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Leo Strauss and the Problem of *Sein*:
The Search for a “Universal Structure Common
to All Historical Worlds”

by

Jennifer R. Stanford

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History

Thesis Committee:
David A. Johnson, Chair
Richard H. Beyler
Douglas Morgan
Michael Reardon

Portland State University
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ABSTRACT

Leo Strauss resurrected a life-approach of the ancient Greeks and reformulated it as an alternative to the existentialism of his age that grew out of a radicalized historicism. He attempted to resuscitate the tenability of a universal grounded in nature (nature understood in a comprehensive experiential sense not delimited to the physical, sensibly-perceived world alone) that was historically malleable. Through reengagement with Plato and Socrates and by addressing the basic premises built into the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, Strauss resurrected poetry (art, or the mythos) that Enlightenment thinkers had discarded, and displayed its reasonableness on a par with the modern scientific approach as an animating informer of life. He thereby placed philosophy in a place subservient to poetry/the mythos, as had the ancients.

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Professor David A. Johnson, who wore many hats for me, including boss, thesis advisor, classroom professor, and mentor. Thank you for your support from our early discussions of my focus of study through the last draft of this thesis. Your commitment to and investment in your students is the mark of a great teacher. Thank you for granting me the grace, flexibility, and structure I needed to be successful. Professor Richard Beyler, whose scholastic excellence and breadth of knowledge first intimidated, then amazed, and then inspired me. Dr. Michael Reardon, for first introducing me to Leo Strauss, and for conducting his class on Strauss in an exegetical fashion with a focus on a single text, as Strauss himself would have done. Afternoons of warm sunlight streaming through the windows of the Honors College house are among my best memories of my time at PSU. Professor Doug Morgan, for graciously allowing me access to his library of transcriptions of Strauss' lecture notes, and for consulting with me regarding Strauss' thought. Thank you for being a part of my thesis committee and supporting me wholeheartedly.

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remarkable man, whom you knew in person and I have come to know through his writings. The staff at the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago library, for making endless photocopies and retrieving folder after folder for my review. Professor Laurie Cosgriff, for her assistance in translating the Greek phrases in the unpublished lecture, Leo Strauss, “The Problem of Socrates.” Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. Professor Friedrich Schuler, for taking so many first year students under your wing, including myself. Yes, I did take a dance class, and I’m sure that it has made me a better historian. Professor Thomas Luckett, for advising Phi Alpha Theta, where I learned far more than I ever did in any classroom. Carl Abbott, for your tips on navigating Chicago, and memories discussing articles in the conference room. You made me think twice about all of my chapter titles. Susan Wladaver-Morgan for her daily support and for putting up with my idiosyncrasies in the office for two years—two years that went by way too fast! Dr. Dick Hill, Professor of Humanities at Concordia University, for first asking those questions that set me on this path of inquiry.

Nicholas, for living these questions with me. You sought to the depths of Western rationality in your study of mathematics, and to the riches of the East for your spirituality. Mom and Dad, Steph and Jess, who somehow made the mixed-up questions explored here matter more than anything. Grandma and Grandpa Stanford, for your support of my grad school endeavors. My compatriots who have shared with me in varying degrees adventures, joys, sorrows, heartaches, and headaches while chasing the spirit of Clio in Portland. All have taught me some, and some have taught me all (it seems); thank you for coloring my world: Sara Deede, Erin McCullough, James V. Hillegas, Melissa Johnson,

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PREFACE

History. That which which poses the limits to the will of humanity. Those thoughts and actions done or left undone can in no case be retrieved against the onward march of time, which waits for no man. The ensuing discussion is concerned not with the past so much as with the idea of the past. The volume will find its place amongst scores of other treatises, not worth in its author's time the human relationships it cost, unless by chance some younger inexperienced soul may happen upon it, and hear from the message here before time is lost its one plea: Live. Love. Communicate. Choose. Escape the waiting place. Before the time is gone. Because you cannot go back. Do not allow yourself to be misunderstood. Do not allow others to dictate your destiny. To understand all is to forgive all.

Cloisters are safe but deadly to those who mistake the shapes and formulations used to describe the world for the reality itself. Creeds are slower to change than worlds. The world may be your oyster, but it is bigger than could ever be imagined. Who can measure the significance of time taken from life to make good on a promise whose fulfillment is no longer of value to the one promised? Value itself is only of relative significance to a particular transitory aim that is not, upon return, found as one left it. When that time taken on promises is the crux of the situation that has robbed the scholar of the expecter of promises fulfilled, does the universe mock, or laugh, or weep? The only mantra left one to hold is Strauss' description of life found afterward: "Once we

have acquired that knowledge...we live; and we live much more than while we acquired that knowledge.”¹

This thesis fought, as a living thing, not to be finished. It was in the midst of beginning to write in earnest, in September 2009, that the reason became apparent. Its subject dealt with a question birthed in my mind some five years before. The prospect of finishing this paper felt like sealing the coffer on a question—and a scholarly career—I was not ready to bury. My sojourn with those “for whom life is thought” was drawing to a close. It was only after I understood that the questioning did not have to end at the last line of this paper, or the acceptance of a degree, for the real questions must be lived out in the pages of life, that the thesis practically wrote itself. Leo Strauss’ works stop short of an answer because Strauss simply did not know. He understood the answers and the very questions themselves were tentative. At this realization, I was freed to write a work without the conclusion I had been unable to find.

The historian asks the kinds of questions for which there are concrete answers to be found in public records, or the tomes of a collection of works, which anyone can examine, and thereby the historian finds limited consensus, at least on the starting facts, if not interpretations, of his work. The philosopher asks those questions for which there are no answers, and for which there are no agreed-upon starting bases. I struggled throughout the course of this thesis not to write a philosophy paper in a History department; I hope the result is a happy blurring of the artificial boundaries we erect between disciplines—a writer’s feeble attempt to move toward the wholeness of life without losing scholarly

¹ Leo Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, class lecture transcript, Department of Political Science, The University of Chicago, Winter 1967, in possession of Dr. Doug Morgan, College of Urban and Public Affairs, Portland State University, Portland, OR, Lecture 3, page 7.

legitimacy, which, I think, was Strauss' ultimate aim—freeing philosophy from subservience to society so that it might be free to serve society—but I am too close to this work to judge of that; may the reader then judge. If, as Marshall McLuhan has stated, the medium *is* the message, the reader would look well to the paper's historical structure and philosophic intent. I think, perhaps, Strauss' ambivalent legacy has something to do with his relevance for twenty-first century America.

Early twentieth-century German totalitarianism and the Second World War effected a brain drain in continental Europe, bringing to American shores a distinct group of academics (two-thirds of whom were from Germany and Austria) who took up university positions, published in their disciplines, and interacted with the American intellectual and social scene.² An obscure German Jew by the name of Leo Strauss was one of these émigrés. A man of orthodox Jewish upbringing, an unorthodox mind, and the product of a continental doctoral education—he studied at the universities of Marburg, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, and Hamburg—Strauss was a maverick scholar who pursued unpopular scholarship and published unorthodox interpretations of classic philosophers, even at the cost of career advancement.³

2 Over two thousand scholars and scientists left Germany after 1933 due to the Nazi civil service law, the Nuremberg Laws, and other political persecution. See Mitchell Ash, "Migrations and Their Consequences," *Partisan Review*, 62 (1995), 644. H. Stuart Hughes, *The Sea Change: The Migration of Social Thought, 1930-1965* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), surveys these academic and their contributions in their respective fields. See also Robert Boyers, ed., *The Legacy of the German Refugee Intellectuals* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972); Georg G. Iggers, "The Decline of the Classical National Tradition in German Historiography," *History and Theory*, 6 (1967), 393. In 1963, commenting on a colloquium held by Christian and Jewish thinkers on the subject of finding consensus to work for a better society, Strauss claimed that Jews, Christians, and "radical intellectuals, reactionaries" too, "faced with the grim prospect of universal philistinism," may have no other option except to "choose anarchism or secession," especially in the case that the organization will not be tolerant enough to let them be. Leo Strauss, "Perspectives on the Good Society," in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 272.

