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Sharpe, Matthew 2006, Leo Strauss: the sphinx's secret? Or how we learnt to stop worrying and believe through the 'hoi poloi', Arena journal, vol. 27, pp. 123-158..

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Leo Strauss: the Sphinx’s Secret?

Or How We Learnt to Stop Worrying and Believe through the ‘Hoi Poloi’

Matthew Sharpe

Just who was Leo Strauss anyway? Is there any chance that he will be born posthumously as himself? A different self than he seemed?

Lawrence Lampert, Leo Strauss and Nietzsche.¹

When Zarathustra was thirty years old, he left his home and the lake of his home and went into the mountains. Here he had the enjoyment of his spirit and his solitude and he did not weary of it for ten years. But at last his heart turned — and one morning he rose with the dawn, stepped before the sun, and spoke to it thus: Great star! What would your happiness be, if you had not those for whom you shine … Thus began Zarathustra’s down-going.

Friedrich Nietzsche, Prologue, Thus Spake Zarathustra.²

Since Oedipus Rex, it might have been suspected that the mysteries of many sphinxes are much less mysterious than they first appear

1. L. Lampert, Leo Strauss and Nietzsche, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996. The expository aspect of the following essay was developed and honed in the context of a course taught at the Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy in the summer of 2004-2005. I wish to thank the enthusiastic student group for helping me develop some knowledge, at least of my ignorance.


ARENA journal no. 27, 2006
to be. This does not mean that there are no sphinxes. It means that, like the purloined letter of Edgar Allen Poe’s imagining, what we suppose they are hiding is often not what, or where, we thought it was.

It is no surprise that American political philosopher Leo Strauss has been accused of being a sphinx by critics, and even a sphinx ‘without a secret’.3 After all, what Strauss called his ‘great discovery’ was that all great philosophers until Machiavelli wrote ‘esoteric’ texts.4 Leo Strauss the man, moreover, remains an enigma. Strauss arrived in the United States in the 1930s, a Jewish émigré fleeing Nazi persecution. Yet, as <www.straussian.net> broadcasts, Strauss’ teaching has bred generations of ‘Straussian’ academics, whom critics have repeatedly accused of cultish traits.5 Perhaps most remarkable of all — and this is certainly what is now being most remarked upon — students of Strauss or of their students (in particular, Alan Bloom, author of The Closing of the American Mind), have become increasingly important in US political circles since Strauss’ death in 1973. Strauss’ deep appreciation of the Greeks’ ‘classical political rationalism’, together with his strident critique of the ‘historicism’ of later modern thought (including that of Heidegger, who became a vocal philosophical defender of Nazism) and qualified defence of Western liberalism against the ‘Eastern despotism’ of the USSR,6 is widely contended to have had a formative influence on current neo-conservative thinking. Virtually all sources regard Straussian thought as pivotal to such powerful neo-conservatives within the Bush Administration as (formerly) Paul Wolfowitz, Leon Kass and Abram Shulsky, as well as hawkish commentators Richard Perle, Robert Kagan and William Kristol.7 Few commentators, however,

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7. Compare, for example, J. Mann, The Rise of the Vulcans, New York, Viking, pp. 25–9; Foremost among the political ‘Straussians’ is President of the World Bank and former US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, widely regarded as the leading architect of the Iraq campaign and the Bush Administration’s philosophy of ‘pre-emption’; see the National Security Strategy of the United States of America, September 2002, at <www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf>. Commentators also list Abram Shulsky, former head of the Pentagon’s ill-fated Office of Special Projects, instrumental in producing the ‘intelligence’ concerning Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction, a body of ‘intelligence’ that history has shown not to have meant much (see my Part 2, iii). Leon Kass, head of the
have traced the logic in Strauss’ opus that might provide an insight into this confusion over his political philosophical contribution.

Given the bellicose change in American foreign policy since September 11 2001 and the changed political rhetoric used to justify it, it is easy to respond in an alarmist way to commentators’ disclosures of a ‘powerful and long-standing Straussian presence’ in Washington. As Saul Bellow’s Ravelstein in part dramatizes, the rise of Straussians to power has almost all of the ingredients of a racy airport novel: secrecy, power and the intersection of seemingly disparate cultural worlds, if not the inveterate opposition of desire (eros) and the law (nomos). The Internet abounds with conspiracy theories locating Strauss as the éminence grise ‘behind the throne’, seated in nocturnal counsel alongside Vice President Dick Cheney, ‘kingmaker’ Karl Rove and others.

It is certainly true that, as Anne Norton comments, today there are few if any left-wing Straussians, if there ever were such a bird or such a cage. There are certainly none amongst the ‘cadet line’ of Straussians influential in Washington. And defenders of Strauss against the idea that he is ‘behind the throne’ of the Bush II regime tend not to unambiguously repudiate the claims of Strauss’ influence on the thinking of the US Administration. Nor do they seem to think the idea such a bad thing. Both this confusion over the Straussian influence, and that apparent influence in the context of world politics today, justify a critical examination of Strauss’ theoretical work that takes seriously his whispered ‘posthumous birth’ as the intellectual godfather of the neo-conservative hawks, vulcans or wasps. As Strauss himself suggests concerning the charges laid by the Athenians against Socrates, where there is smoke there is almost certainly fire.

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9. See my Concluding Philosophical Postscript.

ARENA journal no. 27, 2006
I will argue, here as elsewhere, that alarmism is not the best way of coming to terms with the apparently contradictory political phenomenon of 'Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire'. In this article I propose a critical-philosophical response to this political phenomenon. Whatever we finally decide (see Part 2 below), I contend that there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between Strauss' academic writings on Plato, Aristotle or the mediaevals and the policies of the 'Bush II' Administration. Not the least challenging aspect of Strauss' work, as I will highlight, is how many of its key notions both anticipate and, at the same time, diverge markedly from positions widely accepted in the liberal Western academy — notably, a root-and-branch critique of modernity and a profound scepticism that modern rationalism or liberalism could peaceably and desirably 'assimilate' cultural, political and ethnic differences. As in any case where a theoretical position has been put to work ideologically, political Straussianism is an articulation of Strauss' theoretical philosophy in political practice, where the pressing demands of politics have unquestionably influenced how and which aspects of the theory have been put to political work.

In what follows, my guiding question is: what is it about Strauss' theoretical position that can have led to it being raised, repeatedly, in connection with the most controversial and secretive American 'regime' since Nixon's? In Part 1, I present a brief, working exposition of Strauss' political philosophy, culminating in Strauss' maverick reading of Plato's Republic that Irving Kristol, amongst others, cites as decisive in his political education. In Part 2, I pose a critical theoretical analysis of Strauss' philosophy, read in the 'unnatural' retrospective light of today's neo-conservative ascendency. Here I will argue that what is arguably most persuasive in Strauss' thought — his sense of the difference between philosophy

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15. As will become clear, I draw on sources generally not employed by Strauss' numerous critics, with the exception of Nathan Tarcov; see his 'On a Certain Critique of "Straussianism"' in Deutsch et al., Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker, pp. 159–74.
and politics, the latter having always to ‘vulgarize’ the elevated purity of the former — also means that he could hardly be surprised at the significant, openly illiberal ‘closing of the Straussian mind’ evidenced in the domestic policies and political practice of George W. Bush.

To return to my opening gambit: what I will finally suggest in conclusion is that, just as the uncanny creature invoked by the Theban sphinx’s riddle in Oedipus Rex was Oedipus himself, so the solution to the riddle of the current political Straussianism does not lie deep ‘between the lines’ of Strauss’ works. To cite Strauss’ Thoughts on Machiavelli: ‘the problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things’.16

**Part 1: Strauss’ Rough (Double) Ascent**

**i. Strauss’ criticism of modern liberalism and/or nihilism**

Academic Straussians typically present Strauss as an ally of modern liberalism, and this was certainly one level of his teaching after he arrived in the United States. In prefaces and introductions to his books, Strauss expresses patriotic support for the United States, a ‘bulwark of freedom’ in the face of the ‘contemporary tyranny’ of the USSR.17 Strauss’ *Natural Right and History* bears the image of the Declaration of Independence on its cover. On the basis of such evidence, Straussian Stephen Smith, for example, goes as far as to suggest that ‘it is an oddity of academic mythology that Strauss is viewed as a bête noir of liberalism’.18 Yet Strauss’ relation to modern (as against ancient) liberalism is ambivalent, at the least, as Gunnell comments.19 Strauss’ strongest theoretical statements in its defence take the form of pointing out how it ‘comes closer to what the classics demanded than any alternative that is visible in

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This article is surprising in two ways. The first is that Tarcov shows a refreshing willingness to call into question ‘Straussianism’, a label that he avows himself. The second is that the critique of Straussianism he draws upon is by Strauss himself, from a 1946 review of the work of another classicist, John Wild.

our age’. Strauss elaborates this ‘unhesitating support’ without ‘unqualified approval’ in ‘Liberal Education and Responsibility’: we are not permitted to be flatterers of democracy because we are friends and allies of democracy. While we are not permitted to remain silent on the dangers to which democracy exposes itself as well as human excellence, we cannot forget the obvious fact that by giving freedom to all, democracy also gives freedom to those who care for human excellence. 

