of politically motivated contempt, one could rightly discern that his "iconoclastic writings have long exercised a profound subterranean cultural influence which is now emerging more and more into broad daylight . . ."¹⁰ Not only did Strauss leave an impressive oeuvre that continues to spark and shape political debate, he also founded a school large enough and intellectually prolific enough to spawn its own internal fissures that are often philosophically captivating in themselves. John Murley's massive *The Legacy of Leo Strauss* shows that Strauss's imprint on political thought, even when exercised through alternative avenues well off the profession's well-trod paths, has been

deep and far-reaching.¹¹ Among other things, Leo Strauss has bequeathed Straussianism, and our assessment of this peculiar inheritance has become nearly as important, if not intimately connected with, our understanding of Strauss's significance as a political philosopher.

The question of the meaning of Strauss's significance as a political philosopher and the meaning of his legacy, and the question of the meaning and significance of Straussianism, is inextricably tied to the question of what practical guidance can be gleaned from political philosophy. Strauss's own scattered discussions of this issue revolve around the different definitions of political philosophy and the varying and often incompatible roles he assigns to the philosopher within the city. It is far from certain that political philosophy promises to teach the statesman much about his craft, or differently stated, that prudence requires or even welcomes philosophic support.

Strauss's most sustained treatment of the relationship between political philosophy and political action is given in a lecture delivered for a general seminar at the New School for Social Research in 1942, titled "What Can We Learn from Political Theory?"¹² The crux of the problem is partially indicated by Strauss's reservations regarding the title of the lecture, which was not of his own choosing; in place of political theory he would rather substitute the term "political philosophy." This "terminological question," however, is "not entirely verbal" because "political theory implies that there is such a thing as theoretical knowledge of things political."¹³ In other words, political theory is premised on a repudiation of the "traditional division of the sciences into theoretical and practical sciences."¹⁴ If the traditional view holds that all political knowledge is practical knowledge, and that concomitantly political philosophy "belongs to the practical sciences," the term "political theory" not only undermines this distinction but counters that the "basis of all reasonable practice is pure theory" and that "a purely theoretical, detached knowledge of things political is the safest guide for political action."¹⁵

Furthermore, the term "political theory" presupposes that "theory is essentially different, not only from practice, but above all, from observation."¹⁶ According to Strauss, the "original meaning" of theory "does not warrant at all the distinction of theory from observation" and "certainly does not justify the identification, or almost identification, of theory with an essentially hypothetical kind of knowledge."¹⁷ While elsewhere Strauss gives different treatments of political science (in the modern versus Aristotelian sense) and political theory,¹⁸ they both presuppose that "political knowledge as a whole, consists of the observation of 'data' and hypothetical explanation of these 'data.'" Thus, the kinship between the two rests on a common objective: they provide the "perfection of man's natural understanding of the natural world," dismissive of the "world of common sense" or of the "world in which we live and act" and reduces the "natural world" to the "product of a theoretical attitude."¹⁹ The deepest connection between political theory and modern political science is that both are modeled on a "purely theoretical, detached knowledge of things physical," which has as its principal object the "conquest of

nature.”²⁰ Both, therefore, are instruments of the modern Enlightenment project.

In contradistinction to political theory, Strauss offers this view of political philosophy:

By political philosophy, we understand the coherent reflection carried on by politically minded people, concerning the essentials of political life as such, and the attempt to establish, on the basis of such reflection, the right standards of judgment concerning political institutions and actions; political philosophy is the attempt to discover the political truth.²¹

However, one might object that even this formulation of political philosophy is not concrete enough to provide genuine guidance for human affairs because “the very term philosophy implies that we do not possess the truth” and that the modest goal of philosophy is “at best possession of clear knowledge of the problems—it is not possession of clear knowledge of the solutions to the problems.” Therefore, if philosophy is “nothing but the genuine awareness” of the “fundamental and comprehensive problems” then “there is no wisdom but only the quest for wisdom.”²² Strauss acknowledges this great difficulty when he bluntly asserts that “. . . if political philosophy is limited to understanding the fundamental political alternatives, it is of no practical value” because it would be unable to “answer the question of what the ultimate goal of wise action is” and would have no recourse but to “delegate the crucial decision to blind choice.”²³