3 An example is Strauss' loss of an appointment at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem because of his publication of *Philosophie und Gesetz* (Berlin: Schocken Verl, 1935). See Eugene R. Sheppard, *Leo*

Born in 1899 in Kirchhain, Germany, he attended gymnasium in Marburg and pursued his doctorate at the University of Hamburg under one of Hermann Cohen's disciples, Ernst Cassirer. Strauss' early years in Germany were characterized by his ardent Zionism and his scholarly engagement with the "Jewish problem," searching for a standpoint that would transcend the "anarchy of opinions" then prevailing. Martin Heidegger and Franz Rosenzweig were the most important influences on Strauss at this time. One of his closest friends was the Jewish mathematician Jacob Klein. Strauss poignantly described a slice of his student years:

When we were in our twenties we worked every day during a longish period for some hours in the Prussian State Library in Berlin, and we relaxed from our work in a coffee house close by the library...mixing gravity and levity in the proportion in which youth is likely to mix them. As far as Mr. Klein was concerned, there was, I am tempted to say, only one limit: we must not appear to the public as young men cultivating their minds; let us avoid at all costs—this was his silent maxim—the appearance that we are anything other than idle and inefficient young men of business or of the lucrative professions or any other kind of drones. On such occasions I derived enjoyment from suddenly exclaiming as loudly as I could, say, "Nietzsche!" and from watching the anticipated wincing of Mr. Klein.⁴

Strauss' university studies in Marburg, unfortunately, came after Cohen's death and before Heidegger's assumption of Cohen's chair in philosophy there in 1925. However, Strauss' early thought was concerned with Cohen's work (Cohen had founded the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism, whose primary concern was the analysis of science) and Cohen's interpretation of Plato, Maimonides, and Spinoza, among others. Cohen's philosophy, which he had formed with ethics at its center, was in disintegration at the

Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2006).

⁴ Leo Strauss and Jacob Klein, "A Giving of Accounts: Jacob Klein and Leo Strauss," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth H. Green (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 449-451. This was an introduction Strauss gave in 1959.

time because of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Husserl had shown that the neo-Kantians “[began] with the roof” in building a philosophical edifice with their emphasis on the analysis of science, whereas Husserl claimed to have started with the foundation, recognizing science as derivative of the human experience.⁵

After Strauss received his doctorate in Hamburg, he went to the University of Freiburg in 1922 expressly to see Husserl. While there, Strauss attended a class on Aristotle taught by Heidegger, one of the “unknown young men in Husserl’s entourage.” Strauss occasionally attended Heidegger’s lecture course in Freiburg “without understanding a word, but sens[ing] that he dealt with something of the utmost importance to man as man.” According to Strauss, Heidegger accused Husserl himself of starting with the roof, in his beginning with exploration of pure consciousness. Heidegger took issue with Husserl’s distinction between objects of perception and their “state of being valued” or “state of affecting us,” in Strauss’ words. In other words, Heidegger criticized Husserl’s conception of time; inner consciousness was constituted by finitude, and thus would be no more absolute than Hegel’s Absolute historical moment had proved to be. Strauss followed Nietzsche and Heidegger back to the thought of the classical Greeks with the express intention of formulating an alternative approach to the unmoored Existentialism Heidegger had posed, and which seemed one of the few, if only, options available the careful thinker.⁶

⁵ Leo Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism,” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 28.

⁶ Sheppard, 14-16. Strauss observes how profoundly Heidegger disturbed the established schools of philosophy in Germany. For quote, see Strauss, “Existentialism,” LSP, Box 7, Folder 6, Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago Library, 2-4. Ernst Cassirer, Strauss said, had silently dropped the problem of ethics, but Heidegger (to his credit, in Strauss’ estimation) had faced the problem in all its starkness and decided the existence of ethics was impossible, opening, in Strauss’

In 1925, Strauss became a researcher at the Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (Academy of Jewish Research) in Berlin, a position he held until October 1932 when he was let go because of the shaky financial position of the Akademie.⁷ He went to Paris in 1932 under a Rockefeller Fellowship, and rather than return to Germany under the National Socialist regime, he found a temporary position at the University of Cambridge in 1935. His stint in England did not provide stable employment, and he came to the United States in 1937 for a research and editorial assistantship under Salo Baron at Columbia University. He later joined fellow émigrés at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1938, where he participated in the Graduate Faculty's General Seminar and published in *Social Research*, standing out for his "conservative" views

estimation, an abyss. Strauss was led to study Benedictus de Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), which was the classic attack on orthodoxy within Judaism, because he considered Hermann Cohen's critique inadequate. The post-World War I resurgence of theology, Strauss said in 1970, "was in fact a profound innovation...[it] had become necessary because the attack of the Enlightenment on the old orthodoxy had not been in every respect a failure." Leo Strauss and Jacob Klein, "A Giving of Accounts: Jacob Klein and Leo Strauss," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth H. Green (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 461. Strauss wrote on Hermann Cohen: "Whereas creation as such is the immanent relation of God as the unique Being to Becoming...it could seem that the discovery of the fellowman, the Thou, implies the discovery of the individual as the I...for the reconciliation with God can only be the consummation of the reconciliation of man with himself." Leo Strauss, "Introductory Essay for Hermann Cohen *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*," in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 236-241.

7 Strauss and Klein, "A Giving of Accounts," 461. "Nothing affected us (here he speaks of himself, Jacob Klein, and fellow students) as profoundly in the years in which our minds took their lasting directions as the thought of Heidegger...who surpasses in speculative intelligence all his contemporaries and is at the same time intellectually the counterpart to what Hitler was politically." Strauss continues that Heidegger thought in a way no philosopher had before thought, questioning the very premise of philosophy. Most of Heidegger's contemporaries, Strauss states, were overwhelmed by him. Those that did not quite allow themselves to be overwhelmed tried ineffectually to act against him; it was Jacob Klein who saw the importance of the effects of Heidegger's project, Strauss said. Heidegger's intention was to uproot Aristotle, enabling for the first time in many centuries the examination of that tradition to pursue the ability to know, and not just to believe, "that those roots are the only natural and healthy roots." Strauss was awed by the thought of Heidegger because it opened the possibility of a return to classical philosophy. Strauss found Heidegger's thought so important because as a Catholic, he had known Aristotle without the temptation to understand him through the lens of the modern, "but as a philosopher, Heidegger was not a Christian: he thus was not tempted to understand Aristotle in the light of Thomas Aquinas." Leo Strauss, "An Unspoken Prologue," *Interpretation*, 7 (1978), 450.

among the generally “liberal” sentiment of other émigrés.⁸ His 1941 public lectures at the New School took up the crisis of German historicism and nihilism. His most visible influence on American thought came with his nearly twenty years as a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, beginning in 1949. When he retired from Chicago in 1969, Strauss moved to St. John’s College in Annapolis in 1970 (after spending a year at Claremont McKenna College in California), where he resided until his death in 1973. He is still revered by students and colleagues alike, who fondly remember laughter as a hallmark of his classes.⁹

An avid reader of Nietzsche, Strauss rejected Nietzsche’s irrationalism and engaged with Heidegger’s existentialism, but was unable to absorb its ethical relativism. He searched to the roots of Western rationalism in the writings of the classical Greeks to address the challenges and historically unique problems of his age posed by modernity—specifically the nihilism to which modern Western rationalism tended.

Strauss’ thought is easily vulgarized, just as is the thought of Nietzsche, because like Nietzsche, Strauss did not have a comprehensive, concrete political plan like Marx did.¹⁰ He embarked on a great project to free politics from ideology, yet in a ironic twist

8 Leo Strauss was one of the over 180 refugees sponsored by the University in Exile (later renamed the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science), which Alvin Johnson, President of the New School for Social Research in New York, created in 1933 in response to the persuasion of European colleagues about the threat posed to European scholarship by National Socialism. For an account of Strauss at Chicago, see John Wain, “Becoming Naïve Again,” in *Masters: Portraits of Great Teachers*, ed. Joseph Epstein (New York: Basic Books, 1981). In general, I have attempted this study without reference to the terms “conservative” and “liberal,” which I believe to be more obscure than they are useful. Such dichotomies encourage simplistic generalizations and this thesis is predicated on the hope that a different approach will complicate Strauss’ thought.