Like other great thinkers of the last century, Strauss’ thought is overwhelmingly characterized by the diagnosis that secular liberalism, and the modern West, is in ‘crisis’. Irving Kristol is, accordingly, being characteristically frank when he says that, however Strauss qualified his position, his ‘extraordinary influence’ upon US public debate comes from:

Strauss’ critique of the destructive elements within modern liberalism, an analysis that was popularised by his students ... [which] has altered the very tone of public discourse in the United States ... To bring contemporary liberalism into disrepute ... is no small achievement. Strauss’ criticism of modern liberalism centres on the charge that it tends inevitably towards ‘nihilism’. Nietzsche famously claimed that nihilism is the ‘uncanny’ condition that results when a culture’s highest values devalue themselves. Strauss consistently argued that the highest achievements of the West came from its subjects’ adherence to two ancient inheritances, whose ‘fruitful tension’ modern liberalism has turned its back upon: namely, classical rationalism (which Strauss referred to by the cipher ‘Athens’) and biblical revelation, (‘Jerusalem’). Western modernity was founded on the aspiration of finally supplanting biblical revelation as the orienting ground of political life. The early

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23. For example, Strauss, City and Man, p. 2.
25. For example, L. Strauss, Natural Right and History, Chicago, University of Chicago, 1953, pp. 5-6.
moderns believed that 'progress' in the new sciences would allow man to become 'master and possessor of nature', end scarcity, and hence remove the deepest sources of 'irrational' prejudice and destructive wars. The regulative goal of modernity, then — shared with liberalism by communism — was a 'universal league of free and equal nations' or, in Strauss' preferred Kojevian-Nietzschean framing:

... the universal and homogenous state of which every adult human being is a full member ... when he is not locked up in an insane asylum or penitentiary.27

However, the horrific events of the first decades of the 20th century irrevocably discredited this project. 'The crisis of the West', says Strauss, 'consists in the West's having become uncertain of its purpose ... we have lost that certainty and that clarity.'28 According to Strauss, the events set in train by World War I showed all 'thoughtful people'29 that the West's progress in science was matched by 'no corresponding progress in wisdom or goodness. Modern man is a giant of whom we do not know whether he is better or worse than earlier man'.30 Modernity's ascendant sciences, for Strauss as for the Frankfurt School, provided only for an increasing awareness of how things occurred in nature. But such technical 'know-how' says nothing to the pressing moral and political questions of why humans should want certain things to occur. To the extent that the natural sciences have increasingly become, in modernity, the standard for all rationality, Strauss contends that the end of modern rationality has increasingly become the 'relativistic' inability to reason about ends:

The prohibition against value judgments in social science would lead to the consequence that we are permitted to give a strictly factual description of the overt acts that can be observed in concentration camps and perhaps an equally factual analysis of the motivation of the actors concerned: we would not be permitted to speak of cruelty.31

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31. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 52. His reply to Kojeve in *On Tyranny* begins, similarly: '... a social science that cannot speak of tyranny with the same confidence which
The methodological prohibition in the social sciences against defending any evaluative claims, Strauss charged, meant that these sciences were incapable of naming Nazism a 'tyranny', and so of sanctioning political opposition to it. On the contrary, once we accept modern science's founding methodological distinction between 'objective' facts and 'subjective' 'values':

the principles of our actions have no other support than our blind choice ... We cannot wholeheartedly act upon them any more ... In order to live, we have to silence the easily silenced voice of reason, which tells us that all our principles are in themselves as good or bad as any other principles. The more we cultivate reason, the more we cultivate nihilism ...

Strauss' contention concerning Nazism is — again, in line with the Frankfurt School and others — that it represented as much an outgrowth of modernity as an aberration of its 'mature' rationalism. Significantly, Strauss' account specifically targets modern liberalism as the harbinger of Hitler's tyranny. Like the Marx of 'On the Jewish Question', Strauss calls into question the wisdom of this political philosophy's founding sanctification of a private realm in which 'the state's legislation must not interfere'. By safeguarding this private realm where subjects are free to cultivate whatever beliefs (viz. views about ends) they please, Strauss argues that liberalism also safeguards the 'rights' of individuals to cultivate the basest prejudices. Just as the modern social sciences could only 'objectively' observe the rise of Nazism, so Strauss, like Carl Schmitt, argues that Weimar's liberal Republic was constitutively too 'weak' to outlaw the Nazis' base anti-Semitism:

a liberal society stands or falls by the distinction between the public and the private ... It is an essential element of this liberal society ... that religion as a particular religion, not as a general religion, is private. Every citizen is free to follow any religion he sees fit. Now given this ... the liberal society necessarily makes possible, permits, and even fosters ...

'discrimination'.

medicine speaks, for example, of cancer, cannot understand social phenomena as what they are. It is therefore not scientific. Present day social science finds itself in this condition': L. Strauss, On Tyranny, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 179.

32. Strauss, On Tyranny, pp. 22-5, 177.
33. Strauss, Natural Right and History, p. 6.
34. L. Strauss, 'Why We Remain Jews', in Deutsche et al., Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker, pp. 46-7.
That is to say, for Strauss as for other social conservatives, modern liberalism’s defence of private liberty at best preserves a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for anything like the good society. More strongly than this, however, Strauss argues that, at worst, liberalism becomes ‘a seminary of intolerance’.35 Two intersecting arguments inform this alarming contention.

The first is the concern, which Strauss shared with Nietzsche, Schmitt and Tocqueville, that liberal tolerance threatens the innate ‘human desire for the genuine, for the noble, for the great’36:

The disease to which Strauss pointed ... is the tendency of democratic tolerance to degenerate into the easy-going belief that all points of view are equal (hence none really worth passionate argument) and then into the strident belief that anyone who argues for the superiority of a distinctive moral insight, way of life, or human type is somehow elitist and antidemocratic — and hence immoral.37

Secondly, as Habermas or Apel agree, absolute tolerance is practically impossible, since to act is to ‘vote with one’s feet’ in favour of one choice over another. However:

if the unequal rank of choices cannot be traced to the unequal rank of their objectives, it must be traced to the unequal rank of the acts of choosing, and this means eventually that genuine choice, as distinguished from spurious or despicable choice, is nothing but resolute or deadly serious decision. Such a decision, however, is akin to intolerance rather than tolerance ...38

In line with this reasoning, Strauss’ remarkable ‘Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism’ (which is much more than either an introduction or a reflection on Heideggerian existentialism) suggests that the Nazis represented the active counterparts to the passive nihilism of ‘generous liberal’ subjects caught up in the ‘joyless quest for joy’ of market-driven consumerism.39

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35. Strauss, Natural Right and History, p. 6.
38. Strauss, Natural Right and History, pp. 5-6.

ARENA journal no. 27, 2006
ii. From the second to the first cave — Strauss' great discoveries — and the awful truth

Strauss' understanding of the modern crisis, and liberalism's tendency to fold into tyranny, led to agreement with his teacher Heidegger (as with others) that the West needed urgently to re-examine the modern project:

It is not self-forgetting and pain-loving antiquarianism nor self-forgetting and intoxicating romanticism which induces us to turn with passionate interest, with unqualified willingness to learn, toward the political thought of classical antiquity. We are impelled to do so by the crisis of the West.40

For Strauss, however, Heidegger's own political involvement with Nazism (which Strauss called 'the biggest event of 1933'41) showed how even 'the only great thinker in our time'42 had not re-examined matters radically enough.43

Strauss' return to the ancients, in contrast to Heidegger's, is characterized by two distinct features. The first is an emphasis on the importance of specifically political philosophy.44 The second is a radical challenge to the 'historicism' presuppositions about philosophy itself that Strauss argued Heidegger still shared with the moderns he critiqued. Historicism, for Strauss and for Straussian, is the view that no individual's thought, however great, is capable of transcending the doxa or 'worldview' of her historical culture.45 In Plato's allegory at the start of Book VII of The Republic, the city and its prevailing doxa are pictured as a cave out of which philosophy attempts to lead individuals upwards towards the true light of nature (phasis). Historicism, Strauss contends, is accordingly the anti-philosophical position, since it

42. Strauss, Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism, p. 29.
43. Strauss, Studies in Plutonic Political Philosophy, p. 25. Strauss' reading of Heidegger argues two things that reflect, and point us towards, the singular nature of Strauss' own 'return to the ancients'. Firstly, Strauss argued that both Heidegger's early emphasis on existential decision and his later 'destruction' of the historical determination of previous philosophers' thought ironically reproduce the twin — active and passive — poles of the modern-liberal horizon Heidegger aimed to overcome. Secondly, Strauss highlights the strictly unpolitical nature of Heidegger's thought, if we understand 'political' in the Greek sense of 'within' or 'of the city (polis)': 'there is no room for political philosophy in Heidegger's work ... the room in question is occupied by gods or the gods'. Strauss, Studies in Plutonic Political Philosophy, p. 30.
44. Compare Zuckert, Postmodern Plato, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 118–21. Strauss maintained that the fundamental changes in the history of the West were based on ethico-political choices, not the inscrutable 'destinings' of the later Heidegger.
45. For example, Strauss, Natural Right and History, pp. 9–34.
argues that any such ‘rough ascent’ is impossible. In a telling metaphor, Strauss suggests that historicism in fact situates us as if in a second cave, beneath the first cave of Plato’s allegory. The best that historicism can offer is the accurate excavation of the differing ‘worldviews’ of other cultures. Yet such an ‘archaeology’ — as with the natural sciences — can say nothing about how we should decide ethico-politically between these doxa concerning their ultimate wisdom or nobility.

