

The Secret of Straussianism

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DURING THE LATE 1940s and into the 1950s, as Anglo-American analytic philosophy came to dominate much of the academy and seemed to chase religion and ethics out of the philosophy curriculum, political philosophy as a discipline witnessed a revival of an older effort to ground thinking about morals and politics in what is known as natural law or natural right. Carried on in the shadow of Hitler, Stalin and the relativistic and nihilistic thinking starting to pervade the social sciences, this movement included numerous thinkers whose common aim was to construct a theoretical foundation on the basis of which one could show unambiguously that the Gulag and the Holocaust were *wrong*.

Catholic thinkers like Jacques Maritain, Yves Simon, and Charles N. R. McCoy worked to bring about a renewal of their own tradition from the sterile Scholastic manuals of the nineteenth century. Protestants deepened and renewed their understanding of “God’s creation,” which human beings can know without revelation and which may serve as the basis for Protestant versions of natural law. Protestant thinkers argued that there were “orders of creation” which God had established to guide human life, and which

could provide grounds for moral and political judgment. John Hallowell and John Wild were early and prominent proponents of this revival—as was the Dutch thinker Herman Dooyeweerd. Meanwhile, Eric Voegelin’s distinctive philosophy developed a critique of modern political rationalism and a conservative form of natural right not necessarily tied to orthodox forms of religion. In short, this movement to recover a tradition of normative natural law was rich, many-sided, ecumenical.

Today, while there are still many individual scholars whose work is influenced by Voegelin or, of course, by the Catholic natural law tradition, there is no *school* of Hallowell or *school* of Maritain in political philosophy. Of all the writers of the 1950s who are grouped together as proponents of “moral natural law,” only Leo Strauss (1899-1973) has followers who are widely understood to constitute a school. In political theory, the term “Straussian” has become a designator of a set of like-minded thinkers pursuing similar questions in similar ways, just as with Thomists or Kantians. So successful have the students of Strauss been as an academic school that a recent bibliographical text devoted to Straussianism contains over 10,000 entries.

What, however, *is* Straussianism, and why has it become so entrenched yet so

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controversial in political philosophy? This essay cannot possibly do justice to the complex thought of Strauss himself, nor to the vast literature produced by those who accept the label Straussian. Nor can I treat the works by second- and third-generation students of Strauss who do engage the real philosophic project, such as William Galston with his important *Justice and the Human Good* (1980). At most I can analyze some key elements and themes that have made Strauss so important a figure in American intellectual life.

Straussianism is not coeval with Strauss himself, nor with his biography. What has become Straussianism is largely indebted to Strauss's later work from the late 1940s onward, including many papers published after his death in 1973. Straussianism has, in my view, two distinct dimensions. The first involves the study of the history of philosophy while the second is a rhetorical or political project that covers over the deep fissures of Strauss's own thinking.

Strauss was originally a participant in the renaissance of Jewish thought and life which occurred in Weimar Germany and with which the names of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig are prominently associated. His first works were on Spinoza and Maimonides. But after his flight from the Nazis, first to the New School in New York and then to the University of Chicago, he became increasingly a profound student of what we now call the Great Books of the Western world.

Strauss's devotion to the Great Books came with a difference, however. He obviously was greatly enamored of the foremost texts of Western philosophy, including those written by Islamic thinkers, as texts which wrestled with the fundamental questions of human existence: the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. In a deep study of these texts we could enrich our souls by confronting the greatest questions. So much, however, was little

more than the same argument for liberal education that had been made by educators for decades. Nineteenth-century university presidents had made the same argument, as had the founders of Saint John's College in the 1930s.

What made Straussianism different was Strauss's insistence that the great philosophers wrote with both an exoteric meaning for the common reader and an esoteric teaching for the few or the wise. This latter, "secret" teaching could be discerned by a very careful reading of the classical texts, a reading that paid attention to every word, every misquotation that might be deliberate, and every silence that might be pregnant with meaning. From this premise Strauss developed penetrating, often-important readings of the great texts of Western civilization. For example, Strauss saw Hobbes's atheism clearly where a dominant interpretation of the 1950s held that Hobbes had to be a theist to make his system coherent. Strauss also penetrated the easy rhetorical overlay of Locke's religiosity to its a-religious core in a powerful way—though by the 1950s the fact that Locke was disingenuous about his religious views was a commonplace of scholarship. Strauss pushed harder and got more penetrating results.