9 Sheppard, 18; *ibid*, note 3.

10 One example of this is the film production *The Power of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear*, prod. Adam Curtis, , BBC, 2004, compact disc, posing Strauss as an ideologue whose thought bolstered the George W. Bush Administration’s policies of deceit and illegitimate war. For a defense of Strauss against those, like Shadia Drury, who try to link him with Neoconservative ideology, and the U.S. campaign to spread democracy around the globe, see Nathan Tarcov, “Will the Real Leo Strauss Please

of history, some of the most visible and ardent links between Strauss and contemporary politics in the popular media have linked him with right wing ideologies.¹¹ His thought carries no name in scholarly circles except a very unfortunate one: the term “Straussian” is rife with intellectual and political connotations. Unlike Nietzsche’s early Zarathustra, Strauss did not feel the need to take the truth to the multitude who did not have an ear prepared to hear it—he knew it would be misunderstood and misrepresented—Nasser Behnegar predicted that “‘Straussianism’ is apt to suffer the fate of Platonism, a fate that Strauss describes as a ‘flight away from Plato’s problem.’”¹² Rather, Strauss gathered around him the few whom he could invest in to the extent necessary that they might understand his project and carry it on in his absence. Heinrich Meier contends that the one political act of note in Strauss’ life was the founding of a “school” through his

Stand Up,” in *The American Interest*, Sept-Oct, 1986, accessed online: <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=166>, Oct. 10, 2009. See also Jenny Strauss Clay, “The Real Leo Strauss,” *New York Times*, June 7, 2003. Accessed online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/07/opinion/07CLAY.html>, Oct. 10, 2009. Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988). For further literature on links to Neoconservative policies, see Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Empire* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004); James Atlas, “The Nation: Leo-Cons; A Classicist’s Legacy: New Empire Builders,” *New York Times*, May 4, 2003, sec. 4, p. 1. Clifford Orwin, “Leo Strauss, Moralism, or Machiavellian,” *The Vital Nexus*, 1 (1990), 105-113. For a defense of Strauss’ support of liberal democracy through his critique of modern thought, see Nasser Behnegar, “The Intellectual Legacy of Leo Strauss (1899-1973),” *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1 (1998), 95-116.

¹¹ Strauss attempted to free philosophy from politics and ideology. However, he recognized that the philosopher, as a product of a social horizon, would never be completely free from the ceiling of his own cave—i.e. the ideology of his society—no matter his attempts to transcend it. Objectivity was a common Enlightenment promise of science; Strauss recognized its failure and doubted objectivity’s desirability or even possibility. For a discussion of German post-WWII attempts by the scientific community to convince the new society that their discipline was non-ideological within a culture of non-ideology (which was itself an ideology of sorts), see Richard Beyler, “Physics and the Ideology of Non-Ideology: Re-Constructing the Cultural Role of Science in West Germany,” in *Physics and Politics: Research and Research Support in Twentieth Century Germany in International Perspective*, ed. Helmuth Trischler and Mark Walker (Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010). Beyler delineates German discussions about science and ideology in the shadow of the Third Reich from discussions elsewhere, such as in the United States, where those discussions took on primarily concerns over the social sciences and disillusionment with Marxism. Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960), is one of the Americans involved in the end of ideology debates in the 1950s and 1960s, along with Martin Lipset, Gary Dorrien, et al.

¹² Nasser Behnegar, *Leo Strauss, Max Weber, and the Scientific Study of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.

professorship at Chicago, ensuring that an “edifice of thought” would give stability to his scholarly approach and ensure the availability of a corpus of work to future generations. The ability of such a school to influence the state in even a diffuse way, Meier argued, constitutes its political nature.¹³

13 Heinrich Meier, “Preface to the American Edition,” *Leo Strauss and the Theological-political Problem*, trans. Marcus Brainard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xvii-xix.

“Philosophers are difficult to understand because they bring back reports from regions most of us are not privileged to enter. We take our revenge on them for their agility and our clumsiness by freezing their teachings into doctrines. The more I studied with Leo Strauss, the more I came to realize he had no doctrine—or at least a most elusive one.”¹⁴

--Werner J. Dannhauser

“We have been taught by example. We have seen what few others have the opportunity to see: a lover of wisdom in the flesh.”¹⁵

--Student of Strauss

“He is no longer at the University of Chicago, but desiredly alive and well at St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland...he is nonetheless both great and relished here in Chicago yet.”¹⁶

-- Marie-Merlin Veronica Price

14 Werner J. Dannhauser, “Leo Strauss: Becoming Naïve Again,” *The American Scholar*, 44, no. 4 (1978), reprinted in *Masters: Portraits of Great Teachers* ed. Joseph Epstein (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 253-265. All quotation references are to latter publication, 264.

15 Untitled, unpublished, typewritten memoir, student of Strauss’ at St. John’s College, n. date, p. 3. Leo Strauss papers [hereafter LSP], University of Chicago Library Special Collections, Folder 8, Box 27, Memorials and biographical articles, 1972-1974.

16 Correction to Robert L. Bartley, ‘Irving Kristol and Friends,’ *The Wall Street Journal* May 3, 1972, clipping, n.date, submitted by Marie-Merlin Veronica Price, Chicago. Available LSP, University of Chicago Library Special Collections, Box 27, Folder 8, Memorials and biographical articles, 1972-1974.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1918, German historian and philosopher Oswald Spengler published *The Decline of the West*, in which he questioned the ability of modern science and philosophy to fulfill their Enlightenment claims to provide humanity with universal truths, as Christianity and Islam had held promise for the Middle Ages. Spengler historicized these disciplines and criticized them as the product of the “Faustian culture” of the West, mere historical emanations valid only for the historical period in which they arose. At the time of Spengler’s publication, Leo Strauss was serving in the German army as an interpreter in Belgium. Twenty-two years later, he would call *The Decline of the West* one of the two most representative works of the intellectual situation in Germany in the postwar (post World War I) period.¹ As a young academic in the Weimar Republic, Strauss engaged the ontological and epistemological questions contemporary philosophy raised, and made direct causal ties (warranted or no) between the philosophic questions of

¹ Influential in postwar Germany especially among youth, *The Decline of the West* contributed to the apocalyptic expectation of the age and gave expression to the increasing doubt that history was a progressive force, as many liberals had viewed it. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 2 vols., trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1926-28). See Peter D. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement 1900-1945: An Interpretive and Documentary History* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), 14-19, 40, 46-53. Ringer argues that the “orthodox,” or conservative, educated elite legitimated state existence (and expansion as an assumed necessity of continued survival in competition with other nation-states) with the state’s embrace of moral and cultural goals they considered superior. See Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 118; and Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 64; For notes concerning Oswald Spengler, See Eugene R. Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 18. Heinrich Meier, “Preface to the American Edition,” *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. Marcus Brainard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xv. Leo Strauss, “The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy,” in *Leo Strauss and the Theological-political Problem*, ed. Heinrich Meier, trans. Marcus Brainard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 117. Strauss, at forty years old, gave this lecture before the Creighton Philosophical Club at Syracuse University in April 1940. Quotation from Strauss, “German Nihilism,” ed David Janssens and Daniel Tanguay, *Interpretation*, 26 (1999), 361, emphasis in original.

his age and its politics. This set the course for his lifetime scholarly enterprise of recovering the roots of Western classical antiquity as an antidote to the problem of nihilism to which Nietzsche showed modern Western rationalism tended.