In fact, political philosophy is so radically inadequate in this regard that “even if we could be reasonably certain that a given political philosophy is the true political philosophy”²⁴ it would still be unable to function as a reliable foundation of political judgment. The variety of knowledge that turns out to be “indispensable for reasonable political action”²⁵ is “practical wisdom,” “common sense,” “horse sense,” or a “shrewd estimation of the situation.” If we adhere, as Strauss advises his readers, to the original Aristotelian division of the sciences into practical and theoretical, then “human action had principles of its own which are known independently of theoretical science,” the practical sciences do not depend on the theoretical sciences and are not derivative of them,” and the “sphere governed by “prudence is then in principle self-sufficient or closed.”²⁶ Thus, Strauss can declare: “I have not the slightest doubt as to the possibility of devising an intelligent foreign policy, e.g., without having any recourse to political philosophy,” and that success of such a policy would not depend on a “single lesson in political philosophy.”²⁷

One might expect Strauss to conclude that political philosophy, paradoxically, has nothing to teach us that is useful to actual political life. In fact, Strauss acknowledges the argument that political philosophy is incorrigibly “ineffectual,” that whatever knowledge it might provide us “would not have the slightest influence on the unpredictable course of human events.”²⁸ However, there are surely great political consequences that follow from the public presentation of philosophical ideas; Strauss strongly admonishes Nietzsche for using his “unsurpassable and inexhaustible power of passionate and fascinating speech to make his readers loathe not only socialism and communism, but conservatism, nationalism, and democracy as well.”²⁹ In

short, Nietzsche left his readers with “no choice except that between irresponsible indifference to politics and irresponsible political actions.”³⁰ Strauss’s criticism of Nietzsche, who “made discredited democracy look like a golden age,”³¹ clearly but cautiously connects political philosophy with political action:

What Nietzsche says in regard to political action is much more indefinite and vague than what Marx says. In a sense, all political use of Nietzsche is a perversion of his teaching. Nevertheless, what he said was read by political men and inspired them. He is as little responsible for fascism as Rousseau is responsible for Jacobinism. This means, however, that he is as much responsible for fascism as Rousseau is for Jacobinism.³²

Similarly, one fails to understand Heidegger’s political thought if one fails to see its “intimate connection with the core of his philosophic thought.”³³ While this connection forms “too small a basis” to adequately comprehend the full range of Heidegger’s philosophic purview, this project cannot be completely extricated from the political allegiances he held in 1933 and from the fact that he “welcomed as a dispensation of fate, the verdict of the least wise and the least moderate part of his nation while it was in its least wise and least moderate mood.”³⁴

Furthermore, Strauss denies that “all significant political concepts or theses are the by-product of political life” and that, following Hegel, “philosophy always comes too late for the guidance of political action”; that it is relegated to the modest task of interpreting the “results of political action”; and that “all political ideas seem to go back to political fighters, statesman, lawyers, prophets.”³⁵ The “fundamental philosophic discovery”³⁶ is nature and therefore, the concepts of natural law and natural right have their origin in philosophic thought. This is the “only contribution of philosophy to politics of which we can be absolutely certain,” and which has the significance of setting “an absolute limit to human arbitrariness.”³⁷ This significance is not inconsiderable according to an argument from authority, which states that “political philosophy is the necessary condition of the right order of civil society.”³⁸

What then are we to make of the political significance of political philosophy? By turns it seems to be absolutely necessary and comically feckless. However, prudence is “only de jure and not de facto wholly independent of theoretical science” and “is always endangered by false doctrines about the whole of which man is only a part, by false theoretical opinions.”³⁹ Despite the self-sufficiency of prudence, it is “always in need of defense against such opinions, and that defense is necessarily theoretical.”⁴⁰ This seems to justify the conclusion that political philosophy is the handmaiden to practical prudence; prudence in the hands of statesmen is the singular instrument of sound public policy. Thus, if “political philosophy is necessary to defend a reasonable course of action which was discovered, and embarked upon, independently of political philosophy,” then political philosophy is stripped of its former glory and is reduced to a “sort of political apologetic.”⁴¹ Political philosophy is rescued from uselessness by dint of its rhetorical prowess but at the price of its architectonic status.