Strauss's rich readings of great philosophers have had wide influence even among those who would not think of themselves as Straussians. For example, Edwin Curley, the greatest English-speaking Spinoza scholar of the twentieth century, has clearly been influenced by Strauss's view of Spinoza as a thoroughgoing atheist, though he would never call himself a Straussian.

The *content* of Strauss's teaching, however, is less important than his overarching claim that there *is* a secret teaching, and that he, the teacher, is telling you about it—or, at least, how to find it. This can be heady stuff for graduate students and would-be disciples. Here

are the keys to an intellectually elite kingdom of the truly wise, who communicate with a rhetoric of concealment that avoids destroying the certainties of ordinary folk while it also provides a liberating venue for the elite to carry on their speculations.

This esotericism is not a matter of opacity. It is not just that technical philosophy is often hard to understand. It is. Taking a sincere theist through Leibniz's modal ontological proof for the existence of God is probably wasted energy, even though Leibniz would agree about God with the ordinary believer and his argument is clear to philosophers. What Strauss claimed, rather, was that the greatest philosophers deliberately conceal a hidden message which only the elite few can grasp. This "few," then, is an aristocracy which one can join by having the right teachers, not merely the right parents. Strauss believed that esotericism stemmed from the philosophers' desire to protect philosophy itself from the passions of the masses, which in some cases (as with Socrates) might get one killed.

In large measure this was the argument of Strauss's *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952). It was at the time, and remains in many ways, an important contribution. In all honesty, however, the idea of "secret writing" has become a commonplace among students of early modernity. David Berman and his followers, for example, have used it to study Locke, Spinoza, and the history of atheism in ways similar to that of Strauss and the Straussians. One also finds the same approach undertaken with no relation to Strauss in D. P. Walker's seminal *The Decline of Hell* (1964).

The most important single non-Straussian statement on esotericism is undoubtedly Annabel Patterson's *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (1984), which has spawned a number of followers in the study of early mo-

dernity, such as Lois Potter's *Secret Rites and Secret Writing* (1989). Since literature is actually politics, so the argument goes, we should read literary texts such as Sir Philip Sydney's *Arcadia* as political statements, especially since Sydney was part of the extended Elizabethan court. In the early-modern period, the wrong politics could result in the gallows, so secret writing was the result.

Many of those who on one definition might be thought of as Straussians or at least on the Straussian fringe (myself included) have been profoundly influenced by Strauss's careful reading of classic texts in two important ways. First, Strauss read classical philosophical texts with the care of a literary critic before literary study was given over to leftist politics. Every word or phrase mattered for Strauss. Every placement of an argument, every structural anomaly or feature might be significant. This close reading tried to let the texts speak to us in their own terms, confronting us with the concerns of a great thinker and *his* questions, not ours. This method of close, precise reading made the texts come alive in new and richer ways, even when one might disagree with others following the same method on the precise interpretation of a particular passage or problem.

Secondly, Strauss actually read the text as distinct from either the context or by just picking out a small passage and using it as a springboard for contemporary analysis—as, for example, has often happened with Saint Thomas Aquinas's celebrated "five ways" by which reason can demonstrate the existence of God. Strauss believed that the texts are philosophy first and foremost, and not merely a reflection of their times or of the racial, gender, or class biases of the author. Furthermore, Strauss believed that these texts are wholes, which must be interpreted as such. We do them a grave disservice when we take out of context a certain passage and attempt to judge whether it is a sound

or valid argument according to contemporary standards. For example, Aristotle's claim in his biological treatises that "nature does nothing in vain" must be interpreted as Aristotle put it, in the context of the work or works where it is found. It should not be read as a sort of proto-Darwinist claim that, in view of the selection of the fittest, one would never see anything in vain in nature.

