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978-0-521-87902-6 - The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss

Edited by Steven B. Smith

Excerpt

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STEVEN B. SMITH

1 Introduction

Leo Strauss Today

Leo Strauss (1899–1973) was a central figure in the revival of the study of political philosophy. He was highly controversial during his lifetime, and the debates over his ideas and his legacy have only deepened in the years after his death. His writings attracted passionate defenders and equally passionate critics. His name itself has become an “ism”: *Straussianism*.¹

There is considerable disagreement over the nature of Strauss's achievement even among those most intimately acquainted with his work. His attempt to revive the famous “quarrel between the ancients and the moderns” led many to wonder whether his loyalties were more with the world of ancient philosophy and politics than with modernity. His writings on the theme of what he metaphorically called “Jerusalem and Athens” led some to question whether his commitments were to the theistic tradition of revealed law or to secular forms of rationality. His recovery of the tradition of esoteric writing has led many to speculate whether his own writings conveyed a secret teaching intended for those initiated into the art of “careful reading.” And his concern with the problems created by the philosophies of historicism, relativism, and

¹ Among the recent works on Strauss, see the following: Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. Marcus Brainard (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Thomas L. Pangle, *Leo Strauss: An Introduction to His Thought and Intellectual Legacy* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press, 2006); Eugene R. Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2006); Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Christopher Nadon (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); David Janssens, *Between Jerusalem and Athens: Philosophy, Prophecy, and Politics in Leo Strauss's Early Thought* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008).

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nihilism has led many to wonder about Strauss's politics. Was he a Platonist attempting to educate a new generation of philosopher-kings, or a closet nihilist who affected conventional opinions ultimately to subvert them? Who was Leo Strauss and what did he stand for?

Strauss was a member of a remarkable generation of émigré-scholars who helped to revive a decaying field called "the history of political thought," which was widely considered moribund if not dead. He did this by introducing into the English-speaking world an interest in what has come to be called "the modernity problem." In particular, Strauss called into question the concept of progress upon which the great hopes of the Enlightenment had been pinned. Along with other refugees from Hitler's Germany, he questioned at its most fundamental level the Enlightenment idea of progress and human perfectibility that had been a central part of the modern project since the seventeenth century. The great catastrophes of the twentieth century – two world wars and the Holocaust – convinced Strauss that the steady triumph of scientific and technological rationality had not been a blessing in every respect. The very idea of progress – the use of scientific and technological power for the "relief of man's estate" – had come to appear to thoughtful observers as increasingly problematic.

Strauss's response to the problem of modernity was to reopen the issue with which the modern era began, namely the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. Initially a literary and aesthetic debate, Strauss inquired into the grounds for rejecting the ancients, beginning with Machiavelli and extending through a number of "waves" of modernity from Hobbes and Locke to Rousseau and Kant, and culminating in the radical modernity – today we might say "postmodernity" – of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Rather than exhibiting a steady, cumulative progress of knowledge over error and superstition, Strauss showed how modernity exhibited a dangerous tendency toward "historicism" or what became known as "nihilism," that is, the view that all standards of justice and morality are historically relative, limited to the perspective of the age in which they are expressed. This type of historical relativism, given powerful expression by Oswald Spengler and other interwar German thinkers, had made its way into the Anglo-American world where, Strauss believed, it was beginning to erode the core structure of liberal beliefs about justice and natural rights.

Strauss was not originally a student of political theory or political philosophy. He came to an appreciation of the importance of politics through his early investigation into the philosophy of Spinoza, Maimonides, and other medieval Jewish and Arabic philosophers. These thinkers had adopted a manner of writing that was deliberately intended to conceal their deepest and most important teachings from public scrutiny. This was done in part because they lived in communities that

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held powerful injunctions against philosophical questioning of the religious law, but also out of a sense of respect for or loyalty to those communities of which they were a part. The doctrine of esotericism or the “double truth” had long been noted by Strauss’s scholarly predecessors but he gave it a new meaning. In particular, he came to believe that all philosophers insofar as they desire to communicate to others must take account of the political situation of philosophy, that is, what can be said and what must be kept under wraps. From this, Strauss inferred the primacy of political philosophy.