Let us set aside, for the moment, that Strauss follows classical political philosophy in rejecting the identification of political philosophy with rhetoric, however useful.⁴² Why is prudence incapable of defending itself against the onslaught of theoretical falsehoods? What sort of limitation or defect does this indicate regarding a practical judgment that is otherwise free of theoretical grounding? Why precisely is nonphilosophic prudence so vulnerable to the pernicious effects of false theory, and is there a particular kind of false theory whose charms prudence is especially susceptible to? In “An Epilogue,” Strauss argues that prudence or “practical wisdom” is severely limited insofar as it is incapable of fully comprehending the natural political ends of man:

The principles of action are the natural ends of man towards which man is by nature inclined and of which he has by nature some awareness. This awareness is the necessary condition for seeking and finding appropriate means for his ends, and for his becoming practically wise or prudent. Practical science, in contradistinction to practical wisdom itself, sets forth coherently the principles of action and the general rules of prudence (“proverbial wisdom”). Practical science raises questions that within practical or political experience, or at any rate on the basis of such experience, reveal themselves to be the most important questions and that are not stated, let alone answered, with sufficient clarity by practical wisdom itself.⁴³

Prudence may not be based on theoretical knowledge, but the objectives at which prudence aims are decisively shaped by a theoretical understanding of the ends that man naturally strives toward. Prudence itself might not require a theoretical demonstration that accounts for its partiality within the whole of human political experience rightly understood, but some awareness of man’s natural ends is a prerequisite for the exercise of practical wisdom. On the basis of the Aristotelian division of the sciences, it might initially appear that prudence is entirely compartmentalized from theoretical wisdom, but, for Aristotle, “political science is identical with political philosophy because science is identical with philosophy.”⁴⁴ Hence, science or philosophy as originally understood encompasses the distinction between theoretical and practical science. While Strauss often asserts that the Aristotelian division of the sciences implies that the principles of practical action are knowable without recourse to theoretical demonstration, this cannot mean that such principles are entirely independent of philosophy itself, of which both the theoretical and practical sciences constitute the primary branches.

Prudence truly becomes independent of philosophy with the advent of the separation of philosophy and science; the creation of a hitherto unheard of “metaphysically neutral physics” paves the way for the “separation of political science from political philosophy as well as the separation of economics and sociology from political science.”⁴⁵ Thus, science does not just become independent of philosophy but also becomes an authority for it. Political science is duly transmogrified according to the scientific model with which the movement of physical bodies are to be studied; political philosophy is dismissed as radically nonscientific. Unlike classical philosophy, this new science understands itself as the perfection of

prescientific consciousness and therefore rejects the significance of common sense as an appropriate starting point for the investigation of things political. The “fundamental premise of present day social science” that Strauss identifies as the “distinction between facts and values” is “alien to that understanding of political things which belong to political life.”⁴⁶ As a consequence, social science “cannot reach clarity about its doings if it does not possess a coherent and comprehensive understanding of what is frequently called the common sense view of political things, i.e., if it does not primarily understand the political things as experienced as they are experienced by the citizen or the statesman.”⁴⁷

The “hidden basis” of this new political science is “the belief in progress or in the rationality of the historical process.”⁴⁸ This belief underlies the “dogmatic assumption”⁴⁹ that a return to classical political philosophy is both impossible and undesirable and attempts to “discover standards whose realization would be necessary, or automatic, and hence no longer the object of mere wish or prayer.”⁵⁰ To “guarantee” the realization of these standards, they must be intentionally lowered; instead of attempting to reconcile or balance the common good or interest with the private good or interest, the common good is reduced to “the object of enlightened self-interest.” Hence, the proper “task of political philosophy became to enlighten people about their self-interest” so that “everyone could be brought to realize they are better off in peace.”⁵¹

Strauss identifies this sanguine expectation of the completion of history by virtue of the mass popularization of enlightened self-interest as “modern utopianism.”⁵² While modern utopianism understands itself as a “hardboiled” realism because it rejects the loftier standards of classical philosophy, it is essentially premised on an irrational exuberance because it postulates that “enlightened self-interest leads to public spiritedness and even to social harmony.”⁵³ Modern utopianism is founded on a profound neglect of the darker recesses of the human soul and “forgets the existence of the ‘forces of evil,’ and the fact that these forces cannot be fought successfully by enlightenment.”⁵⁴ Modern utopianism feigns a thoroughgoing realism by refusing to acknowledge the moral ideals that inform political experience. It is ultimately fantastical because it blithely assumes that scientific progress and political progress are necessary concomitants. Intoxicated by the apparent success involved in the conquest of nature, the modern utopian happily replaces the philosopher and the theologian with the social engineer who ushers in the final stages of a secular, transhuman paradise.