In the following, I show that Strauss' absorption of Nietzsche's thought and direct address of concerns Nietzsche raised was central to his engagement with contemporary philosophy. He did not consider Nietzsche's critiques of reason applicable to ancient approaches, and identified thoroughly modern elements in Nietzsche's thought. Strauss affirmed many of Nietzsche's diagnoses of modernity, while discarding his prescriptions. Strauss recovered and reinterpreted the Classical Greek approach which had been rejected by Nietzsche and Heidegger as untenable for their age because of the Greeks' lack of the historical sense. Scholars have often framed Leo Strauss' thought project as the recovery and revival of classical political rationalism. However, Strauss will not be understood unless we see that along with his reaffirmation of the classical rationalism that Nietzsche had sought to destroy, Strauss revived the corresponding Ancient Greek conception of the limits of rationality, embodied in the competing tradition of the poets, which the Western Enlightenment had discarded.

Rather than finding in classical philosophy the *genesis* of Western nihilism, as had Nietzsche and Heidegger, Strauss centered the root of nihilism in Enlightenment suppositions, and he formulated the *solution* to nihilism in the Ancients' avoidance of a dogmatic physics or metaphysics. He tried to revive philosophy in its traditional (pre-Nietzschean) sense as one element of a larger world, the bounds of which poetry (construed in the broad, classical sense, more in line with the term "art" as we use it today) might encompass, but which philosophy could not limit. This recognized the

question of God or the gods (and by implication humanity's relationship to the metaphysical) as being "coeval with" philosophy. In other words, he subsumed philosophy to poetry.

Strauss sought to restore a tentativeness to the conclusions at which modern disciplines had arrived by exposing as arbitrary choices the assumptions upon which those disciplines operated. This tentativeness, Strauss believed, had existed in the ethos of the ancients. The modern quest for certainty had elevated science to a privileged position in the modern mind and the organization of modern society, but Strauss argued to the contrary that science was, like religion, just another star that populated the ceiling of Plato's cave.² He sought a ground for self-evident human rights beyond the limits of

² Strauss' Weimar-period writings show a desire to address the disillusionment caused by the First World War, which he later wrote "shook Europe to its foundations...men lost their sense of direction. The faith in progress decayed." He tried to uncover the "shaky foundations" of the goals of liberalism, belief in historical progress, and the Enlightenment's faith in the nearly limitless bounds of reason, while shoring up the nihilism resulting from the doubt of the Enlightenment project. Central to his concern was the idea that Enlightenment thinkers had invented an "age of prejudice" of the Middle Ages as a historical straw man against an "age of freedom" to frame their own era. The seventeenth and eighteenth century purveyors of knowledge demoted the value disciplines like philosophy, theology, and literature from a status they previously held as valid sources of knowledge on par with the sciences. They broke with premodern tradition, i.e. developed a quarrel with the ancients. The nineteenth century, in turn, had come to doubt the certainty of the Enlightenment project. "The doubt of the modern project...has acquired the status of scientific exactitude," Strauss observed in his introduction to *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964). Social science had admitted its inability to validate any value judgments. Modern political philosophy's goal of a universal and prosperous society had become merely one ideology among many others. The modern project had originated to satisfy man's natural needs, by which nature had to be conquered, and the limits of its mutability determined the success of the Enlightenment project. For direction in this conquest, they looked to reason rather than nature, and hence there developed, in Strauss' words, "the rational Ought as distinguished from the neutral Is." The natural consequence was the separation of philosophy (search for the Ought) from science (establishment of the Is), or the distinction between facts and values. Nietzsche had made all rational liberal philosophic positions untenable, in Strauss' view; there were few options available other than turning one's back on reason and falling into the irrational dark unknowable in man that Nietzsche hoped would evolve into a higher being, adopting Heidegger's relativism absent of any ethical mean, or accepting Marxism's materialism or neo-Thomism, i.e. in Strauss' consideration, a non-teleological natural science wedded to a teleological social science. Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 65. See Behnegar, *Leo Strauss, Max Weber*, 2-3. See also Ted V. McAllister, *Revolt Against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and the Search for a Postliberal Order* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996). Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006). For quote, see Strauss, *The City and Man*, 9.

history that would be rooted in the nature of human existence as such, but which might be interpreted differently by each historical/situational context; i.e. a historically-contingent ethics that was grounded in nature, in his own words, a “universal structure common to all historical worlds.” Strauss wrote in 1957:

We might say, what we truly know are not any answers to comprehensive questions but only these questions, questions imposed upon us as human beings by our situation as human beings. This presupposes that there is a fundamental situation of man as man which is not affected by any change, any so-called historical change in particular. It is man’s fundamental situation within the whole—within a whole that is so little subject to historical change that it is a condition of every possible historical change.³

Strauss considered the act of human valuation paradoxically originating both in experience in historical timeframes articulated by a society’s poets, and in relation to a deeper universal structure rooted in nature, an understanding of which philosophy sought, but never accomplished. However, Strauss was not successful in formulating a basis for this universal structure he posed, coming up against the problem of distinguishing “nature” from “convention.” He faced in his search for fundamentals an “irreducible facticity.”⁴

3 Leo Strauss, “On the Interpretation of Genesis,” in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 361. For more on Strauss’ treatment of myth and the universal versus particular human “codes,” see Strauss, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green, 119. Kenneth Hart Green states in his Preface to this anthology he edited that Strauss took a new approach to the reading of the Hebrew Bible which Strauss himself called “postcritical.” Part of this approach related to recognition of the distinction between “inner” and “outer” approaches, or the differing understandings to which one could come by viewing a tradition from inside that tradition. See Green, “Preface,” xii.

4 For quote, see Leo Strauss, “Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 2 (1971), 31. On initial review, this appears not completely alien to that of Richard Rorty, whose own unique formulation Perez Zagorin described as a self-labeled neopragmatism, a melding of traditional Platonism and existentialism, or a revised (or renamed?) Kantianism, especially when one takes into account scholars of Kant, for example, describing interpretation of Kant’s noumenon as “an understanding that creates its objects in knowing them.” Elements of German idealism are clear in Strauss’ thought, but his was a specific project to revive *Bodenständigkeit*, or a rootedness in the soil, a “novel kind...a being at home beyond the most extreme homelessness” created by

This orientation was grounded in three important points: first, a revival of *praxis* as the Greeks used the word, while maintaining a sharp distinction between philosophy in the theoretical world and the action of the city (i.e. re-particularizing politics and preserving the universal nature of philosophy as capable of imagining ideals that existed in the mind, but had no hope of political or societal realization), along with reaffirmation of poetry as an approach equally valid with reason; second, agreement with Nietzsche about the problems of other-worldliness that the metaphysical posed (Strauss responded by radically re-emphasizing Judaism to make it earthly, and thus relevant and affirmative of the human world); third, the understanding of human existence, *Sein*, the ground of all being, not in the Greek conception of “to be always” (which meant theoretically there were no limits to humanity’s capacities to find out by reason the mysteries of the world), nor in Heidegger’s conception of Being defined by finitude, “to be in the way which man is” (which radically historicized all valuation and destroyed the possibility of ethics), but in an Eastern conception of being as “to be elusive” or “to be a mystery.”⁵

Strauss’ thought is an extension of the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger; they were simultaneously his greatest allies and his foremost intellectual opponents in his

his recognition, with Nietzsche, of the eclipse of the gods in the West. Strauss was a proponent of historicism as the discipline of historical study in the mode of Ranke (Strauss was in no way a proponent of teleological history like Hegel); what he opposed was the application (or mis-application, in his consideration) of the disciplinary methodology of historicism as a self-evident given in the construction of larger life-philosophies. For example, he saw the implications of the genesis of all values in history to be the absence of the existence of any values outside of those attached to human experience by a specific culture. See Perez Zagorin, “History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now,” in *History and Theory*, 38 (1999), 1-24. Hiralal Halder, “Leibniz and German Idealism,” *The Philosophical Review*, 26 (1917), 381. For comparison with the orientation of American Pragmatists and their defectors, see Richard Rorty, “Science as Solidarity,” in *The American Intellectual Tradition: 1865 to the Present*, vol. 2. 4th ed. ed. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 453-462.