This insight into the primacy of political philosophy gave Strauss a platform from which to reinterpret the standard works of the tradition from Plato onward. It provided him with a way of interpreting works written under what might be called “regimes of persecution.” Rather than simply assuming that works like Plato’s *Republic*, Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*, or Locke’s *Second Treatise* mean precisely what they say on the surface, one must be attuned to contradictions, repetitions, and ambiguities down to the smallest points of detail as containing possible clues to what the author secretly intended. Strauss brought the skills of a literary detective to the study of philosophical texts. This discovery of what he called “a forgotten kind of writing” led him to pose such questions as: “What are the limits of free expression?” “To what degree is the freedom to philosophize consistent with the underlying premises of social order?” “What is the social responsibility of philosophers?” and in its broadest and most comprehensive form, simply “Why philosophy?”

Strauss knew that his discovery – actually, he always referred to it as a “recovery” – of esotericism would set off a bombshell. He was correct. Almost immediately, critics took aim. Perhaps the most disturbing suggestion was that the great thinkers wrote in a way that would deliberately deceive the majority of their readers. Strauss admitted that such a charge was bound to be shocking to “every decent modern reader.”² There were further questions raised by the recovery of esotericism. How could the interpretation of an esoteric meaning be verified if the very meaning of the text was hidden? When was an author’s contradiction simply a contradiction and not a clue to some deeper problem? Further, was esoteric interpretation a historical phenomenon, limited to texts written in preliberal or nonliberal societies, or was it an imperative for all philosophical writers, even those living in free societies that valued, or at least claimed to value, the expression of heterodox points of view? Was Strauss himself such a writer?³

² Strauss, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” in *PAW*, 35.

³ For the idea that Strauss was an esoteric writer, see Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Shadia

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At the same time that Strauss questioned some of the basic tenets of the Enlightenment's faith in progress and science, he reawakened an interest in the importance and vitality of religion. This grew out of his experience as a German Jew who had been raised in an orthodox family and for whom what was called "the Jewish Question" was a lifelong concern. The Enlightenment had attempted to solve the traditional problem of church-state relations by cordoning religion off into its own private sphere within civil society. Influenced by writers like Franz Rosenzweig within the Jewish tradition and Karl Barth within Christianity, Strauss viewed this type of liberal theology as inadequate to deal with the full scope of the "theologico-political predicament." Strauss began to raise questions about whether the Enlightenment had succeeded in disproving the possibility of revealed religion or whether the citadel of orthodoxy had managed to survive the "Napoleonic" assault of the modern critique of religion. The question of Jerusalem or Athens, of whether revealed law or human reason was the ultimate guide of life, was still an issue that remained to be decided.

The theologico-political theme, considered until only recently a somewhat peripheral aspect of Strauss's interests, has in recent years come to take center stage. The Jewish Question was not just a parochial aspect of Strauss's biography but became for him the very symbol of the human predicament. The Jewish Question meant more for him than the failure of even democratic governments to end the problem of "discrimination." "The Jewish problem," he would write, "is the most manifest symbol of the human problem."⁴ In addressing this issue, Strauss sometimes took upon himself the language of the prophet or sage.

The importance of the theologico-political problem was recognized just over a decade ago by the literary critic George Steiner writing in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement*:

If, in the traditional pairing which Strauss adopts, the life-long labors turn around Jerusalem and Athens, it is the former which, at the last, radiates at the center. It is in the light or dark of Jewish identity and history, made dramatically intense

Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: Saint Martin's, 1988); Steven Lenzner, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Freedom of Thought* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, Department of Government, 2003); for an excellent account of Strauss's esotericism and its relation to contemporary literary theory, see Paul A. Cantor, "Leo Strauss and Contemporary Hermeneutics," *Leo Strauss's Thought: Toward a Critical Engagement*, ed. Alan Udoff (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991), 267–314; see also Gérald Sfez, "Leo Strauss: Un Criticisme de la Preuve," *Revue Philosophique* 130 (2005): 3–19; Arthur Melzer, "Esotericism and the Critique of Historicism," *American Political Science Review* 2 (2006): 279–295.

⁴ Strauss, "Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*," in *LAM*, 230.