From *Law and Philosophy* (1935) onwards, Strauss sets about trying to restore the possibility of philosophy, and so lead thought out of the ‘second’ cave of historicist doxa in the postwar academy. In order to genuinely re-examine ancient thought, Strauss contends, we must try to understand the ancients’ thought as they understood it themselves, not just in terms of its ‘contribution’ to the ‘dialogue’ of ‘culture’. However, if we do this, Strauss argues, it becomes clear that it was a characteristic feature of the pre-modern philosophers that they each laid claim to a Truth which, far from merely reflecting their culture’s prevailing doxa, transcended its closed religious or traditional horizon. To understand these philosophers as they understood themselves involves understanding that they not only did philosophy, and came up with competing accounts of the truth of the whole, but also, whether they liked it or not, that they faced the very real political requirement — within their cities’ ‘first caves’— of having to justify what they were doing. Philosophers ‘had to justify philosophy in terms of the political community ... by means of a kind of argument which appeals, not to philosophers ... but to citizens as such’.

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46. Strauss, *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 211. With historicism, Strauss contended, we are confronted with another modern stance that only appears to be one of tolerance. The historicist is open to considering the thought of earlier thinkers. Nevertheless, this openness will only extend to looking at the ‘contribution’ each has made to the ‘great conversation’ of ‘culture’ or the ‘history of ideas’. What this false openness excludes is the possibility that what these earlier thinkers said might be ‘simply true’, and that we might be able not only to learn about them, but also from them. This historicist starting point, that is, tacitly presupposes its own ‘liberal’ superiority over the thought of those at whom it impartially gazes, thereby removing the most pressing philosophical motivation for taking earlier thought seriously.

47. ‘If one approaches a thinker with a question which is not his central question, one is bound to misinterpret, to distort, his thought ...’, in Strauss, *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 211.

48. See Strauss, *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. xxxiv. Because of the openness of modern liberal culture, Strauss suggests that modern scholarship has increasingly forgotten just how radical the very practice of philosophy was in mediaeval and classical societies: ‘Modern philosophy was from its beginning the attempt to replace the allegedly wrong philosophy of the Middle Ages by the allegedly true philosophy or science. It did not raise any longer the question of the necessity of philosophy or science itself: it took that necessity for granted’, Strauss, *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, pp. 208–9.

It is via this reasoning that Strauss makes his famous claim that the great pre-modern philosophers wrote esoteric texts. That is:

Persecution ... gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing ... in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines ... But how can a man perform the miracle of speaking in a publication to a minority, while being silent to the majority of his readers? ... An author who wishes to address only thoughtful men has ... to write in such a way that only a very careful reader can detect the meaning of his book.50

Now, for readers of psychoanalysis or deconstruction, the idea that a text bears multiple registers of meaning is uncontroversial. Freud's understanding of the unconscious was conceived on the political analogy of a subversive message distorted by the force of a censoring agency representing social Law. Armed with his 'sociological' contention concerning the 'art of writing' in closed societies,51 though, Strauss contends that in order to understand pre-modern philosophers as they understood themselves, we too need to learn a technique of 'reading between the lines'. Again, as with psychoanalysis, this technique will allow us to read closely, and very literally, the texts of the philosophers.52 It will pay particular attention to unusual textual features that 'less careful' readers pass over or dismiss53 — ideas which appear only once, particularly near a work's centre, ideas repeated with slight alterations — and whether, and what ideas authors express in the guise of a commentator, which is to say, not in their own names. In contrast to psychoanalysis and deconstruction, Strauss contends that, 'especially if the author discusses, however incidentally, the possibility of intentional blunders in his writing', these blunders can reasonably be read as intentional:

One positive criterion is this: if an able writer who has a clear mind and a perfect knowledge of the orthodox view and all its ramifications, contradicts surreptitiously ... one of its necessary presuppositions or consequences which he explicitly recognises ... everywhere else, we can reasonably suspect that he was opposed to the orthodox system ...54

50. Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing, p. 25.
52. Strauss, Liberalism Ancient and Modern, p. 257.
54. Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing, p. 32.
Strauss' 'great discovery' of this 'forgotten art of writing' emerged out of his mid-1930s' studies of mediaeval Jewish and Islamic philosophy, in particular, the works of Maimonides and Al-Farabi. What became particularly decisive for Strauss, however, was what he came to understand when he re-read these authors drawing on the techniques that Maimonides prescribed to his readers. Strauss comes to contend that Farabi's reading of Plato is strikingly heterodox compared to standard (modern) understandings. Indeed, it is so different that it allows us to put aside the criticisms hailing from Heidegger, Nietzsche and the moderns that suggest that Platonist metaphysics is 'unrestorable' given subsequent philosophical investigations. In the first part of Farabi's major work, Farabi piously distinguishes between this-worldly happiness and the Real Happiness of the other world, Strauss observes. Yet, in his 'historical works' on Plato and Aristotle, Farabi silently drops this distinction, even going so far as to say that talk of immortality amounts to 'ravings and old women's tales'. As Strauss comments:

what this ... means becomes clear from the fact that in the entire Plato (which contains summaries of the Gorgias, the Phaedrus, the Phaedo, and the Republic) there is no mention of the immortality of the soul: Farabi's Plato, silently rejects Plato's doctrine of a life after death.

Or, put more generally, in a doctrine that Strauss extends to the Platonic Ideas, if not to Aristotelian cosmology: 'it would seem that ... the religion of the philosophers was, or at least potentially consists in, the exoteric teaching of the philosophers'. This also means that we may legitimately look to their texts again, to espy what lies between these exoteric lines.

55. The introduction to Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed contains a description of how the author had 'set ... down' his work only for 'the few' who had 'philosophised' while 'believing at the same time in the matters pertaining to the Law'. Maimonides describes seven types of written contradictions and prescribes the method by which the reader can decode the two types of contradiction he has included in his own work. M. Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963.


57. Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing, p. 13. Towards the centre of his own commentary on Plato in The City and Man, Strauss hence suggests that the famed Platonic doctrine of the Ideas is 'fantastic' and 'unintelligible', p. 119.

58. Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing, p. 121.
iii. Strauss’ ‘Primitive Platonism’ or: ‘Philosophy in the City’?

By itself, the idea that a 9th-century falasafi only affected for political reasons his belief in revelation and (thus) shari’a Law does not seem radical today (see my ‘Concluding Philosophical Remarks’ below). Yet, so Strauss argues, if we do apply the ancient practice of ‘reading between the lines’ to Plato, his texts can be seen to carry meanings quite different from those that modern ‘academic mythology’ supposes, and which (he argues) remain as timelessly right today as when Plato penned them. As Strauss wrote in a letter to Lowith in 1946:

I really believe ... that the perfect political order, as Plato and Aristotle have sketched it, is the perfect political order ... I know very well that it cannot be restored: but the famous atomic bombs — ... cities with a million inhabitants, gadgets, funeral homes, ‘ideologies’ — show that the contemporary solution ... is contra naturum.

So, how does Strauss re-read Plato after Farabi, and what wisdom — beyond an atheism uncontroversial today — does he claim to uncover there?

For Strauss, the fact that Plato did not write treatises is the first decisive thing. The Platonic ‘cosmos’ consists of thirty-five dialogues. In none of them is Plato a character. Hence, the only things that we can be sure are Plato’s own are the titles and the dialogues’ settings or ‘action’. It makes as much sense to assume that what any one character is saying is ‘Platonic’ as it is to identify Shakespeare with Macbeth or Hamlet. Moreover, when we consult what Plato’s dialogues say concerning ‘the literary question — the question concerning writings’ — as Derrida has highlighted, we see that Plato devalued writing compared to speech. One reason Plato gives for this is that writing does not allow an author to assess to whom one is speaking and thus to

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59. Strauss, City and Man, p. 61.
60. See Deutsch et al., Leo Strauss, Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker, p. 8. On the structure of this ‘I know well, but nevertheless ...’ thought, see my Concluding Philosophical Remarks.
61. Strauss, City and Man, p. 55.
62. Strauss, City and Man, p. 55.
64. Strauss, City and Man, p. 59.
65. Strauss, City and Man, pp. 52–3.
modify one's message accordingly. That is to say, in line with Persecution and the Art of Writing, Strauss contends that the execution of Socrates was decisive in determining both the 'sphinx-like' form and the content of his student, Plato's, writings. Given this trauma, Strauss suggests that we should not read Plato as if he wrote fearlessly in a secular liberal state. Instead, we should read all the dialogues as broadly 'apologetic'. To be ironic: given Strauss' view, the Platonic dialogues put on stage 'philosophy in the city': the life and different, more-or-less 'erotic' encounters of Socrates in the polis, granting an expanded, Platonic sense of eros. Their enigmatic dialogic form is there to intimate 'between the lines' what philosophy is to 'young men who love to think', while leading others to salutary opinions that do not too radically shake their 'worldviews'.