⁵ For quote, see Leo Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism,” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 45.

search to revive the classical dualistic worldview of philosophy (reason) and poetry (revelation). He identified as unfruitful modern suppositions, like historicism, that both had adopted. While expressing grave doubts about the limits of Western technology, Strauss could not abandon reason for the dark irrationalism of Nietzsche. He engaged with Heidegger's exploration of Being but could not stomach Heidegger's unmoored existentialism that disallowed any ethics. Strauss articulated love, the spirit of finesse, and attachment or engagement as the fundamental experience of humanity, whereas Nietzsche had posed the will to power (understood as self-overcoming) and Heidegger had posed angst and mortality. Nietzsche and Heidegger saw nature as a void upon which humanity creates values, or meaning, which results in history, whereas Strauss viewed nature as separate from history, or human valuation.

In Chapter One, I examine lecture transcripts of a Seminar on Nietzsche that Strauss taught at the University of Chicago in 1967, in addition to his one published work on Nietzsche, "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*." I show Strauss' agreement with Nietzsche on the principal problems facing the modern West, and argue that Strauss' starting assumptions, including the rejection of historicism and consideration that the view of the ancients was a better representation of the reality of the human experience than the Modern assumptions, led him to a different conclusion than Nietzsche. Through analysis of Strauss' writings on Socrates and reference to his other works on Nietzsche, this chapter shows Strauss did not vilify Socrates as did Nietzsche, though he did recognize the Platonic Socrates as a caricature and held that Xenophon's Socrates was the closest historical record available.

Chapter One also shows how Nietzsche conflated the philosopher and the poet. Nietzsche asserted that the philosopher of the future would create values rather than discover them. Nietzsche sought to unite science and philosophy into one, as they had once been; he wiped away the metaphysical horizon and made all considerations this-worldly, and thus made the limits of the past—history—the only limits on man's will. In contrast, Strauss reinterpreted the Jewish tradition to get around Nietzsche's problem of otherworldliness by making the metaphysical this-worldly. Additionally, I address Laurence Lampert's thesis that Strauss reinterpreted Plato as non-Platonic; i.e., he understood the limits of language in descriptions of reality and thus addressed the linguistic concerns of Heidegger.

Chapter Two shows that Socrates is the pivotal figure for both Strauss and Nietzsche. Socrates represents, for Strauss, the emergence of philosophy's concern with the political. Socrates is Nietzsche's antagonist—the theoretical man—the root of Western nihilism. I also assert that it is in Strauss' treatment of the relationship of the classical poets to philosophy, his true approach to philosophy comes to light. Strauss sees philosophy as one mode of inquiry equal with or lesser to that of art, or the articulation of the mythos, that ultimately asks the question of humanity's relation to the metaphysical, and the nature of God or the gods.

Chapter Three explores historicism and the problem of History in relation to Nature. Nietzsche and Heidegger discounted the Ancients, Strauss believed, because of the Ancients' lack of Historical sense, i.e. their inability—or refusal—to see humanity essentially defined by History, or finitude. In his seminar class, Strauss creatively poised Nietzsche as a historicist and himself as a proponent of Nature as a ground for

interpretation of the human condition. Chapter Three also explores Judaism as a force in Strauss' philosophy and his refusal to dismiss the *possibility* of the metaphysical as Nietzsche had done. Strauss radically reinterprets aspects of the Jewish tradition to compensate for its deficiencies in Nietzsche's eyes, with which Strauss sympathized.

Strauss' thought was non-ideological in origin. He did not advocate a return to the cosmology of the Ancients, nor did he fully disagree with Nietzsche and Heidegger. Strauss' fervent engagement with them attested to his respect for their thought. What is remarkable about Strauss is his openness—his willingness in his later life, as a German Jew, to give Heidegger's thought the philosophical consideration he thought it deserved, in spite of the political stances Heidegger deliberately chose. Strauss' disagreement elicited his full engagement with, rather than dismissal of the individual he considered the greatest thinker of his time. That is perhaps the evidence of the power of Strauss' thought and one of the reasons that it deserves our consideration today.⁶

⁶ Strauss wrote of Heidegger, "The more I understand what Heidegger is aiming at the more I see how much still escapes me. The most stupid thing I could do would be to close my eyes or to reject his work." Leo Strauss, "Existentialism" LSP, Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago Library, Box 7, Folder 6, 6.

CHAPTER ONE:

L'EUROPE ET LA PHILOSOPHIE DES PATRIES¹

The nation is endowed with universal meaning: it is not only, or even primarily, a political phenomenon but an ultimate principle of life...in the process of [German nationalism] becoming a reality, the idea of humanity receded more and more into the background and disappeared completely in the end. What remained, then, was a missionary idea without a mission...What remained was, in short, the principle of conquest for the sake of conquest.²

Friedrich Nietzsche is held to be the pioneer, the ideological founder of the Third Reich. With no other thinker does National Socialist ideology feel so closely related, so internally linked as with Nietzsche. The leading spirits of the Third Reich call upon him incessantly. Striking and most strange, however, is the fact that the grimmest opponent of national socialism also rests with such partiality on no other thinker as on Friedrich Nietzsche. How is that possible and who is right? Are both camps perhaps correct, or neither?³

Nietzsche's Revolution: Poetry and Philosophy

Strauss recognized that the challenge posed to liberalism in the nineteenth century (and thus the need for the preservation and continuance of political philosophy) had arisen in the person of Friedrich Nietzsche—the man Strauss once called the “last

1 Chapter title inspired by a phrase Strauss borrows from Charles de Gaulle, “l'Europe des patries, the Europe of the fatherlands,” in the assertion that every philosophy has a social and political bias rooted in his historical frame of reference he is never able to completely transcend. Strauss recognized the “rootedness” of human experience in historical referents. See Leo Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, class lecture transcript, Department of Political Science, The University of Chicago, Winter 1967, in possession of Dr. Doug Morgan, College of Urban and Public Affairs, Portland State University, Portland, OR, Lecture 9, p. 8.

2 Carl Mayer, “On the Intellectual Origin of National Socialism,” *Social Research*, 9 (1942), 225-247.

3 D. Gawronsky, *Friedrich Nietzsche und das Dritte Reich* (Bern: Verlag Herbert Lang, 1935), 5; referenced in Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 272.

enlightener”—who had questioned civilization, and rationality itself.⁴ Nietzsche had changed the intellectual landscape of Western humanity forever. Strauss maintained that after Nietzsche, modern liberalism was no longer an adequate philosophical position. In a lecture entitled “Introduction to Existentialism,” which Strauss gave in the 1950s, he stated the following:

There is no longer in existence a philosophic position, apart from neo-Thomism and Marxism crude or refined. All rational liberal philosophic positions have lost their significance and power. One may deplore this but I for one cannot bring myself to clinging to philosophic positions which have been shown to be inadequate.⁵

The thought of Nietzsche animated many of Strauss’ principal concerns. Strauss spent a lifetime studying Nietzsche and came to see that, while rejecting the elevation of rationalism, Nietzsche had retained some thoroughly modern elements in his thought, which led Strauss to conclude that Nietzsche’s criticisms of rationalism did not apply to that of the ancients. Strauss agreed with Nietzsche that poetry was superior to science (and more necessary for life), but he was reticent to discard reason. Nietzsche had envisioned nature as a void and found history the fundamental experience of humanity, thus placing the philosopher to come after him as the poet-creator, conflating the two. Strauss, on the other hand, following the classical Greeks, maintained a strict distinction between the poet-creator and the philosopher-discoverer, the first being one who creates,

4 Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 65. Shadia Drury, in *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, 2d ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 170, states that Strauss’ greatest intellectual debt lies with Nietzsche; most scholars have found that while Nietzsche was of paramount importance, Strauss considered Heidegger to be the philosopher of greatest import for his time. For “last enlightener” quotation see Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:389, quoted in Nasser Behnegar, *Leo Strauss, Max Weber, and the Scientific Study of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

5 Leo Strauss, “Introduction to Existentialism,” was a lecture given at the University of Chicago in the 1950s, published as “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism,” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 27-46; quote p. 29.

and the second, one who discovers. Strauss thus posited an alternative to the existentialism developed from the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger by affirming both the existence of a natural standard while at the same time nodding to the value creation, which is the vocation of humanity.