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by the twentieth century, that Leo Strauss, Hermann Cohen's dissenting successor in the development and tragedy of German Judaism, reads, that he "lives" the interaction between classical Greek, Islamic, Renaissance, and Judaic views of the meaning of man. Even where the declared topic is outwardly remote from Judaica, in the somewhat strange book on Aristophanes and Socrates, for example, we need, as Strauss himself would have it, to read between the lines. The Hebrew characters are never far off.⁵

As Steiner maintains here, if it was Jerusalem that "radiates at the center" of Strauss's thought, it is important – even imperative – to note that he addressed the problem of revelation not essentially as a man of faith but in the spirit of a Socratic philosopher raising or asking questions. Of course, this is already to stake a claim in a contested field – one that is addressed in several of the essays in this book. Strauss accepted the view, widely shared by a number of his contemporaries, that philosophy had not yet refuted the claims of revelation. This alone puts him in a long skeptical tradition from Montaigne and Pascal to Kierkegaard and even Wittgenstein. But this did not lead to a call for a revival of orthodoxy but a return to classical political philosophy, a return compelled by Strauss's awareness of the self-destruction of modern philosophy and its descent into nihilism.

Strauss's call for a "return" to classical political philosophy – a return always described by him as "tentative or experimental" – was not some reactionary effort to revive an ancient metaphysical system or some antiquated cosmology. Still less was it a call to revive the ancient polis and its forms of social hierarchy. Long before philosophy became the name of an academic discipline, it was associated by its practitioners with a way of life. To practice philosophy meant not to adhere to a specific set of doctrines, a method, or much less anything like a system of ideas but to live in a certain way. The way of life of the philosophers was intended as an answer to the question, "How ought I to live?" or "What is the best way of life?"

Strauss's resurrection of the Socratic model of the philosophical life has naturally led readers to wonder whether Strauss had a political philosophy of his own, perhaps even communicated secretly "between the lines." This is an issue on which he remained tantalizingly and, I suspect, deliberately oblique, even though it has not prevented all manners of readers from attributing all manners of doctrinal positions to him from neo-conservatism to a nihilistic antimodernity. But Strauss declared himself to be a skeptic in the original Greek sense of the term, that is to say, wary of all political solutions that claim certainty for

⁵ George Steiner, "Inscrutable and Tragic: Leo Strauss's Vision of the Jewish Destiny," *Times Literary Supplement* (November 11, 1997), 4.

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themselves and certainly wary of political movements and causes. He claimed to be a “friend” of liberal or constitutional democracy but on skeptical grounds as the least harmful of the different alternatives.⁶ Given these ambiguities and the importance that Strauss has come to assume, it remains more urgent than ever to come to an assessment of his complex legacy for the study of philosophy and politics.

The essays contained in this volume attempt to canvass the wide range of Strauss's interests. Although Strauss's writings typically took the form of the commentary – a form to which he gave very high philosophical expression – I have preferred to avoid reprising his often dense and detailed interpretations of specific figures within the tradition (Plato, Maimonides, Hobbes, Nietzsche) and to focus instead on the general themes or problems that these writings are intended to illustrate. I believe this approach follows Strauss's own method that always regarded his case studies in the history of ideas as the best means of stimulating awareness of the “fundamental” or “permanent” problems of philosophy. This approach should give readers a sense of the scope and breadth of the problems that Strauss felt it important to address.

The essays in the first half of this volume deal broadly with Strauss's various contributions to the history of philosophy (ancient, medieval, modern), the theologico-political predicament, the recovery of esotericism, and the modernity problem, to name just the most prominent. Those in the second half of the book survey his views on politics and twentieth-century thought, in particular. These include his views on his German contemporaries, on modern political ideologies (Liberalism, Communism, National Socialism), his judgment on America as a regime, his critique of the social sciences, and his views on the role of education and the university in a free society. The volume concludes with a consideration of Strauss's legacy.

This volume opens with a biographical essay by the editor that puts Strauss's writing in the context of an extraordinary life that moved from a small town in Germany to Berlin, Paris, and England, and from there to New York, Jerusalem, and Chicago. Strauss's life intersected with some of the giants of twentieth-century European thought including not only Husserl, Heidegger, and Cassirer but Gershom Scholem, Alexandre Kojève, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Special attention is given to the decade Strauss spent at the New School for Social Research, where he first began to develop his distinctive approach to philosophy.

⁶ Strauss, “Liberal Education and Responsibility,” in *LAM*, 24.