Strauss's method of penetrating reading is *not* equivalent to his teaching about esotericism. Many students of the great works of philosophy or literature have followed a sort of "Straussian" method of close and penetrating reading without also claiming that an author was deliberately secretive or elitist. Leon Kass's recent magisterial work on Genesis is an extraordinarily close and profound reading of that text, for example. But he nowhere argues that there is a secret or hidden meaning intended only for the few and the wise.

But Straussism is not just a method, which like any method can be abused, for example, by seeing a hidden (read esoteric) homosexual character behind every literary tree. Straussism is also, perhaps even most deeply, a political or rhetorical project. Straussism rejects the easy relativism and deep nihilism of modernity and replaces it with the rhetoric, if not the substance, of natural right. This is the crux of Straussism as a school of thought, and it deserves our closest attention.

By common consent of serious students (the same test which Strauss used to identify the great books) the central book of Strauss's *oeuvre* is *Natural Right and History* (1953). Everything before *Natural Right and History* is either surpassed by or is propaedeutic to it. All Strauss's later works flow from it. This work appeared during the aforementioned revival of what was called by some writers "moral natural law." In its time, it was understood generally as one more in a series of attempts to

respond to the crisis brought on by the relativism and the nihilism of the modern period.

Strauss's key text richly rewards the reader. He properly calls attention to the severe deficiencies of historicism and Weberian sociology, both of which desire to make ideas the product of history and both of which are unwilling to say that some aspects of the objects which they study are *wrong* (e.g., the traditional Indian practice of suttee). Strauss also engages in a rich discussion of both classic natural right and its modern cousin, natural rights. In the former he tends to view Plato and Aristotle in the same way, an entirely respectable position, though also highly contested—especially if one considers the whole of Aristotle's *oeuvre*: Aristotle was profoundly interested in both logic and biology, neither of which was a central concern of Plato. In discussing modern natural rights Strauss provides close and powerful readings of Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Burke.

One expects at the end of *Natural Right and History* to be shown the proper (re)grounding of natural right in our time; one expects the reigning relativism and nihilism to be overcome in dialogue with the great thinkers that Strauss has so admirably explicated. Nothing of the kind, however, occurs. Strauss might have demonstrated to us how philosophy grounds natural right. He might have turned toward Jerusalem and shown us how faith or theology articulates the true basis of moral and political life. He might even have tried to ground natural right in the scientific study of human nature, as some of his extended followers, such as Roger Masters and Larry Arnhart, have done. Since he speaks so much about the soul, he might have tried to defend the reality of the soul as distinct from the body. But Strauss does none of this. He has laid out the modern crisis so boldly and analyzed its main forms so thoroughly and he has taught us how to read the

classic texts to grasp the problem of natural right. Yet, just when the issues are joined so forcefully, he fails to give an answer.

At bottom Strauss appears to be a skeptic on the most fundamental question of all: Can either philosophy or theology ground either wisdom or virtue? It is not that Strauss did not do all he could have done. It is rather that, on his own terms, such a grounding of natural right seems not to be possible. This is why in his masterwork the language of natural right is so fervent and pervasive while the payoff is so meager. On the question at hand the project appears as rhetorical, not philosophic. In *Natural Right and History* Strauss argues that classical natural right is superior to modern natural rights, but he nowhere shows how classic natural right is anything more than rhetoric.

Nowhere does Strauss provide solutions to, or show how Plato or Aristotle provided solutions to, fundamental epistemological problems found in Plato's own work. Nowhere does he engage Aristotle's metaphysics or biology in search of natural right, in the way that Aristotle himself might have done. Nowhere does he seriously engage the nature of the physical cosmos. On his own view, philosophy must aspire to and thus assume a comprehensive account of the whole. But to invoke the whole—a cosmos—immediately raises the question of the grounds on which we can assume that whole to be intelligible. Such a move, of course, leads to classic natural theology, which Strauss studiously ignores.