Moreover, modern utopianism is the enemy of prudence because it fails to account for the insuperable limitations placed on man by the obstinacy of nature. Following Machiavelli, it “rejects classical political philosophy because of its orientation by the perfection of the nature of man”⁵⁵ and insists on interpreting all human affairs in light of man’s baser inclinations. By firmly refusing to interpret political life from the perspective of lived political experience in favor of subpolitical phenomena, the new political dispensation also follows Machiavelli by severing wisdom from moderation.⁵⁶ Modern utopianism is “bound to lead to disaster because it makes us underestimate the dangers to

which the cause of decency and humanity is exposed and always will be exposed.”⁵⁷ As Strauss counsels, “it is safer to try to understand the low in light of the high than the high in light of the low.”⁵⁸ For all his spectacular scientific power, “modern man is a blind giant.”⁵⁹

Ancient utopianism, which Strauss evidently prefers, is the appropriate antidote to the excesses of modern utopianism. Unlike its modern counterpart, ancient utopianism takes its bearings by the articulation of the best regime: “The classic natural right doctrine in its original form, if fully developed, is identical with the doctrine of the best regime.”⁶⁰ However, the animating purpose behind the articulation of the best regime is not the implausible actualization of any political ideal, but rather a critical exposition of the limits of political life. In this sense, ancient utopianism is more realistic than modern utopianism; the entire point of constructing the best regime in speech is to let “us see that the city constructed in accordance with this requirement is not possible” and therefore illuminate the “essential limits, the nature, of the city.”⁶¹ In this sense, Plato’s *Republic* provides the “broadest and deepest analysis of political idealism ever made”⁶² and therefore “supplies the most magnificent cure for every form of political ambition.”⁶³ Somewhat paradoxically, the philosophic investigation into the grounds of the best political order prevents “those who are willing to listen to them from identifying any actual order, however satisfactory in many respects, with the perfect order . . .” Ancient utopianism provides man with a poignant reminder that we “will never create a society that is free from contradictions,”⁶⁴ that “no human being or group of human beings can rule the world justly,”⁶⁵ that “no bloody or unbloody change in society can eradicate the evil in man,”⁶⁶ that “it is against nature that there should ever be a cessation of evils,”⁶⁷ and therefore, history is a process that obdurately defies perfect consummation. As Strauss put it in a 1942 lecture, political philosophy protects us from the “smugness of the philistine” and the “dreams of the visionary.”⁶⁸

But is this the only or even the primary role of political philosophy? Strauss confuses his account of the political role of philosophy by discussing it in many ways that are not obviously compatible with one another. Sometimes, because the philosopher “possesses a more comprehensive and clearer grasp of man’s natural ends” than do “partisans,” he plays the part of an “umpire” or “impartial judge” regarding disputes as they arise.⁶⁹ In these cases, Strauss emphasizes that the philosopher interprets political affairs from the “perspective of the citizen” as opposed to that of a “neutral observer”⁷⁰ who would study political affairs no differently than one would study “triangles or fish.”⁷¹ In other cases, the philosopher is not merely one citizen among many, but teaches statesmen and legislators the “legislative skill” that is the “most architectonic skill that is known to political life.”⁷² Also, insofar as political philosophy aims to encourage and cultivate religious faith it is the “indispensable handmaid of theology.”⁷³ In another context, the “most elementary premises of the Bible” are useful as supplements to classical political philosophy, indicating that theology is the necessary handmaid to philosophy.⁷⁴

Furthermore, given that the “conflict between the philosopher and the city is inevitable” the philosopher necessarily must be armed with a “philosophic politics,”⁷⁵ which is meant to justify philosophy before the tribunal of the city; to protect and defend philosophy from suspicion and persecution; to protect the city from the potentially pernicious effects philosophy can have on its stability; and to recruit potentially philosophic youth to the life of contemplation. Strauss describes a philosophic politics entirely in terms of its accommodation to the nonphilosophic demands of the city:

In what then does philosophic politics consist? In satisfying the city that the philosophers are not atheists, that they do not desecrate everything sacred to the city, that they reverence what the city reverences, that they are not subversives, in short, that they are not irresponsible adventurers but good citizens and even the best of citizens.⁷⁶

Oddly enough, the public expression of political philosophy as a philosophic politics is conspicuously unphilosophical; Strauss forwards the view that:

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 introduction to philosophy—the attempt to lead the qualified citizens, or rather their qualified sons, from the political life to the philosophic life.⁷⁷

However, Strauss also points out that the “deeper meaning” of political philosophy “tallies well with its ordinary meaning” because both ultimately “culminate in praise of the philosophic life.”⁷⁸ Furthermore, political philosophy is so far from being merely the public presentation of philosophy properly understood that in its “original form” it is “the core of philosophy” or “first philosophy.”⁷⁹ Because the political sphere is a part of the whole, and more so than other parts open to the whole, it is difficult to establish political philosophy as an independent discipline. In fact, political philosophy ultimately “transforms itself into a discipline that is no longer concerned with political things in the ordinary sense of the term.”⁸⁰ Political philosophy is not merely prudence nor is it only an instrument in defense of prudence; political philosophy is first and foremost a gateway to a life of contemplation.

According to Strauss, the great difficulty that confronts us is that we live in an age that refuses to take seriously either philosophy or politics. As he makes resoundingly clear in his discussion of liberal education, we live in a time characterized by “vulgarity” or a “lack of experience in things beautiful.”⁸¹ We no longer take philosophy seriously because a facile and popular relativism has rendered its central claim to replace opinion with knowledge dubious. Its central and most certain contribution to political life was the idea of natural right; however, that notion has been dismissed in favor of the distinction between facts and values. Philosophy, once identical with science, has now been replaced by modern science, which rejects common sense and prudence as unscientific. This means that politics is no longer interpreted through the salutary prism of what is highest and most noble in man; the complexity of

political experience is traded in for the exactitude and predictability of scientific hypothesis that need not begin with political experience as experienced. As Strauss laments, the task of returning to the things themselves, or relearning to experience the true character of political life is so daunting precisely because “the world in which we live is already a product of science”; thus, “as long as we identify the natural or pre-scientific world with the world in which we live, we are dealing with an abstraction.”⁸² In “On Collingwood’s Philosophy of History,” Strauss describes our situation almost despairingly: we are born in an “age of decline or decay”; we are in the “deep pit beneath the cave.”⁸³

Of course, this means that we should be modest about the stewardship classical political philosophy can reasonably provide:

We cannot expect that a fresh understanding of classical political philosophy will supply us with recipes for today’s use. For the relative success of modern political philosophy has brought into being a kind of society wholly unknown to the classics, a kind of society to which the classical principles as stated and elaborated by the classics are not immediately applicable. Only we living today can possibly find a solution to the problems of today. But an adequate understanding of the principles as elaborated by the classics may be the indispensable starting point for an adequate analysis, to be achieved by us, of present day society in its peculiar character, and for the wise application, to be achieved by us, of these principles to our tasks.⁸⁴

Despite or even because of our “present predicament” we may now be afforded with a unique and privileged occasion to “achieve a genuine understanding of the political philosophies,” which has “been rendered possible by the shaking of all traditions.”⁸⁵ According to Strauss, the “crisis of our time may have the accidental advantage of enabling us to understand in an untraditional or fresh manner what was hitherto understood only in a traditional or derivative manner.”⁸⁶ Paradoxically, even though our decadent times are, in many respects utterly insalubrious for classical political philosophy, this historical opportunity “may apply especially to classical political philosophy which has been seen for a considerable time only through the lenses of modern political philosophy.”⁸⁷