Strauss contends that when read in this way, Plato's dialogues — together with Xenophon — support the idea that, as a relatively young man, Socrates underwent a radical transformation, or 'second sailing'. The young Socrates, parodied by Aristophanes in Clouds, was a phusikoi (roughly, a natural scientist). Brilliant and ascetic, he was completely caught up in the joy of rational enquiry. As such, this young Socrates was also completely oblivious to how his philosophizing appeared politically to 'the many' within Athens. As Aristophanes suggests by placing his Socrates in a basket, hovering in the clouds between heaven and earth, the young Socrates seems indeed to have held to the proto-modern belief that reason alone could supplant the gods and solve all human problems. Without prudence, Aristophanes' Socrates teaches the scoundrel Strepsiades that Athens' gods are a fraud, and that the only gods are chaos, vortex and clever speech. Anticipating Socrates' real fate, at the end of the comedy, Strepsiades, for his part, righteously burns Socrates' 'think tank' to the ground.

Whether Aristophanes intended his parody as criticism or warning, Xenophon and Plato show us a Socrates who stands in

66. Strauss, City and Man, p. 55. Of course, it has been almost universally assumed that Socrates is Plato's mouthpiece. Yet he does not appear in the Laws (see Part II, iii). Moreover, Socrates was widely accused by contemporaries — in the dialogues — of being radically ironical. And 'irony in the highest sense', Strauss contends, is 'the dissimulation of one's wisdom' in order to protect the self-regard of others. Strauss, City and Man, p. 55. So the claim to simply identify Plato's doctrines with any of the sayings of Socrates is also tenuous, according to Strauss. Instead, Strauss advises that we need to 'return once more to the surface' and 'admit ... that the Platonic dialogue is an enigma ... one big question mark', City and Man, p. 55.


68. See Zuckert, Postmodern Platos, p. 147.

sharp contrast to the Socrates of *Clouds*: a Socrates made ‘fair (noble) and young (new)’. Whether Aristophanes’ Socrates preached the same things to all-comers, this new Socrates speaks differently to different people. Rather than claiming any (super)natural wisdom, he asks questions of citizens, or presents edifying, ‘likely stories’. In Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, Socrates even describes the *phusikoi* along Aristophanic lines as ‘madmen’ oscillating hopelessly — as Kant later contended — between insoluble metaphysical solutions (being is one or many, stable or wholly in motion, changing or completely the same). If Aristophanes’ Socrates held court outside of the city, the mature Socrates publicly worshipped Athens’ gods and recognized that:

the things which are first in themselves are somehow first for us, the things which are first in themselves are in a manner, but necessarily, revealed in man’s opinions.

Rather than hovering amidst the clouds, this ‘mature’ Socrates practised *elenchus*, a ‘rough’ sceptical ascent starting from citizens’ *doxa* about ‘political things’ — virtues, types of individuals, and the good life — towards the Truth.

As Allan Bloom rejoins, Plato’s *Republic* is, then, the centrepiece of Strauss’ striking re-reading of Plato:

The *Republic* is the true *Apology* of Socrates, for only in the *Republic* does he give an adequate treatment of the theme which was forced on him by Athens’ accusation against him. That theme is the relationship of the philosopher to the political community.

If we attend to the ‘time, place, characters and action’ of the *Republic*, Strauss argues, the dialogue bears a quite different teaching than first appears. To be direct: Strauss claims that, read in this way, the dialogue’s central account of the best city or *kallipolis* turns out to be *radically ironic*. The features of this account, as Strauss details, involve a liberal quoting of the ‘ideal city’ Aristophanes had laid out in another comedy, *The Assembly of Women*. It takes place amongst a group of ten men in the Pireaus

70. See Strauss, *Aristophanes and Socrates*, p. 3.
73. Strauss, *City and Man*, p. 19 (emphasis added); compare Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, p. 139.
where, as Plato’s ancient readers would have known:

... some years after the conversation, men linked to Socrates and Plato by way of kinship or friendship attempted ... [to brutally] restore an aristocratic regime dedicated to virtue and justice. Among other things they established an authority called the Ten in the Piraeus.\textsuperscript{78}

This account is given by Socrates to the young, politically ambitious Glaucon,\textsuperscript{79} when Socrates is forced by his companions to speak, as he was forced to speak by Athens in The Apology.\textsuperscript{80} Finally, if the explicit question of the Republic is: what is justice?, Strauss notes, the setting of the discussion indicates that the dialogue takes place exactly \textit{in lieu} of a promised feast.\textsuperscript{81} The problem with this is that human \textit{eros} — and especially ‘base’ bodily desires like hunger — is \textit{the} cause of political conflict. The Platonic dialogue on justice, that is, strangely ‘abstracts from [what] is most important to the subject matter of the dialogue’.\textsuperscript{82}

Strauss contends then, that the construction of Socrates’ ‘city in speech’ in the Republic, was meant by Plato as a gigantic \textit{reductio ad absurdem}. Far from being an exacting prescription for politicians ‘hungry’ for justice, for Strauss, its prescriptions are \textit{neither possible nor desirable}.\textsuperscript{83} The proto-‘communistic’ attempt\textsuperscript{84} to found a city according to nature leads to the radically \textit{unnatural} prescription that subjects cannot even choose their own sexual partners, but that they should defer to the wisdom of the rulers.\textsuperscript{85} The city that would be founded on philosophical truth turns out necessarily to require recourse to ‘noble lies’ or myths (see Part 2, iii) in order to educate its guardians into believing that they were born to their social places, that their true family is the \textit{polis}, and that this \textit{polis’} boundaries are natural.\textsuperscript{86} Furthermore, this \textit{kallipolis}, so far from being practically desirable, must be founded not only on the famed

\textsuperscript{78} Strauss, \textit{City and Man}, p. 63: Compare Zuckert, Postmodern Platos, p. 149. In fact, several of the characters in the Republic were victims of the Thirty Tyrants, as Strauss points out.

\textsuperscript{79} As Strauss wrote: ‘Xenophon tells us that Socrates ... cured [Glauc] of his extreme political ambition ... Certain it is that the Republic supplies the most magnificent cure ever devised for every form of political ambition’, \textit{City and Man}, p. 65, compare p. 97.

\textsuperscript{80} Compare Strauss, \textit{City and Man}, p. 59; on Strauss’ emphasis on compulsion in some Socratic dialogues and (thus) in the city as such., compare S. Smith, \textit{Reading Leo Strauss}, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006, pp. 97–100.

\textsuperscript{81} Strauss, \textit{City and Man}, p. 61.

\textsuperscript{82} See Zuckert, Postmodern Platos, p. 147.

\textsuperscript{83} Compare Smith, \textit{Reading Leo Strauss}, esp. pp. 93–7.

\textsuperscript{84} Compare Zuckert, Postmodern Platos, p. 152.

\textsuperscript{85} Strauss, \textit{City and Man}, p. 102.
expulsion of the poets, but — anticipating Pol Pot — also the exile of all citizens above ten, educated in the old ways.\textsuperscript{87}

Although the philosophers would be kings in this city, then, as Strauss contends, it would be far indeed from one where ‘the gentle unforced force of the better argument’ (Habermas) would rule, not backed by lies and the sword.\textsuperscript{88}

As Ferrari comments, if we ask where in the Republic lie the teachings Strauss draws from it, the Straussian answer is that ‘it is not a turn made in the Republic; it is the turn that makes the Republic’.\textsuperscript{89} If Strauss is correct, the Republic is both ‘the reply par excellence to Aristophanes’\textsuperscript{90} and ‘the most magnificent cure ever devised’ for anyone who expects too much of politics.\textsuperscript{91} As Strauss concludes:

as Cicero has observed, the Republic does not bring to light the best possible regime but rather the nature of political things — the nature of the city ... By letting us see that the city constructed in accordance with [the highest needs of man] is not possible, he lets us see the essential limits, the nature, of the city.\textsuperscript{92}

\textbf{Part 2: Leo Strauss’ Downgoing? From Philosophy to the City, and Strauss to the Straussians}

\textit{i. A central contention: coming to terms with finitude/the political}

The élan of Strauss’ reading of Plato’s Republic is clear. It strikingly circumvents the charges that a return to the ancients must involve an impossible rehabilitation of Aristotelian cosmology.\textsuperscript{93} Equally, Strauss is able, brilliantly, to rebut the criticisms of Platonism hailing from Nietzsche, Heidegger and Karl Popper as touching

\textsuperscript{86} Strauss, City and Man, p. 111; Zuckert, Postmodern Platos, p. 151.


\textsuperscript{88} Compare especially Smith, Reading Leo Strauss pp. 97–100.

\textsuperscript{89} As cited in Smith, ‘Leo Strauss’ Platonic Liberalism’, p. 798; and Reading Leo Strauss, p. 99 (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{90} Compare Zuckert, Postmodern Platos, p. 146.