Strauss maintained that Nietzsche had endangered the continued existence of liberalism and democracy by asserting that no truths existed outright; values only existed if one put value to them. By implication, the philosophic position that an assertion of natural human rights was arbitrary opened a danger and an opportunity: The danger lay in the possible (or probable?) destruction of democracy due to its indefensibility as a preferable political system; the opportunity was the stripping away of all prior conceptions to make a return to the most basic questions again a possibility. Heidegger's continuation of Nietzsche's project had made possible for Strauss a recovery of the Socratic question proper to the philosophical quest of the best life, *Pôs biôtéon*? Or *Comment faut-il vivre*? How is one to live? What is *arête* or excellence? This question was traditionally understood in the context of the Platonic good-in-itself. Strauss framed the problem this way:

The tradition in its roots has been shaken by Nietzsche. It has completely lost its self-evidence. We stand in the world completely without authority, completely without direction. Now for the first time the question *pôs biôtéon* can be raised in its complete sharpness...We can no longer read Plato's dialogues in order to be amazed that the old Plato already knew this and that; we can no longer polemicize against him. And the same is true of the Bible; we can no longer regard it as self-evident that the prophets were right; we ask ourselves seriously whether the kings were not in the right.⁶

⁶ Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:389; in Behnegar, *Leo Strauss, Max Weber*, 4. See also Nasser Behnegar, "The Intellectual Legacy of Leo Strauss (1899-1973), *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2 (1999), 95-116.

In other words, the post-Heideggerian philosopher stood in a unique historical situation in which he could once again access the thought of the ancients, but as if for the first time, with all of the uncertainty of the Existential thought revolution and its implications—a position Strauss argued was very much more the stance of the ancients than the certainty of the moderns who had interpreted the ancients through their own lens.

Strauss believed that Nietzsche, while having destroyed faith in Western rationalism, had also pointed toward a way beyond, in a subjective or “transcendental” truth that could not be understood detachedly, and so was not the same for all people in all ages. The post-Nietzschean philosopher would consciously construct values on the basis of the will to power (self-overcoming, understood as Nietzsche had meant it, in a “subtle and noble manner,” according to Strauss), which was the basis for the philosopher’s search for value. This would offer restraints and context for human creativity.⁷

The contemporary age, in Strauss’ estimation, was an impoverished one. Heirs to the ancient classical philosophers, an unhistorical people who had birthed philosophy while somehow managing to preserve the existence of the gods in a comprehensive cosmos, modern humanity had developed the “‘universal doubt’ of all opinions [that] would lead...not into the heart of the truth, but into a void,” as Strauss states Socrates had known. Modern thought that arose in seventeenth century, seeking to build a dogmatism

⁷ Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 265. The prevailing notion of the fundamental experience at Nietzsche’s time was the primal urge of self-preservation; Nietzsche says rather fundamental desire is self-overcoming, which he describes as the will to power. It is for Nietzsche primarily a personal response to the self rather than the exertion of control over others. Schopenhauer had taught Nietzsche that the will to life was the essence of reality. Men decided not to accept the given, but to create a different world situation. Strauss commented: “If knowledge means that the understanding prescribes nature its laws, that it forms the given, is this not a kind of the will to power?” Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 4, p. 10.

on skepticism, operated on the principal that doubt of everything would lead to something of certainty and form the new basis for knowledge. Strauss considered this a synthesis of Platonism and Epicureanism. “Metaphysical neutrality became the mantra of the new physics in the eighteenth century.”⁸ This led to positivism in the nineteenth—the view that science is the only legitimate method of gathering knowledge—contributing to the growing irrelevancy of philosophy.

Most significantly for Strauss, Nietzsche had done away with the Socratic question of the best, or the ideal—which posited a good-in-itself; Strauss raised again not the Socratic question, but the question of the worth of the Socratic question for re-examination in all of its sharpness, without the previously-held requisite that the forms of the good be identical in all historical situations, in a vein similar to the American pragmatists, whose experience-based-experiments were undertaken between the confines of an existing value system.⁹

Strauss recognized that no wholesale return to the worldview of the ancients was possible, or even desirable. By interpreting Strauss literally—radically—one could say he was a foremost proponent of Plato’s idealism in his recognition of the imperative of the existence of a right-in-itself existing in nature for the preservation of democracy and peaceful human interaction. Yet, Strauss was simultaneously a foremost sympathizer with Nietzsche’s (and by extension Heidegger’s) concerns and philosophical questions.

⁸ Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 5, p. 3.

⁹ Nietzsche’s vision of the future was that mores can only be personal. Nietzsche is an immoralist to the extent that he defines morals as one standard applicable to all. The opposite point on the spectrum of Nietzsche is Platonism: the belief in a “pure mind which perceives *the* truth in itself—the truth which is the good.” Strauss’ Nietzsche sees no difference between Platonism and modern rationality or empiricism. Christianity did not create a new problem, Nietzsche maintained; it is just a new form of the same problem Socrates/Plato had created. Strauss comes to the conclusion that the ground condition of all life is the perspectival. See Neil Robertson, “Leo Strauss’ Platonism,” in *Animus*, 14 (1999), 34-43.

Strauss posited and sought, but never proved, the existence of a “universal structure common to all historical worlds;” i.e. a standard found in nature—nature here understood not as Hobbes’ state of nature in which human life is “nasty, brutish, and short,” or Rousseau’s idealization, nor Nietzsche’s void, but a morphing, experiential, quasi-given that was mutable because it was unfrozen by *logos*, and thus free to form to human creativity and changing historical contexts.¹⁰ In the vein of Heidegger, Strauss acknowledged that the process of forming a human conception into language was a contributor to the creation of a perception of the artificial stasis of that concept and its immutability beyond the warrants of reality.

Yet in Strauss’ eagerness to explore not the answer to the Socratic question, but the question’s worth and significance, he seems reticent to adopt the incumbent Platonic worldview along with it. Strauss’ interpretation of Plato is critical here: he does not think Plato believed the *logos* to be an accurate and sufficient representation of reality; in other words, Strauss flipped contemporary interpretations of classical scholarship on their head and stated that Plato was non-Platonic.¹¹

Plato is the real subject of Strauss’ only published work on Nietzsche, an eighteen-page commentary (written between 1972 and 1973 just before Strauss’ death) on Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* entitled “Note on the Plan of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*.” It is a study of Nietzsche in relation to Plato. Strauss understands the

10 Leo Strauss, “Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 2 (1971), 31.

11 Leo Strauss, “Note on the Plan of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*,” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983). Lawrence Lampert argues that Strauss saw Plato as non-Platonic, and that he claimed Nietzsche lapsed into platonizing, therefore drawing traditional antagonists closer together than they have ever been. Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). See also Leo Strauss, *The Argument and the Action of Plato’s Laws* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975).

subject of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* to be the will to power and explicates Nietzsche's objective as the liberation of philosophy from religion's rule. In this work Strauss is expressly concerned with the relationship of religion to philosophy in Nietzsche's thought. He brings to the fore the fundamental choice facing the modern, as Nietzsche had framed it, in contrast to the fundamental choice as envisioned by the ancients. For Nietzsche, the fundamental choice facing humanity was that between philosophy and religion (morals), whereas for Plato, the choice was between philosophy and politics (the city). Strauss is less concerned with the answer chosen to the questions as he is with the nature of the questions themselves, and the philosophical situation from which they arose. The ancients' question implies one of two situations: either the gods were presupposed in the cosmos of the ancients, i.e. they existed for the Greeks as a fundamental fact of life and the modern conception of religion as a category did not exist, or the gods were not an assumed aspect of reality, and did not merit a credible alternative worth mentioning. For Strauss, the former is clearly the situation.