While it is well-known that Strauss devoted much of his intellectual labors to the recrudescence of classical political philosophy, it is not often remarked with sufficient clarity that the first motivation for this project was a restoration of the proper political function of philosophy within the city. If philosophy is no longer considered to be a serious vehicle for comprehending the natural ends of man, then it cannot possibly provide the philosophic defense of prudence and moderation that the statesman so desperately needs. If philosophy is rejected because of the repudiation of the Aristotelian division of the sciences and the separation of philosophy from science, then moderation becomes a cheap consolation prize; the true reward is asymptotic progress in the conquest of nature. A crisis of confidence in philosophy necessarily begets a lack of confidence in its competence to defend political moderation not to mention moderation itself. Hence, a loss of confidence in the proper political objectives of philosophy leads to the replacement of ancient with mod-

ern utopianism. In his 1942 lecture, Strauss declared: “The foremost duty of political philosophy today seems to be to counteract this modern utopianism.”⁸⁸

The failure of political philosophy to counter modern utopianism with an ancient utopianism that reminds us of the “limits set to all human hopes or wishes”⁸⁹ not only leads to dangerous political adventures such as Communism, but essentially makes it impossible to understand the true character of lived political experience. The precipitous dismissal of ancient utopianism ushers in the scientific reductionism of modern social science. The theoretical consequence of philosophy’s political floundering is the reduction of political experience to abstract theory; if the natural ends of ancient utopianism that once provided the framework within which prudence exercised itself are rejected, politics ceases to point beyond itself. If our natural experience of political action is of its directedness to a nonpolitical good, which is knowledge of the good,⁹⁰ the substitution of a theoretical attitude or construct for this experience means that political action only points back to itself, that it only points to the will to power. Political action ceases to be that part of the whole that is most especially open to the whole; when political action is no longer part of a coherent whole it gets lost in its own suffocating partiality. Thus, the sum result of the failure of philosophy to consummate its political purpose is ultimately the failure of political action to draw our collective attention to that transpolitical good that is philosophy.

According to Strauss, the “crucial issue” with respect to historicism, especially the position of the “thoughtful historicist” such as Heidegger, “concerns the status of those permanent characteristics of humanity, such as the distinction between the noble and the base” and the unfortunate fact that such permanencies cannot be used by the historicist, however thoughtful, as “criteria for distinguishing between good and bad dispensations of fate.”⁹¹ Strauss considered Heidegger’s “contempt for these permanencies” to be the decisive reason for his political allegiances. A similar contempt for permanencies made it impossible for Nietzsche to “show his readers a way toward political responsibility” even after “having taken upon himself this great political responsibility.”⁹² After unsuccessfully attempting to account for the “modern situation” and “human life as such” with his doctrine of the will to power, he was inexorably led to the “explicit renunciation of the very notion of eternity.”⁹³ The gravest consequence of modern historical consciousness and contempt for human permanencies is “oblivion to eternity” or “estrangement from man’s deepest desires and therewith from the primary issues.”⁹⁴ “This is the price,” Strauss soberly observes, “which modern man had to pay, from the very beginning, for attempting to be absolutely sovereign, to become the master and owner of nature, to conquer chance.”⁹⁵

NOTES

1. As quoted in Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 531.

2. Bill Gates, *Business at the Speed of Thought* (New York: Grand Central, 1999).

3. Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 135–58.
4. Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1.
5. See Miles Burnyeat, “Sphinx without a Secret,” *New York Review of Books*, May 30, 1985, and Gregory Vlastos’s untitled response, April 24, 1986.
6. For example, Nicholas Xenos, “Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of the War on Terror” *Logos* (Spring 2004); Shadia Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 19–39.
7. For example, Peter Berkowitz, “What Hath Strauss Wrought?,” *Weekly Standard* (June 2003); Jenny Strauss Clay, “The Real Leo Strauss,” *New York Times*, June 7, 2003; Steven Lenzner and Irving Kristol “What Was Leo Strauss up To?” *The Public Interest* (Fall 2003).
8. Some excellent examples of accounts of Strauss’s work that do not begin with the more frivolous contemporary interpretations are Stanley Rosen, “Wittgenstein, Strauss, and the Possibility of Philosophy” in *The Elusiveness of the Ordinary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 135–58; Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theological Political Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006); Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
9. Thomas West, “Leo Strauss and American Foreign Policy,” *Claremont Review of Books* (Summer 2004); Thomas Pangle, *Leo Strauss: An Introduction to His Thought and Intellectual Legacy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006); Nathan Tarcov, “Will the Real Leo Strauss Please Stand Up?” *The American Interest* (September/October 2006): 120–28.
10. Pangle, 1.
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