\textsuperscript{91} Strauss, City and Man, p. 65; compare Zuckert, Postmodern Platos, p. 149.

\textsuperscript{92} Strauss, City and Man, p. 138; Strauss, in L. Strauss et al. (eds), History of Political Philosophy, 3rd edn, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 68.

\textsuperscript{93} As Strauss put it in a letter to Kojeve: ‘It is not necessary to be Aristotelian: it is sufficient to become Platonist’, in Zuckert, Postmodern Platos, p. 304n.
only Plato’s exoteric position. If, for Nietzsche, Christianity is Platonism for the people; for Strauss, Platonism is Plato for the people. The esoteric Plato survives, conserved and conservative between the lines. Finally, Strauss’ Platonic critique of all claims to orient politics through Ideas alone uncannily resembles those criticisms of modern ideologically driven politics that hail, not only from Edmund Burke, but also hegemonic sources within the postwar Left academy.94

Nevertheless, Strauss does not draw from his reading of Plato a postmodernist view of philosophy as limited only to the sceptical undoing of all truth-claims, or a Millean commitment to as open a public sphere as possible. There is a natural right that has a political bearing for Strauss. It is just that, to invoke again Plato’s cave allegory, the philosopher who has seen the light of natural right beyond the city must descend again into the city. Equally, then, this light itself must also be dimmed, if it is to show up at all in the minimally unnatural ‘twilight’ of political life. And herein lies — if I am right, that is, exactly in terms of what Strauss contends concerning the non-philosophic many — the rub of today’s political Straussian.

To be clear, Strauss takes the Republic’s criticism of the limits of the city to show the unsurpassable, timeless disjunction between philosophy, with its ‘zetetic’ openness to questioning all established certainties, and ‘the city’ as such. No less than post-structuralists — as Strauss’ debate with Kojève makes clear — Strauss sees no possibility that such fundamental differences could be ‘dialectically’ overcome:

Philosophy or science ... is the attempt to replace opinion about ‘all things’ with knowledge of ‘all things’, but opinion is the element of society; philosophy or science is therefore the attempt to dissolve the element in which society breathes, and thus it endangers society.95

If philosophers are to exert a beneficent influence at all upon politics, as Strauss yet maintains they ought, they will need not merely to temper their expression (see Part 1, ii). In what functions in Strauss’ thought as the mark of human finitude — again, after Heidegger, another topos Strauss shares with most other

94. The postwar criticism of rationalism has not remained the exclusive possession of the Right. Lyotard's celebration of the death of meta-narratives, Levinas' critique of totalizing Western-Greek philosophy, Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism, and even Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of Western instrumental reason all come to mind.

contemporary schools — 'mediating' agents are also needed, in order to make natural right practical within the polis whose doxa it transcends:

This being the case, the natural right of the wise to rule must be questioned, and the indispensable requirement for wisdom must be qualified by the requirement of consent. The political problem par excellence is reconciling the requirement for wisdom with the requirement for consent.96

Yet Strauss, armed with his critique of modern philosophy, does not therefore advocate the establishment of institutions and procedures to 'scientifically' secure this political reconciliation. In line with his reading of the Republic, rather, Strauss protests the irremovability of an element of extra-rational chance (ananke) from 'the city'. More than this, following Plato, Maimonides and Farabi, Strauss argues that chance must facilitate the appearance of two types of individuals whose capacities will be necessary to 'complete' any regime's laws: 'the statesman' and the 'legislator' or 'prophet'.

If I am right, it is Strauss' theoretical elevation of these two 'sovereign' exceptions that opens the theoretical door to political Straussianism.97 As Strauss writes in Natural Right and History:

it is extremely unlikely that the conditions for the rule of the wise will ever be met. What is more likely is that an unwise man, appealing to the natural right of wisdom and catering to the lowest desires of the many, will persuade the multitude of this right: the prospects of tyranny are brighter than those of the rule of the wise.98

With this said, it is to Strauss' conception of the 'statesman' and the 'prophet' — and towards today's political Straussians — that we must now turn.

ii. Natural right, the Laws and the Statesman: from the ancient(s) to the Modern Prince

The normative pivot of Strauss' position is the natural right that the ascendant philosopher sees, after he has made his 'rough ascent'

96 Strauss, Natural Right and History, p. 140.
97 The theme of the exception as necessary and/or pragmatic ground for the rule, we note, is accordingly not an exclusive provenance of the post-structuralist, post-Marxian 'Left'. As the career of Schmitt might show, its politics is undecidable at best.
98 Strauss, Natural Right and History, p. 140.
out of the city. Near the centre of *Natural Right and History*, Strauss tells us that for 'the ancients', 'there is a universally valid hierarchy of ends' that has a political bearing. He lists these as wisdom, then justice, then 'public safety' — or what has today come to be called 'homeland security'. Strauss goes on immediately to qualify this claim. If there is a natural hierarchy of ends, he continues, 'there are no valid rules of action' that would hold for all cases.

The enigma wrapped in these contrary statements unfolds in the light of Strauss' reading of Aristotle's teaching on natural right, located exactly in the centre of *Natural Right and History*. Strauss credits Aristotle as the teacher of two political doctrines concerning natural right. The first is that, in line with Plato's *Republic*, there is no 'simply best' regime for all times and places. The second, 'more surprising' Aristotelian teaching, is that 'all natural right is changeable': 'Aristotle says explicitly that all right — hence all natural right — is changeable: he does not qualify that statement in any way'. At issue here is how, in 'certain conditions', it may always become necessary to suspend the ordinary rule of law:

Justice has two different principles or sets of principles: the requirements of public safety, or what is necessary in extreme situations to preserve the mere existence or independence of society, on the one hand, and the rules of justice in the more precise sense on the other. And there is no principle which defines clearly in what types of cases public safety and in what type of cases the precise rules of justice have priority ... Every dangerous external or internal enemy is inventive to the extent that he is capable of transforming what, on the basis of previous experience, could reasonably be regarded as a normal situation into an extreme situation.

Our present situation certainly justifies pausing at this passage. Given the 'inventiveness' of enemies, Strauss says here that any pre-given norms for deciding might always have to be suspended in an extra-judicial decision by the sovereign or (in modern terms)

100. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 162. Strauss elaborates: 'this standard is sufficient for passing judgment on the level of nobility of individuals and of actions and institutions. But it is insufficient for guiding our actions', Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 163.
102. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 157, 158.
the executive branch. In this way, *Natural Right and History* recounts a classical version of the inveterate justification of rulers' prerogative from time to time to declare a 'state of exception'.\(^{104}\) The decisive point is that, although Strauss' natural right thus cannot say *what* we should do, he does not follow other recent theorists into the cul-de-sac of groundless decisionism. Strauss' argument is instead that natural right provides an answer to a different, and no less pressing, political question than 'what is to be done': the question of *who* should rule. The best sovereign — or in Strauss' classical terms, the 'statesman' — will be the *individual* best able to adjudicate concerning circumstances:

Thus the question arises as to what is the best regime. The first answer given by such men as Aristotle and Plato and Socrates before them is: that in which the wise rule, irresponsibly and absolutely. Irresponsibly in the sense that they are not responsible to other human beings. That the wise should be responsible to the unwise seems to be against nature.\(^{105}\)

In this classical light, he argues in *Of Tyranny* that:

the rule of a tyrant who, after coming to power by means of force or fraud, or having committed any number of crimes, listens to the suggestions of reasonable men, is essentially more legitimate than the rule of elected magistrates as such.\(^{106}\)

What distinguishes tyranny from the best regime, Strauss hence contends, is not *how* its leaders come to and exercise their mandate. 'Good governance' is *necessary* in order to manufacture consent (see *iii*). But it is not sufficient. The criterion is something at once more substantive and more elusive: the 'highest end' that orients the leaders' actions, and whose spirit 'pervades the societies throughout'.\(^{107}\) So long as an individual leader is wise, or acts in order to 'ennable' the regime, as Strauss explicates Plato, his lawless rule is so far from being condemnable as to be the most desirable political thing:

\(^{104}\) As Harry V. Jaffa puts it, in his remarkable defence of Strauss against the charge of Machiavellianism: "that there are no moral rules of conduct to which exceptions may not be found, where "the safety and happiness of society" are at stake, *has been recognized by sound moralists of all times*" (my italics); Harry V. Jaffa, 'Dear Professor Drury', *Political Theory*, vol. 15, no. 3, August 1987, p. 319.


\(^{106}\) Strauss, *On Tyranny*, pp. 76–7

The rule of law is preferable to the lawless rule of unwise men since laws, however bad, are in one way or another the outcome of some reasoning. According to the stranger [in Plato’s Statesman], even in the city ruled by the true king there will be laws ... but the true king ... may justly change the laws or act against the laws. In the absence of the true king, the stranger would probably be satisfied if the city were ruled by a code of laws framed by a wise man, one which can be changed by the unwise rulers only in extreme cases.  