An important example of this avoidance of theology is seen in Strauss's posthumously published 1941 lecture on the German nihilism of the Weimar period. Strauss there argues that the young nihilists were so easily seduced by Hitler because they saw in bourgeois liberalism nothing that touched their souls with fire. The young Germans' longing for transcendence, which Augustine would have

understood perfectly, found no answer or even acknowledgement within Weimar's liberalism. Thus, when Hitler came to power, and was touted by his own minister for religious affairs as "the herald of a new revelation," the nihilists discovered an answer to their longing.

In this deeply unsettling context, however, Strauss simply ignores the fact that the first and most profound opponents of the Nazi regime were churches and theologians like the Protestant Karl Barth, who was expelled in 1934, and the Catholic Erich Pederson, who fled about the same time after publishing a thinly disguised attack on the pseudo-religious intentions of the Nazis. Pederson's book has since become a seminal work on fourth-century Patristics. Why was this opposition so fast and so clear? I think it is because the theologians understood immediately the longing that Strauss shows was at the heart of nihilism. The theologians recognized the desire, its destructive power, and the ultimate incapacity of anything temporal to answer it. Yet Strauss, after so ably documenting the problem, ignores the solution to which the facts point, an answer that would cast profound doubt on the sufficiency of philosophy to satisfy the human soul.

To recognize further the rhetorical character of Strauss's project we should perhaps apply Strauss's method to his own writing. One example is all I have room for here. Strauss advises us to look with care when one thinker quotes another. Is it a deliberate misquotation? Why is it placed where it is? What does the quoting of such a text imply? Well, in *Natural Right and History* Strauss opens the introduction with a passage about natural rights from the Declaration of Independence. His reference to the Declaration deliberately draws attention to that text's claim that human beings have rights that exist apart from historical context and independent of any political

regime. To be legitimate, regimes must respect rights. Of course, Strauss once again does not wrestle with the claim of the Declaration that these rights are a divine endowment. But moreover, if one notices that the Declaration is preeminently a rhetorical or political text, where one would hardly expect the deepest truths to be argued for, might this not point to a truth about Strauss's own intentions?

Strauss follows up the references to the Declaration with references to the early twentieth-century German theologian and philosopher Ernst Troeltsch who was profoundly influenced by the same Max Weber that Strauss, in this very work, so ably criticizes. Weber and Troeltsch lived together in the same house in Heidelberg for thirteen years. The essay from which Strauss quotes was one of Troeltsch's last, written in 1920. It is a comparison of German thought, which by then was in the grip of radical historicism, and Anglo-American thought, which still at that time believed in what Troeltsch always called "natural law."

What Strauss does not tell the reader is that by 1920, having first given up on traditional Christianity and then on Kantianism as a substitute, Troeltsch was a convinced historicist who could brilliantly describe the difference between German historicism and the thought of the Declaration but could give no cogent argument defending the Declaration against historicism. Does this intellectual journey imply something about Strauss's own with respect to Judaism? Troeltsch tried to find an answer to historicism but having, in his own view, failed, he conceded and embraced a version of historicism borrowed from Dilthey. Perhaps the quotation points to a conclusion. It is better to be silent about one's failures and offer instead the rhetoric of virtue. It is better not to let the skeptical cat out of the bag.

Of the over 10,000 entries in the recent

bibliography of Straussianism all but two must be passed over here. A number are penetrating studies of great thinkers. I have consulted many of them myself, with great profit. But to grasp the Straussian rhetorical project at its sharpest, as well as its ultimately empty core, I shall focus on two Straussian books of recent vintage. Perhaps the most widely read Straussian book ever—*Natural Right and History* included—was Allan Bloom's passionate bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), which was praised by Straussian reviewers, the *New York Times*, and many conservative publications alike. The work is a *tour de force* of cultural analysis and commentary. It traces the relativism and nihilism that pervades American culture and education back to their intellectual roots in Heidegger, Nietzsche, and lesser moderns. Bloom goes to the core of the modern problem, not its most recent manifestations. Derrida and Foucault merit one reference each. Gadamer none.