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Leora Batnitzky then takes up Strauss's understanding of the theologico-political predicament. She argues that although Strauss initially examined this problem within the context of German Jewry, he came to regard it as expressing the enduring challenge posed by revelation to the claims of reason and philosophy. As such, the term "theologico-political predicament" links Strauss's early development to his later themes, including his revival of the great "quarrel between the ancients and the moderns," the relation between Jerusalem and Athens, and his diverse studies in the history of political philosophy. Her essay concludes that the challenge posed by revelation remains of enduring significance not just for believers but especially for nonbelievers.

Laurence Lampert addresses the controversial theme of Strauss's "recovery" of esotericism. Drawing heavily upon Strauss's recently published correspondence and especially the letters to his friend Jacob Klein from 1938 to 1939, these letters record Strauss's excitement at the discovery of esoteric writing first in Maimonides and later in Plato and other classical Greek writers. Strauss's recovery of the esoteric tradition is then illustrated by a close reading of his essay on Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*, composed originally in 1943. Lampert argues that following his great medieval and classical masters, Strauss decided to practice his own form of esoteric writing, having deemed that the reasons for the practice were still valid in an age that regarded itself as open to the expression of all views, however heterodox.

Catherine Zuckert considers Strauss's repeated and widely discussed proposals for a "return" to premodern thought. Focusing on his lecture "Progress or Return," she argues that Strauss's call for a return was based on a new understanding of both of the "roots" of the Western tradition, namely biblical morality and Greek rationalism. Strauss presents the history of the West as a series of attempts to harmonize or synthesize these conflicting tendencies, but because ancient philosophy is fundamentally incompatible with the biblical conception of the Creator God, these attempts have failed. It is the tension between rather than any synthesis of these roots that is the secret of the vitality of the West and the best promise for its future.

Stanley Rosen reprises Strauss's analysis of the problem of modernity by drawing attention to the two modern thinkers who arguably exercised the greatest influence on Strauss: Nietzsche and Heidegger. Modernity, they agreed, was marked by the steady triumph of scientific and technological progress, while being simultaneously incapable of understanding the very works that constitute that progress. This inability is represented by the terms "relativism" and "historicism," which claim there is no stable basis for ranking values in accordance with excellence; the

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resulting denial can only lead to nihilism. Rosen concludes that Strauss's analysis of the modernity problem is itself a characteristically modern trope and that he fails to prove the superiority of the Socratic-Platonic alternative.

Joel Kraemer considers one of Strauss's most enduring intellectual legacies, his recovery of the "medieval Enlightenment" in Jewish and Arabic thought. Turning to Strauss's 1935 book *Philosophy and Law*, Kraemer argues that Strauss's understanding of Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* ("the classic of rationalism") was decisively shaped by his reading of Alfarabi and the Arabic *Falasifa* (philosophers). Like his brother-in-law Paul Kraus, Strauss helped to direct attention to the Arabic contribution to philosophy and in so doing come to a richer understanding of philosophy. Because Islam and Judaism both have the character of a comprehensive body of Law (Sharia, Torah) and not a faith or creedal religion like Christianity, each helps vividly to illustrate the enduring tensions between philosophy and revelation. Strauss's approach to the medievals was not that of a conventional historian of ideas but rather of a philologically gifted philosopher challenging the attack on classical rationalism by the modern Enlightenment.

The second half of this volume begins with two essays on Strauss's politics and his relation to both his country of birth and his adopted homeland. Susan Shell discusses Strauss's views on the German philosophy of the early twentieth century that helped give rise to Hitler and National Socialism. She focuses on Strauss's 1941 lecture on "German Nihilism," in particular his use of the Virgilian motto, "to crush the proud and spare the vanquished." She argues this essay marks the turn in Strauss's thought where he distanced himself from his earlier harsh criticism of liberal democracy and the doctrine of the "rights of man," as expressed in his now widely cited letter to Karl Löwith of 1933, to his unhesitating support of liberal democracy as a vehicle for civilized statecraft.

William Galston disagrees with those critics who regard Strauss as a dangerous enemy of liberal democracy. Galston maintains that Strauss valued the U.S. Constitution as a bulwark against the tyrannies of both the Left and the Right, but he did so for positive reasons as well. Strauss endorsed the public-private distinction so valuable to liberalism, as the best way of reducing – even if not completely eliminating – the various forms of discrimination and social injustice. This separation also helps ensure the survival of certain distinctive forms of liberal virtue necessary for the survival of self-government. Strauss emphasized that liberal democracy is the modern regime that is the closest approximation of the ancient idea of *politeia* or mixed government, and to this

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extent it remained open to the claims of human excellence. Galston concludes that Strauss provided a “qualified embrace” of liberal democracy, qualified only by his fears about modern democracy’s tendency toward complacency, philistinism, and mass conformity.