Statesmanship in this way becomes a key topic given Strauss’ regeneration of classical philosophy. And, as Anne Norton comments, ‘if the Straussian intend to act as leaders, or merely to advise them, we would do well to know what they think a good leader, a good statesman, ought to be’. In answer to this question, Straussian typically name Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln as exemplars of ‘the kingly art’. Yet, as Norton argues, if these names seem unremarkable, the reasoning that informs this praise is more controversial. Carnes Lord’s significantly titled The Modern Prince: What Leaders Need to Know Now — a book praised by both academic Straussian Harvey Mansfield and neo-conservative ‘crown prince’ William Kristol — praises Lincoln and Churchill’s virtu besides FDR’s ‘extraordinary’ legislative reform ‘to increase the number of judges in order to gain a majority’, the ‘autocratic democracy’ of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew, and the ‘founding vision’ of Turkey’s Ataturk. Lord’s Lincoln is in his turn praised primarily for being the president who first suspended habeas corpus and the ordinary rule of law to secure the greater good, not for being the great emancipator, a legacy whose wisdom another ‘West Coast’ Straussian, Harry Jaffa, has openly questioned.

108. Strauss, ‘Plato’, p. 76 (emphasis added). Secrecy being an irremovable component of the political, Strauss asks us in ‘Perspectives on the Good Society’ to consider whether the best place for secrecy is not, after all, the council of educated statesman rather than in the ballot box, where the unaccountable opinion of each counts equally; see Strauss, Liberalism Ancient and Modern, p. 264.


113. Lord, Modern Prince, pp. 14–15, 81. Significantly, Lord also highlights Lincoln’s remarks concerning the need for a civic religion (p. 130); see next section.

Now, these Straussian positions are, as Strauss' thought itself would lead us to expect, both far more directly political and far less moderate than anything Strauss wrote. Yet, given this reasoning, the decisive issue does not seem to me whether Strauss' thought 'directly' sanctions the current US executive's bid to place the nation on a more-or-less permanent emergency footing so as to 'Provide Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism' nor, still less, whether the present incumbent stands for the Straussians as the model of a contemporary Straussian 'gentleman-statesman', as Singer and others have asked. The philosophical question seems rather to be whether there is any normative criterion within Leo Strauss' philosophy robust enough to prevent men less wise and more political than Strauss was from 'appealing to the natural right of wisdom and catering to the lowest desires of the many' in order to markedly alter the balance between consent and executive power. And here, I think, Natural Right and History is uncharacteristically unconvincing — or perhaps we should say 'discreet'. It is also, ironically enough, uncomfortably close to the Marxism-Leninism whose 'nihilistic' recourse to the tribunal of history Strauss typically pilloried:

What cannot be decided in advance by universal rules, what can be decided at the critical moment by the most competent and most conscientious statesman ... can be made visible as just, in retrospect, to all; the objective discrimination between extreme actions which were just and extreme actions which were unjust is one of the noblest duties of the historian.

115. In a way that has further encouraged speculation by critics about the Straussian credentials of the US incumbent, Strauss contends that in the 'practically best' regime, although the wise cannot directly command: "... the administration of the law must be entrusted to a type of man who is most likely to administer it equitably, i.e., in a spirit of the wise legislator, or to "complete" the law according to the requirements of circumstances which the legislator could not have foreseen. The classics held that this type of man is the gentleman. The gentleman is not identical with the wise man. He is the political reflection, or imitation, of the wise man. Gentlemen have this in common with wise men, that they "look down" on many things that are highly esteemed by the vulgar ... " (Strauss, Natural Right and History, pp. 141–2). Compare the chapter titled 'Liberal Education and Reponsibility', in Liberation: Ancient and Modern, pp. 13–14. See also P. Singer, The President of Good and Evil, Melbourne Australia, Text Publishing, 2004, pp. 261–5. See also M. Sharpe, 'From Athens, via Washington, to Baghdad: Leo Strauss and the New American Century', Quadrant, September 2004. For a characteristically moderate or polite Straussian response see the 'Letter' by Bernie Clarke in Quadrant, October 2004. Irving Kristol is clear: "... by one of those accidents historians ponder, our current President and his administration turn out to be quite at home in this new political environment, although it is clear that they did not anticipate their role any more than their party as a whole did". I. Kristol, The Neconon Reader, New York, Grove Press, p. 37.

iii. Of The Republic and the prophets: from the return of Thrasydamus to the rise of the religious Right

Notably, Strauss is one of the few commentators on Plato's Republic since Farabi who emphasizes the centrality of the character Thrasydamus. Thrasydamus is usually presented as the hot-blooded proto-Machiavellian whom Socrates refutes in Book I. Nevertheless, as Strauss notes, Thrasydamus returns later in the Republic. Moreover, Socrates announces that, far from being enemies, he and Thrasydamus are friends. Strauss argues that what Plato means to indicate by this is that, far from being the defender of the indefensible, the spirited Thrasydamus represents the city or polis itself in Plato's dialogue. Thrasydamus, Strauss emphasizes, is the only practitioner of an art in the dialogue: he is a rhetorician. In light of his return, Strauss thus does not finally read Plato’s defence of the ‘noble lie’ within Socrates’ construction of the indefensible ‘city in speech’ (see Part 1, iii) to indicate that such political dissemblance is itself indefensible. Strauss’ reasoning is rather that, if even in the ‘ideal’ city such ‘vulgar rhetoric’ as Thrasydamus is necessary, we must surely conclude that ‘vulgar rhetoric’ is necessary to politics as such.

In Natural Right and History, Strauss sets out what is at stake as follows:

The problem is that, for reasons noted in ii, the political life of a regime is ultimately ‘incompatible with any rules, however basic’. The ancients’ solution, as Strauss presents it, is that:

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118. Strauss, City and Man, p. 123-4, compare also pp. 86-7, 115-16.
119. Strauss, City and Man, pp. 123-4. The Platonic text in question is to be found in Plato, Republic, 498c: ‘Don’t slander Thrasydamus and me just as we’ve become friends — not that we were enemies before...’
120. Strauss, City and Man, p. 78: ‘Thrasydamus acts like the city, he resembles the city... When making his appearance in the Republic, Thrasydamus plays the angry city. It will become clearer later in the Republic that anger is no mean part of the city...’
121. Strauss, City and Man, p. 80.
122. Strauss, Natural Right and History, p. 141 (emphasis added).
for pedagogic reasons, society must present as universally valid certain rules which are [only] generally valid. The effectiveness of the general rules depends on them being taught without qualifications, without ifs and buts. But the omissions of the qualifications which makes the rules more effective, makes them at the same time untrue.123

It is precisely Strauss' association of political 'pedagogy' with the 'untruth' of the laws, I would contend, that informs both Strauss' reading of Thrasymachus' return in the Republic and his pivotal reading of Jewish and Islamic prophethood.124 In Islam and Judaism, revelation is revelation of law. Similarly, Plato's Laws, which for Farabi and Maimonides represented the work of prophethood, 'opens with the word "God"; there is no other Platonic dialogue that opens in this manner'.125 The prophets, in Strauss' political understanding of theology126 are those individuals Natural Right and History designates 'wise legislators', whose exceptional 'imagination' makes them capable of framing the Laws in stories the unwise 'many' can comprehend. These stories, in turn, work to 'freeze' in the public mind the only 'general' rules of the city 'into sacred, inviolable, unchangeable prescriptions [in a way] which would be rejected by everyone ... in the sciences and the arts', but which is 'ministerial' for 'the ordering of human affairs'.127

Given the emergence of Straussian in the US intelligence community and the conservative commentariat, the question that is raised here once again does not primarily concern Strauss' supposed 'esoteric' doctrines, or their 'direct' political influence. It is, rather, this: how can we, or Strauss, expect such a defence of the poetico-rhetorical mandate of individual prophet-legislators to be taken up in the unscientific 'twilight' of 'the city', especially in the

123. Strauss, Natural Right and History, p. 158 (emphasis added).
124. Shadia Drury charges in Leo Strauss and the American Right that a key shortcoming of Strauss' position is how he deleteriously conceives of philosophy within the horizon of a religious notion of the prophet as a vehicle of divine revelation. See S. Drury, Leo Strauss and the American Right, pp. 54–64. As Hart Green contends, this at least appears to be overstated — the mantle of prophecy was also what philosophy needed to don in order to survive in societies of revealed law. See K. H. Green, Jew and Philosopher: The Return of Maimonides in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss, Albany NY, State University of New York Press, 1993, esp. ch. 5.
age of concentrated mass media? When this question is posed, two contentions regarding today’s political Straussian seem unavoidable.