Bloom's book is mostly a devastating analysis of the easy-going relativism and sloppy nihilism of American students, popular culture, and above all the American university. It is a call to arms against the sea of troubles that beset us. It tells us in splendid detail how we got to this degrading point where eminent philosophers like Heidegger embrace Nazism and less eminent contemporary philosophers write books about the philosophical meaning of the Simpsons, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and U2. The degradation obviously continues in Bloom's terms with hard rock music and with video games where the object is to kill policemen.

Yet after offering such a compelling analysis of the evils of relativistic social science and nihilistic philosophy in general, after so brilliantly describing the genealogy of modern nihilism, we ask after a fashion: Where's the beef? Nihilism and relativism are surely as wrong and as degrading as Bloom claims. But what, with

some degree of care and precision, is the alternative? Studying the great books and participating in the great conversation is highly recommended by Strauss and Bloom—and by this writer as well. Students would be much better for it. Yet if nihilism is wrong, then what is the alternative?

Strauss's eminent pupil recounts with more candor than Strauss his rejection of the desire of his family that he become a rabbi. Piety or faith was not his strong suit. But if Jerusalem is wrong is Athens any better? It cannot be better simply because it raises the great questions. Nietzsche engaged the great questions more penetratingly than virtually any other philosopher. Yet as Bloom himself here demonstrates, it is Nietzsche who lies behind the degradations he so richly describes. Ultimately the esoteric teaching of Bloom is the same as that of his mentor. There is no real response to nihilism except the convenient rage which is shared by many. The failure to show us a way forward beyond a perpetual openness points to the very nihilism that Bloom seemingly detests.

My other example of the Straussian problematic is Michael Zuckert's masterful book on the intellectual background on the American founding, *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism* (1994). This work is much more like that of mainstream Straussianism which has largely ignored the sort of cultural criticism in which Bloom engaged. Zuckert's work is an analysis of the development of Whig political thought from the seventeenth century into the eighteenth. The story he recounts with precision and detail is the development of republican thought in Britain from the dominance of Grotius in the period after the Restoration of 1660 to the dominance of Locke in the eighteenth century. Zuckert's work is a powerful analysis of one side of the story. But as Barry Alan Shain has so brilliantly shown, to focus the study of the American found-

ing on a coterie of intellectuals who were at best deists ignores the beliefs and values of the ordinary Americans who actually fought the Revolution and ratified the founding documents. These men and women were committed to local control, communal values, and above all to a deep religiosity that intellectuals like Jefferson and Madison despised.

The story that Zuckert does not treat in any detail is the deep religious convictions that lay at the heart of early modernity. He does so for two interconnected reasons. First, he claims—but does not demonstrate—that the Reformation offered nothing new, or sufficiently new, in politics. Second, and more importantly, when English Protestants tried to create a polity rooted in religion they wound up in sectarian strife and Cromwellian tyranny. Hence, Englishmen, in his view wisely, turned to create a foundation for politics based on reason alone. This of course agrees quite nicely with Zuckert's own predilections. Such a story, however, ignores both texts and realities. The texts he nowhere mentions are those theological tracts that develop a radical Protestant individualism rooted in a view of conscience as a direct witness of the Holy Spirit. This literature grounded a religious liberty more powerful than that of Locke or even Jefferson. Where Locke, for example, excluded Roman Catholicism from toleration, Thomas Helwys, the founder of the English Baptist movement, included them nearly a century earlier than Locke. Moreover, Zuckert chooses not to mention that the deliverances of reason are at least as contested and prone to sectarianism as those of faith—as we have seen, time and again, with the twentieth century's atheist ideological faiths.

In the end Zuckert, like Bloom, is a true disciple of Strauss. He focuses on Locke's entirely political, and so rhetorical, *Two Treatises* and does not confront the rich epistemology of the *Essay*. Nor does he

examine Leibniz's critique of the *Essay*, which one would have to do to ground fully the teaching about rights in a comprehensive view about nature. Zuckert ultimately holds that when the Declaration claims truths to be "self evident" what is meant is that they are axiomatic within a specific political tradition. They are neither true nor false, as such. They are taken for granted, not argued over. Zuckert's work may be intellectual history at its finest, but it is a story, not reality. It is the story of the ideas held by a coterie of intellectuals who had already picked sides on the great questions. They could not regard liberty as the sacred right of all human beings because in their hearts they had no real comprehension of what "sacred" or God-given could mean. Even a deist like Jefferson wrote in his first draft that the truths of our founding were "sacred," not merely self-evident.