Nasser Behnegar explores Strauss’s interest in the modern social sciences, examining his critique of behavioral and Weberian social science, respectively. Both are understood in the light of Strauss’s attempt to restore classical political science, especially in its Aristotelian visage. Strauss’s critique centered on the modern social scientific endorsement of the fact/value distinction and the claim that only the “Is” can be an object of knowledge, whereas the “Ought” belongs to the irrational sphere of private values. He once colorfully compared this situation to “beings who are sane and sober when engaged in trivial business and who gamble like madmen when confronted with serious issues – retail sanity and wholesale madness.”⁷ Behnegar also explains the close kinship between Strauss and Edmund Husserl and the reasons for Strauss’s preference for classical political science over phenomenology.

In his essay, Timothy Fuller places Strauss among the distinguished scholars who restored political philosophy to a central place in the university study of politics in the years after World War II, advocating also the complementary restoration of the classical tradition of liberal learning. Strauss was not only a teacher; he reflected carefully on teaching as a vocation and on the aims of liberal education in the context of a liberal democracy. What he offered as a scholar was complemented by what he wrote on teaching and learning. He insisted on clearly distinguishing the study of politics from the life of action while recognizing that these distinct teachings are dialectically related.

One of the most controversial aspects of Strauss’s legacy is that group known as “Straussians.” Michael Zuckert attempts to dispel both the notion that there exists a single-minded clique of followers of Strauss and the mystery surrounding the existence of several groups or factions of Straussians. Although the number of those influenced by Strauss is now quite large and their interests diverse, Zuckert attempts to get to the heart of the matter by identifying two issues upon which they disagree, namely morality and religion. He attempts to show that these disagreements derive at least in part from certain unresolved puzzles in Strauss’s own thinking. The different factions of Straussians – the East Coast and West Coast as well as different Straussian grouplets – derive not only from issues in Strauss’s thought but center on some of the most significant and abiding human questions.

⁷ Strauss, *NRH*, 4.

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These issues and others have intrigued and perplexed Strauss's readers from the time of his earliest publications. Strauss was the author of more than a dozen books and around a hundred articles and reviews, among which the best known are *On Tyranny* (1948), *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952), *Natural Right and History* (1953), *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958), *What Is Political Philosophy* (1959), and *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (1968). These works and many others have been reissued several times over the years and are now widely translated into a number of European and Asian languages. New editions and collections of Strauss's works are being made available, and conferences have been devoted to his ideas in countries throughout the world. What is clear is that Strauss's writings and teachings – rivaling that of other giants of twentieth-century political thought such as Isaiah Berlin, Hannah Arendt, and John Rawls – have had a major impact on the revival of political philosophy in our time.

Strauss's own achievements cannot be entirely divorced from the phenomenon known as "Straussianism." To be sure, this has been exacerbated recently by certain high-profile discussions of Strauss and his alleged influence from beyond the grave on American policymakers in the Bush administration.⁸ Of course, what Strauss would have thought of this is impossible to know. What is clear is that these discussions have often ended up reifying Straussianism by turning it into some sort of monolith. There are many different types of Straussians with quite different interests; there are liberal Straussians and conservative Straussians, Democratic Straussians and Republican Straussians, secular Straussians and religious Straussians. With some plausibility, all can claim to find their ideas and positions ratified by Strauss's own writings.

Strauss was a teacher and, like all great teachers, he attracted students. Many of these students have gravitated to the university and can be found in departments of political science, philosophy, classics, and

⁸ Among those claiming to find some type of political agenda in Strauss's writings, see Robert Devigne, *Recasting Conservatism: Oakeshott, Strauss, and the Response to Postmodernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Shadia Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York: Saint Martin's 1997); Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Alain Frachon and Daniel Vernet, *L'Amérique Messianique: Les guerres des néo conservateurs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2004); Myles Burnyeat, "Sphinx Without a Secret," *New York Review of Books* (May 30, 1985), 30–36; Stephen Holmes, "Truths for Philosophers Alone," *Times Literary Supplement* (December 1–7, 1989), 1319–1323; James Atlas, "Leo-Cons: A Classicist's Legacy," *New York Times* (May 4, 2003), sec. 4.