The first is that, whatever Strauss’ intentions, his teaching about the indispensability of ‘prophetic’ speech to politics can readily stand as a ‘high’ justification for the lowest types of political deceit. 128 If the ‘art of writing’ Strauss discovered in the mediaevals was ‘a weapon of the weak’, 129 that is, Strauss’ reading of Thrasyilmachus and his prophetology introduces a family resemblance between the indirect speech of the persecuted and the ideological obfuscations of rulers who would ‘prevent the circulation of ideas ... preserve the powerful against criticism ... serve the strong and keep the weak vulnerable’. 130 As leading intelligence officials Abram Shulsky and Gary Schmitt have written in ‘The World of Intelligence (By Which We Do Not Mean Nous)’:

Strauss’ view certainly alerts one to the possibility that political life might be closely linked to deception. Indeed, it suggests that deception is the norm of political life, and the hope — to say nothing of the expectation, of establishing a politics that dispense with it is the exception. 131

In response to this, it is sufficient to cite Strauss himself:

the city cannot leave it at saying, for instance, that deception ... is bad in peace but praiseworthy in war. It cannot help viewing with suspicion the man who is good at deceiving, it cannot help regarding the devious or disingenuous ways, which are required for any successful deception as simply mean or distasteful. 132

As I commented in Part 1, iii, what is translated from Plato’s Republic as ‘noble lies’ are not simple lies. They are closer to myths; which, as Claude Lévi-Strauss taught, serve ultimately to explain the origins of a society’s laws. For logical reasons, as Slavoj Zizek has contended, no cultural system can consistently explain its own origins without presupposing itself (this would be like jumping over one’s own shadow). Hence, what Zizek calls ‘ideologies’

129. Norton, Leo Strauss, p. 103.
130. Norton, Leo Strauss, p. 103.
132. Strauss, Natural Right and History, p. 149.
always pivot around narratives concerning 'sublime objects' whose enigmatic nature — or, in older language, whose sacred status — conceals from believers the violence that invariably attends the foundations of political community.  

Strauss is as far from simply rejecting such analyses as to argue that, in the best possible city, the nomoi can only be 'completed' by religious narratives concerning their origins, laid down by prophetic rhetoricians:

If the principles valid in civil society are diluted natural right [see Part 2, i], they are much less venerable than if they are regarded as ... divinely established and involving an absolute duty for fallen man. Only in the latter case is justice, as it is commonly understood, unquestionably good. 

Or again:

One may express the conclusion of the argument ... by saying that there cannot be true justice if there is no divine rule or providence ... The cause of justice is infinitely strengthened if the condition of man as man, and hence especially the condition of man in the beginning (when he could not yet have been corrupted by false opinions), was one of non-scarcity. But such care cannot be human providence. There is then a profound kinship between the notion of moral law and the notion of a perfect beginning: the golden age or the Garden of Eden.

Straussians' defence of Strauss as a liberal must hence be further tempered by a recognition of his position concerning the political desirability of a shared religion. What historians will be able to tell us in the fullness of time is that Strauss' evaluation of the salutary political value of religious beliefs for the unphilosophic many has been repackaged by Irving Kristol and allies as a 'high' defence for a populist turn for the American Republicans, and its alliance with the fundamentalist Christian movement. Kristol's political
writings between 1985 and 1995 document his conversion to the idea of a populist alliance between neo-conservatives and the Christian Right. On the back of this new prospect, Kristol passed through a veritable dark night of the political soul to an unlooked-for dawn. The grounds of this alliance, Kristol reflects, are shared moral concern about 'the quality of education, the relations of Church and State, the regulation of pornography ... all of which [neocons and the religious] regard as proper candidates for the government's attention'. To Republicans who had concerns, Kristol counselled as early as 1993 that, given the extreme circumstances:

the Republican Party must embrace the religious if they are to survive. Religious people always create problems since their ardour tends to outrun the limits of politics in a constitutional democracy. But if the Republican Party is to survive, it must work on accommodating these people.

As Kristol acknowledged, there is apparently something very unlikely ('quite unexpected') about an 'alliance between neocons, who include a fair proportion of secular intellectuals, and religious traditionalists':

Conservative politicians woo the religious conservatives, but only the neoconservatives can really speak to them ... Many of these neoconservatives are not themselves religiously observant in their private lives — although more and more are coming to be.

Yet, Kristol's unexpected religious advocacy does find a precedent. The precedent is in Leo Strauss' own public statements concerning religious assimilation in modern liberal states. In a way that sounds surprising given Strauss' own fame as a philosopher, in his 1962 Preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion, Strauss made bold to advise other 'Western Jewish intellectuals':

who or whose parents severed [their] connection with the Jewish community in the expectation that he would thus become a normal member of a purely liberal or a universal human society and who is naturally perplexed when he

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137. Kristol, Neoconservatism.
139. Kristol, Neoconservatism, p. 368.
140. Kristol, 'Neoconservative Persuasion', p. 25.
finds no such society [that] the solution is return to the Jewish community, the community established by the Jewish faith and the Jewish way of life — tenhubah (ordinarily rendered by 'repentance') in the most comprehensive sense.\textsuperscript{142}

In the light of these statements, we can say that Kristol’s response to accusations his support for the religious right is Machiavellian is, in any case, meaningfully Straussian:

All political philosophers prior to the twentieth century, regardless of their personal piety or lack thereof, understood the importance of religion in the life of the political community. Neo-conservatives, because of their interest in and attachment to classical ... political philosophy share this understanding ...\textsuperscript{143}

Whatever historians ‘adjudicate’ concerning the alliance between neo-conservatives and the pre-millenarian Right in America, thoughtful readers of Strauss can also be reminded of what Strauss said about Heidegger’s 1933 embrace of Nazism:

It was contempt for the permanencies [of the political] which permitted [Heidegger] in 1933 ... to welcome ... the verdict of the least wise and least moderate part of his nation while it was in its least wise and least moderate mood, and at the same time to speak of wisdom and moderation.\textsuperscript{144}

Concluding Philosophical Postscript: ‘I Believe (Others Believe) that ...’

Strauss’ thought, I would thus contend, names the principle — that of the unscientific finitude of politics — according to which something like today’s neo-conservative appropriation of his philosophy could have been anticipated. If this contention is correct, though, a further question is raised, which I want to address here in closing. This is, what is it about the way Strauss conceives of this ‘finitude’ that leads him to theoretically

\textsuperscript{142} Strauss. \textit{Liberalism Ancient and Modern}, p. 231 (emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{143} Kristol. \textit{Neoconservatism}, p. 381.
hypostasize 'the statesman' and the 'prophet-legislator' who both stand above the law -- instead of, for example, valorizing the separation of estates or powers? Hence: what in this way leads him to have left the door open to legitimize what one commentator has dubbed the 'subversion [of] the Law for conservative causes' by regimes like to that of George W. Bush?\footnote{W. Tiefer, \textit{Vesting Right: How the Bush Administration Subverts the Law for Conservative Causes}, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004.}

If there is any positive 'esoteric' teaching that Strauss took from the mediaevals, it seems to have been nothing more intrinsically political than the assertion that philosophy is the highest way of life. As Plato argued in the \textit{Republic}, the fact that philosophers are subjects of a higher \textit{eros} (desire for the truth of the whole) makes them the 'natural' claimants to rule. But at the same time it also provides the 'highest' justification as to why the ideal city is impossible:

> We arrive then at the conclusion that the philosophers are unwilling to rule ... Being dominated by the desire, the \textit{eros}, for knowledge as the most pleasant and blessed possession, the philosophers have no leisure for looking down at human affairs, let alone for taking care of them ...\footnote{Strauss, \textit{City and Man}, p. 125.}

While Strauss, as we have seen, holds that the political is the site of irrevocable finitude, \textit{we can hence now also add that this political finitude is nevertheless conceived by him in the light of something 'truly grand' — something very like a this-worldly infinity or sovereign Good.} In the light of this highest philosophical Thing, accordingly, Strauss' acceptance of the political necessity of the rule of law takes on exactly the form of political disavowal which modern political philosopher Slavoj Zizek argues defines political subjectivity as such — namely, \textit{I know well (in Strauss' case: that philosophers cannot rule; that the ideal city is impossible), but nevertheless ... (I continue to believe that philosophers should rule, a direct approximation of the ideal city is desirable ...)} As Strauss writes in \textit{Natural Right and History}, once the natural right of wisdom is admitted:

> justice and moral virtue in general can be fully legitimated only by the fact that they are required for the sake of the ultimate end or that they are conditions of the philosophic life.\footnote{Strauss, \textit{Natural Right and History}, p. 141.}

\textit{ARENA journal no. 27, 2006}
In the light of this sovereign Good, Strauss is even able to say, in his reading of Plato’s Statesman, that a city’s laws are at best ‘crude rules of thumb’ — necessary, but also necessarily poor, instrumental tools. Yet the reason, as he elaborates, is not only or even primarily the inventiveness of enemies we saw in Part 2, i. There is a deeper reason, for what is in question for him here is also the living wisdom and right of the philosophers:

The main objection to laws is not that they are not susceptible of being individualized [to circumstances] but that they are assumed to be binding on the wise man, on the man possessing the kingly art.

In this light, the deepest question I want to ask about Strauss’ political philosophy is, ironically, exactly one that Strauss asked of Kojève in their debate in On Tyranny: namely, whether we can or desirably ought to understand politics in such a way, ‘by starting from the untrue assumption that man as man’ — in Strauss’ case, as a philosopher — ‘is thinkable as a being that lacks awareness of sacred [moral] restraints’ or, if he knows about them, thinks that they really apply only to the others?