Strauss considered the modern switch from such a question of politics versus philosophy, or civic action versus thought, to that of religion versus philosophy, was an artificial change on two fronts. First, the Enlightenment's dismissal of the metaphysical possibility, the dispensing with which allowed for circumventing fate in exchange for a narrower world within the realm of humanity's control, had not only eradicated the traditional *Ought* (which was considered a benefit of this change); it had narrowed the possible *Is*, a fact Strauss felt was ignored in modern social science. Second, the switch

from political philosophy to political science, or the substitution of the prescriptive for the descriptive, had left society without a self-evident purpose.¹²

Strauss and Nietzsche held in common a concern for the preservation of philosophy, though their prescriptions for its revival and preservation were vastly different. Nietzsche tried to remake the philosopher as the poet—the one who creates rather than discovers. Strauss turned to the classical dualism of philosophy and poetry as equal, but competing orientations to the world. Nietzsche had wrestled within the Platonist/Relativist dichotomy and formulated his own solution: that of willing life-giving self-truths, or the recovery of myth, emanating from the fundamental will to power (the instinct of self-overcoming) that was radically this-worldly. Similar to Thomas Aquinas' move to integrate faith with reason, Nietzsche changed the definition of poetry and philosophy by integrating them. Strauss considered Nietzsche the first historicist philosopher, who abandoned reason in favor of poetry and a belief in the possible historical evolution of humanity to a higher level.

In his 1967 seminar on Nietzsche, Strauss concerned himself with *Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil* (a commentary on *Zarathustra*), and *Genealogy of Morals*. He drew a major distinction between traditional philosophy and that of Nietzsche. In the first chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche claims that traditional philosophers held the prejudice that they had *discovered* truth, when in fact they have always created truth,

¹² For more on this, see specifically Leo Strauss, "Preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion," in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), quote p. 172. Here Strauss elaborates Spinoza's denunciation of revelation, which the modern had adopted as a disproof, discounting the reasonableness of revelation: "The last word and ultimate justification of Spinoza's critique is the atheism from intellectual probity which overcomes orthodoxy radically by understanding it radically, i.e., without the polemical bitterness of the Enlightenment and the equivocal reverence of romanticism. Yet this claim, however eloquently raised, cannot deceive one about the fact that its basis is an act of will, of belief, and that being based on belief is fatal to any philosophy." Note the term "act of will," and that this is taken almost verbatim from Nietzsche.

imposing their will on reality subconsciously. He conflated the philosopher of the future with the poet, who would *create* values, an act directed by the will (Nietzsche's root of creativity, rather than knowledge), thus freeing philosophy from the role of legislator and manipulator.¹³ With the eclipse of the gods, the philosopher of the future would now value the world consciously—he was no longer Plato's theoretical man. Strauss concluded that *if*, as Nietzsche says, philosophers are creators, philosophy understood in its traditional sense becomes impossible.¹⁴ In Strauss' estimation, Heidegger furthered Nietzsche by denying eternity, thus making philosophy unable to transcend time, or history: "all thought belongs to, depends on, something more fundamental which thought cannot master; all thought belongs radically to an epoch, a culture, a folk." Strauss characterized ancient philosophy in the general understanding as descriptive and observational, discovering a creative act "outside of it, preceding it." Strauss maintained

13 Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 3, p. 11. Nietzsche said traditional philosophy as compared to the philosophy of the future was as the moon to the sun; one reflects heat and light, and one creates it. He saw a philosophy that prescribed laws to nature as only serving the people rather than truth, as it described truths that the people by and large accepted. In the thought of Hegel, the thought of the philosopher followed the act; he observed and described reality. Marx and Nietzsche changed all of that. Their philosopher comes before the festival, heralding it rather than following and describing it. He is then more like the poet than the scientist. Nietzsche compares his philosopher to a wolf rather than a dog; Strauss points to Plato's *Sophist*, in which Plato compares the wolf to the sophist, and the dog to the philosopher. Nietzsche's philosophers of the future, Strauss said, unlike the classical philosophers, would be concerned with the holy, and they would be poet-creators. They would be atheistic heirs of the biblical tradition who are "waiting for a god who has not yet shown himself." They cast out the biblical God because faith in him leads to asceticism and other-worldliness. "Because the biblical God as the creator of the world is outside the world," and in comparison the world is less than perfect; that stance, to Nietzsche, was inimical to life, and life was the highest good to be preserved at every cost.

14 Nietzsche's substitute for traditional philosophy is psychology, with the particular note that it is a physiopsychology. He believes this must become the fundamental science. The human soul is changing through its creative acts; it is a historical physiopsychology. Strauss sees measurement of Nietzsche's ethics based in evaluation of the strength of the will to power. Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 4, p1. A sociologist, for example, Strauss says, can make observations of a certain shift in the influence of the Christian tradition in Europe over years, but how is he to judge of that? To say whether it is a positive or negative is outside the scope of his modern discipline. "Is Nietzsche not compelled—and is everybody not compelled—eventually to assert something as true in the traditional sense of truth? Namely, truth as finding out what is, in contradistinction from putting one's stamp, creating, you know?" The problem, however, has made impossible the "conservative preservation or refurbishing of the past."

that philosophy and praxis had to be severed, as they had been for the ancients. He saw history as a tool with which to make the conditions possible again for praxis, creating a horizon within which life was possible.¹⁵

Strauss looked to human creativity and saw evidence that it presupposes knowledge of the *is*. Philosophy was originally the quest for the truth about nature, *physis*, beyond the human convention, *nomos*. The ancient Greek philosophers made a clear distinction between the two. Strauss in his lecture used the example of a cow, distinguishing its brownness (*physis*) from its sacredness to Hindus (*nomos*). Nietzsche makes a radical step here, Strauss states, turning traditional philosophy on its head. For Nietzsche, the only world of concern to us is the world in which we live, i.e. the world in which cows have a particular color; the *true* world of Platonic ideals, or the world as seen through modern physics, are on the same plane for Nietzsche—both artificial constructs that cripple humanity and impede praxis. Both are of no concern for us, in the question of philosophy, the pursuit of life.¹⁶

Nietzsche emphasizes experiencing something's physical properties as well as the value it holds for us over understanding it by dissection. Strauss explains, in Nietzsche's

15 Leo Strauss, "The Problem of Socrates," 6. Paper presented at the Annapolis campus of St. John's College, April 17, 1970. LSP, Box 21, Folder 1, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library." Gregory Bruce Smith, *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Transition to Postmodernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 133. In the Alexandre Kojève and Strauss dialogue, Kojève aligns himself with Hegel's assertion that philosophy is the encapsulation of a particular time, whereas Strauss follows Plato to see the classical aim of philosophy providing an independent platform (in nature) against which to measure the state. While Kojève advocates reconciling the existing tension between philosophy and society, Strauss sees the tension as critical and necessary for maintaining a healthy society—its transhistorical, transpolitical nature provides a protective buffer. For Strauss, it was the modern understanding of the relationship of philosophy to society that allowed for the development of modern tyranny, a unique combination of technology at the disposal of ideology. Strauss states elsewhere that modernity was birthed by Niccolo Maciavelli, who explicitly subjected the aim of philosophy to fulfill the needs of the state. See Leo Strauss and Alexandre Kojève. *On Tyranny: Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 161.

16 Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 5, p. 13.

view and in his own, that the Hindu valuation of the cow as sacred is more profound than the fact that the cow is brown. Strauss explains Nietzsche's change this way:

"Superficially one could say *nomos*, what was traditionally called convention, is now much more important than *physis*; and that is of course an important part of historicism."¹⁷ Art and religion are more critical than science in this constellation. The interpretation of the world by physics is of great practical use, but it is an impoverished world in terms of human needs. Nietzsche's inversion opens the possibility of restoring the sacred into the world of human experience, but for the first time consciously.¹⁸

Strauss diverges from Nietzsche here, insistent on the concern for a universal knowledge. He changes the character of that knowledge, from certain knowledge as understood by previous ages to a tentative knowledge: "universal knowledge...must remain somehow. But it can no longer be understood as certain knowledge, demonstrable knowledge, as knowledge of what is true in itself."¹⁹ Stated differently, Strauss short-circuited the Enlightenment preponderance for certainty and returned to the ancient comfort with uncertainty, unknown, and thus release of control. Nietzsche had similarly thrown out Enlightenment dispositions, but had found no use for universalism of any sort.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 14.