Strauss himself rejected all the answers advanced during the revival of natural law or natural right in the 1950s. In so doing he rejected what some have taken to be the meaning of Straussianism: the simple return to classic natural right. Having rejected the answers of many of his conservative contemporaries, what is the proper answer—or at least the direction in which a proper answer is to be found? Openness alone is no answer. One strenuous critic of Strauss has attacked him as being a "sphinx without a secret." I think that this is a limited and unsatisfactory response to Strauss and to Straussianism. In general, the secret of Strauss's teaching is that there *is* no philosophic answer to the fundamental problems of human existence: What is the good? How shall I know it? How shall I live in its light?

In the end Strauss failed to follow his own sage advice. Strauss always taught that it is better to interpret the low in terms of the high. Starting with the low distorts and diminishes the grasp of the high. Starting with the high allows the heights to be seen in their true splendor

while the low remains what it is. This is advice we all ought to follow. This essay is being written partially on Palm Sunday, in the shadow of Easter. But if the Easter event is what Christians claim it to be, then surely theology, not philosophy, is the "queen of the sciences," just as it once was in universities. It is the foundation of all inquiry. But one searches Strauss's corpus and that of leading Straussians in vain for any serious encounter with Christian theologians, or for that matter with the real theologians of Islam like al-Ghazali. Straussians express their partiality for the ancients over the moderns as a preference for the high over the low. When confronted with the very highest, however—the claims of Christianity—they turn back on the road to Athens without any serious argument to justify their turn.

In the 1930s, as Strauss was making both a physical and a spiritual journey out of the world of German-Jewish education and thinking, another European Jew, destined to become one of the century's deepest thinkers, was making a very different journey. Like Strauss, Simone Weil was born into a secular Jewish home before World War I. Like Strauss, she was a profound student of the ancients and her lectures on Plato contain different but still rich and deep insights, like his. But beginning in the mid-1930s, as Strauss was settling in the U.S., Weil had a personal experience of the risen Christ with a profoundly biblical orientation. Where you are ontologically in relation to God became for her the foundational question of all human existence. It is not geographical, it is not denominational, it is not philosophical, and it is not political. It is spiritual in the deepest sense: What does God want me to do and to become? This question follows from remembering that in the Bible, the great religious text of the West, the first question is *not* a philosophical one; it is *not* man's question addressed to God. Rather, it is God's question addressed to us: "Where are you?"

The beginning of wisdom, for Weil, is to orient oneself correctly to the source of wisdom so that one may hear the call and experience the beauty of the Divine, which illumines all of creation.

Like Augustine a millennium and a half earlier, Weil did not despise philosophy—especially not the ancients who so captivated Strauss. But philosophy could not satisfy the restless longing of humanity in the world we know. This world is a place of bitterness and suffering to which the philosopher has only limited and partial answers. Having ignored the fundamental question from the source of all good, the philosopher cannot now proclaim the triumph of the good.

In a way, Weil's path from Judaism shows the limited nature of Straussianism as a school. Straussians start with the view that the great texts they study are foremost political texts with a political intent. They show us how we might tame political utopianism and create for our-

selves a political order of peace and security. When compared with Weil they do not measure up because they have only a tamed and limited objective. They do not confront Weil's question because the liberal regime, which Strauss claimed was the best regime possible under the circumstances, could not openly confront such a question.

As a method of reading and studying the great texts, Straussianism is to be highly recommended—though with due appreciation for the dangers of reading too much esotericism into otherwise mundane texts. But as a teaching about wisdom, about the very highest things, the Straussian secret is ultimately a check drawn on an empty account. It may be that the rhetoric of conservative conventionalism is the best that philosophy has to offer. If so, is not the proper response of those who seek wisdom to give up what we have and "come follow me."