We saw in Part I that the ground for Strauss’ enmity towards the modern liberal ‘world society’ is apparently rooted in his aristocratic concern about what Marcuse dubbed ‘repressive toleration’ — how a universalized liberalism, as it is imputed, levels down the highest human possibilities. This Straussian view, as we can now see, is in its turn finally grounded in Strauss’ overarching Platonic concern about philosophy, as the highest good of them all (see Part 1, i). But there is surely a problem with Strauss’ position here. For in what is one of his noblest claims, Strauss argues that the philosopher’s eros is ‘highest’ precisely because it is desire for a good — knowledge — which is radically common. Like

149. Compare J. Klein and L. Strauss, ‘A Giving of Accounts’, in L. Strauss, Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity, ed. K. Hart Green, Albany NY, State University of New York Press, 1997, p. 463; reprinted in The College, vol. 22, no. 1, 1970, p. 4: ‘Mr Klein and I differ regarding the status of morality ... in your scheme of things morality has a higher place than in my scheme’. Compare Strauss, Natural Right, pp. 151–2: ‘The latter question can also be expressed by asking whether, by transforming opinion about morality into knowledge about morality, one does not transcend the dimension of morality in the politically relevant sense of the term’. Strauss’ students, even the more moderate of these, nowhere deny this reading. Compare, for example, Zuckert, Postmodern Platos, p. 113.


151. Compare Smith, Reading Leo Strauss, p. 100: ‘The very title of Strauss’ The City and Man is a stand-in for these two most comprehensive alternatives, the moral life and the philosophical life. The Republic as a whole is nothing less than an object lesson in their incommensurability’.

the proverbial flame, he notes, the possession of knowledge by any one individual does not exclude the like possession of it by any or all others. The problem is thus that this elevated vision of philosophy, on its own terms, *in no way* justifies Strauss' theoretical opposition to liberal toleration. For this opposition clearly bespeaks an anxiety that what the philosopher seeks is in truth a scarce thing, threatened by any too open sharing of it, and indeed, in possible danger — for all its 'natural'-ness — of being eradicated forever. Strauss' Platonic view of philosophy can in this way surely not *by itself* justify support of any particular form of political regime at all. As Strauss says in *City and Man*:

Having perceived the truly grand, the philosophers regard the human things as paltry. Their very justice — their abstaining from wronging their fellow human beings — flows from the contempt for the things for which the non-philosophers hotly contest. They know that the life not dedicated to philosophy and therefore even political life at its best is like life in a cave.\(^{154}\)

The only possibility that remains at this point, I want to argue, is that Strauss' aristocratic enmity towards modern liberalism is informed by sources that are, in his own terms, political or *sub-philosophical*. These sources, that is, will not involve any (hidden) knowledge. They will instead involve beliefs concerning Other(s): namely, the Platonic 'many' supposed to be *by nature* incapable of even glimpsing the philosophical Good. And, if we then pose the question of what it is that Strauss upheld concerning the 'hoi poloi', what we see is that his position is surely anything but esoteric. 'Everyone who reads his first great book and does not overlook the woods for the trees' can see its 'temper and direction' on this matter.\(^{155}\) A view that openly justifies tyrannical rule if it is the rule of the wise\(^{156}\); that is comfortable talking of the 'perverted' nature of modern liberal democracy\(^{157}\) and proposing 'counterpoisons' for its 'universal philistinism',\(^{158}\) rooted in the ignoble passion of

\(^{153}\) Or in Gourevich's words: 'the elementary and unobtrusive condition of human freedom ... is detachment from the need for whatever can become one's own to the exclusion of others ...' Gourevich, 'Philosophy and Politics', *Review of Metaphysics*, vol. XXI, no. 1, September 1965, p. 76.

\(^{154}\) Strauss, *City and Man*, p. 125.

\(^{155}\) I am paraphrasing Strauss on Heidegger, in *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 30.

\(^{156}\) Strauss, *On Tyranny*, pp. 7-79.

\(^{157}\) Strauss, 'The Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy', *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, p. 64.

envy'; that names modern political science 'vulgar'; returns characteristically to denunciations of something called the problem of a world society and that chastises Carl Schmitt in the Germany of 1932 for not going far enough in order to overcome modern liberalism — and we could go on — also wears its political heart on its sleeve. As City and Man says: 'this suggestion is strengthened by the observation that according to Plato's Socrates the greatest sophist is the political multitude'.

The ancients held a 'fundamentally different' attitude towards 'the many' than the great moderns, Strauss contends quite openly in Persecution and the Art of Writing. Their attitude was fundamentally different because:

They believed that the gulf separating 'the wise' and 'the vulgar' was a basic fact of human nature which could not be influenced by any progress of popular education: philosophy or science was essentially a privilege of 'the few' ...

At this point it is quite reasonable to ask, with Zizek in Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle:

[What, precisely, is the 'esoteric' teaching of Strauss' books — say, of his Persecution and the Art of Writing, which is about the need to distinguish the esoteric and exoteric message of great works? There is only one consistent answer: the 'esoteric' teaching here can be only the insufficiency of the very distinction between esoteric and exoteric: namely, the scandalous fact that there is more truth in the 'public' teaching than in the esoteric secret ... What, then, if the true secret of the Straussian and, perhaps of Strauss himself, is not their secret disbelief, their cruel Nietzschean world-view, but their disavowed belief?]

that we can observe, if we try hard enough, the overt behaviour of humans as we observe the overt behaviour of rats. But we ought not to forget that in the case of rats we are limited to observing overt behaviour because they have nothing to say or because they have no inwardness. Yet to return from these depths to the surface ...' One does wonder what Strauss is implying at this point at least, when this passage is read beside his comment on the 'shamelessness' of liberal subjects, pp. 261-2.

161. Compare, for example, Strauss, On Tyranny, p. 211; Liberalism Ancient and Modern p. viii; 'Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism', pp. 39-43.
163 Strauss, City and Man, p. 36.
164. Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing, p. 34.

ARENA journal no. 27, 2006
It is not just, as we saw in Part 2, iii, that when Strauss and the neo-conservatives speak politically they support public religion as if they were themselves ‘true believers’. It is not even that such a cynical supposition that only Others need to believe ironically resembles the typical supposition of liberal subjects whom Straussian deplore (are we not all ‘detached’, ‘cool’, ‘enjoying’ subjects today?). By drawing on Zizek’s Lacanian political theory, we can see that Strauss’ position suggests a stronger philosophical contention: that the true ‘secret’ of Strauss and the political Straussian — if there are such things — is their own disavowal of the finitude of the ‘blessed’ philosophical ‘few’ who, no less than us, the unwise many, cannot but also be finite, desiring and believing subjects of politics and hence the laws.

In the modern age wherein universal enlightenment, in principle, threatens ‘to render the very distinction between the exoteric ‘beautiful lie’ and the esoteric terrifying truth ... hopelessly dated’, the real desire of the Straussian hence appears not to be the ethereal desire to protect philosophy. Rather, this desire necessarily coincides with that of religious conservatives as a wish to resurrect a political society closed enough to keep the very distinctions alive about which Strauss never ceased openly to speak: between exoteric and esoteric, the many and the few, the city and some ‘natural’ calling of man supposedly ‘above the law’, and hence also beyond citizens’ reproach.

Paul Wolfowitz’s essay in Present Dangers contains an important subsection which bears the loaded title ‘How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Pax Americana’. The title is, ‘esoterically’, a reference to Kubrik’s Dr Strangelove, the subtitle of which reads: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb. There is then a second concealed allusion here. Kubrik’s Dr Strangelove, as those ‘in the know’ know, was modelled on Wolfowitz’s second great teacher, the Cold War nuclear analyst Alfred Wohlstetter, a colleague of Strauss’. One conclusion we should draw, if we follow the ‘classic interpretive schema’, is that Wolfowitz is advocating that the United States should reserve the right to use

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tactical nuclear weapons to maintain the *Pax Americana* in the coming century. For all this engaging esoterica intimated within the subsection’s title, however, it is an entirely more open question as to whether one needs to uncover these layers of allusion to interpret the *politics* of Wolfowitz’s essay. In it Wolfowitz from start to finish advocates that the post-Cold War *Pax Americana* is not to be lamented, which is instead a strategic opportunity to be seized, although this means that ‘the burdens placed on the US’s armed forces are ... [to remain] significantly larger than those placed on the armed forces of any other nation’. Just how esoteric Wolfowitz’s position on the nuclear question is, is also fairly up in the air:

We must both support the military’s capability and ensure that the US continues to lead with respect to new weapons systems based on rapidly evolving technologies. We cannot expect to do this on the cheap.\(^{170}\)

In a similar way, I propose, critics of the ‘Straussianism’ in Washington would do well to cease speculating about hidden doctrines, as if this sphinx’s secrets were concealed far from view. The *politics of Strauss*’ philosophy are only too evident. This politics, as Strauss could lead us to suspect, is present in its form or structuring assumptions, which are deeply and openly anti-democratic, and predicated on the abiding distinction between the enlightened few and permanently and justly benighted many. That is, if I am right, everything turns on how the Strausians have learnt to stop worrying about the modern ‘crisis’ by believing through the ‘hoi poloi’, or, more precisely, in believing in their need to believe, which also means their need not to know the truths entrusted to their guardians.