¹⁸ Strauss, *ibid*, Lecture 6, p. 5. Strauss stated that each tradition, if one accepts the values that the participants in a group or society hold, is internally rational and cannot be criticized. They are true from within, but may appear untrue from without, by an individual holding a different set of values. However, to this relativism Strauss points to our historical ability to step outside of our cultural values and transcend them. This is his evidence for the fact that we have only an attachment to our values based upon our arbitrary commitment or decision: "One might even say that, to the extent to which we are still able to reflect on the relation of our values to our situation, we are still trying to shirk the responsibility for our choice." Leo Strauss, "Social Science and Humanism," in Pangle, *The Rebirth*, 9-12.

¹⁹ Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 3, p7, Lecture 6, p. 7-8. Nietzsche, in a striking parallel with Marx, had described an aristocratic morality that existed as a positive "yes," "we the good." Slave morality's creative act, conversely, he said, was "no." He saw slave morality couched as good versus evil, and saw noble morality as good vs. bad. He observed that the morality of the aristocrat was natural and healthy, being free. He characterized the slave morality as reactive, rooted in resentment based in guilt, and unnatural.

However, in Strauss' attempt to shore up the philosophic effects of a radicalized existentialism, he could not bring himself to cast out that possibility entirely.

Historiographical Stakes

"Strauss was famous for disdaining Nietzsche," Willis Regier claimed in a 1996 review of Laurence Lampert's book, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, and points out that Strauss' interpretation of Nietzsche is ignored by great Nietzsche scholars like Arthur Coleman Danto, Gilles Deleuze, R. J. Hollingdale, Walter Kaufmann, Richard Schacht, and J. P. Stern. Regier states that, in contrast to Lampert's wild praise of Strauss' treatment of Nietzsche, Strauss was not the most in-depth scholar of Nietzsche's politics, and he largely ignored what other scholars wrote. Regier is under the impression that Strauss publicly skirted Nietzsche most of his life and denounced Nietzsche's influence on his thought, notwithstanding being completely taken with Nietzsche between his 22nd and 30th years. I show rather that Nietzsche was *the* central element animating much of Strauss' thought throughout his life.

Laurence Lampert concedes with Regier that Strauss' praise of Nietzsche that he "uncovers" in his "Note on Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*" will be a scandal to Straussians.²⁰ Nothing could be further from the truth. Throughout Strauss' writings and class sessions, he adopts and employs phrases wholesale from Nietzsche. Strauss absorbed much of Nietzsche's philosophical approach and concerns, while disagreeing on substantive points, including Nietzsche's historicism, will to power as the defining

20 Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*; Willis G. Regier, "Review: Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, and William H. Schaberg, *The Nietzsche Canon: A Publication History and Bibliography*," in *Modern Language Notes*, 111 (Dec. 1996), 1023.

experience of humanity, attack on Socrates and the rationalism he represents, and rejection of the metaphysical. Strauss was an admirer of Nietzsche's power of thought without succumbing to nihilism; he understood the relevance of Nietzsche's concerns, and sought to address them with all the power of his own mind.

There is much disagreement among scholars of Strauss as to what he actually advocated. Claims range from posing Strauss as a denouncer of Nietzsche, to a closet nihilist, an arch-conservative, an enemy of democracy, and everything in between. Some have claimed to "uncover" Strauss' secret Nietzschean affinities, and expect this should be a shock to his followers. I show through an analysis of lectures from a course Strauss taught on Nietzsche, and from an unpublished lecture on Socrates that Strauss did, in fact, assimilate many of Nietzsche's thought patterns, but disagreed with him about humanity's relation to the metaphysical, the uses of nature and history, and his reaction to classical rationalism.

The works of some scholars have presented Strauss' views in a series of Manichean dichotomies, e.g. Philosophy v. Poetry, Reason v. Revelation, Ancients v. Moderns, Jerusalem v. Athens, and with good reason. Strauss himself used these terms and even titled an essay "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Introductory Reflections."²¹ This view has entrenched Strauss' thought in a 1960's American conservative rut and overshadowed his philosophical breakthrough—a breakthrough which was only new for

21 Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Introductory Reflections," *Commentary*, 43 (1967), 45-57; reprinted in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 147-73. For a sampling of this dualistic portrayal of Strauss' thought by both his supporters and detractors, see the following: Steven B. Smith, "Leo Strauss: Between Athens and Jerusalem," in *The Review of Politics*, 53 (1991), 75-99; Strauss called Nietzsche's understanding of the ancients "deplorable," but still considered Nietzsche's assertions about them worthy of examination.

the Modern, but which Strauss believed had been known by the Ancients.²² The use of the dichotomies listed above becomes problematic when they become limiting factors and not a crux of understanding for further elaboration. While recognizing two entities or systems of thought between which there exists tension, and seeing the necessity of dualism, Strauss never *limited* conceptions of the world to this constellation or reduced complex orientations to categorical imperatives; only his interpreters have done this. Strauss rather drew the distinction in order to broaden the philosophical possibilities. He saw any irreconcilable tension as a positive consequence.²³

The literature on Strauss can mostly be broken into that dealing with his political philosophy and that dealing with his Judaism, with little scholarly attention given to the interplay between these two elements of his life; if we really want to understand Strauss as a philosopher, we ignore his Judaism at our peril. I hope that rather than trying to label and categorize his thought as Nietzschean or not, postmodern or not, scholars might take an approach beyond categories, realizing that Strauss was a paradoxical thinker who much like Nietzsche responded to individual problems in ways that may sometimes appear contradictory. Strauss' scholarly reaction to the Judaism of his upbringing holds a clue to understanding his posture toward Nietzsche. Steven B. Smith and Laurence Berns

22 It is interesting to note that Strauss' insistence on himself as a scholar and not a philosopher is in line with his reinterpretation and recovery of the thought of the Ancients. He did not claim to have formulated anything new, but only to have recovered what was new to the modern but had been a lived reality to the Ancients. Present-day scholars who treat Strauss as a philosopher in his own right are perhaps seriously misguided, and have misunderstood his premise posing as a restorer of historical texts to their original historical meaning.

23 Given Strauss' philosophic position on the importance of competing thought patterns for societal health, it is curious that many detractors have styled him an enemy of democracy which is the embodiment of incorporating conflicting themes into peaceful coexistence. Strauss recognized the value of democratic systems of government as one of the best regimes human history has ever known to shelter and abet the free practice of philosophers. His defense of liberal education (the "attempt to found an aristocracy within a democracy") as the only sure way to enable the continuance of a democracy by fashioning a cadre of leaders validates this point. See Leo Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?" reprinted in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 3-8.

have each treated the similarities and divergences in the thought of Strauss and Heidegger in relation to the classics and that of their teacher, Edmund Husserl. Nasser Behnegar has conducted an in-depth study of Strauss' philosophic critique of historicism. Eugene R. Sheppard's biography offers a broad historical view of Strauss' life, tying it together thematically with the assertion that the Jewish experience of *galut*, or exilic homelessness, impacted Strauss' thought in critical directions. Neil Robertson criticizes Strauss' historicism in interpreting the Moderns in light of its later revolutionary form and thus "closing the early modern mind" and failing to understand modernity on its own terms. William H.F. Altman aligned Strauss with the young nihilists that Strauss describes in "German Nihilism," pointing to Strauss's affinity for Nietzsche that he claimed in correspondence from 1935: "I can only say that Nietzsche so dominated and enchanted me between my 22nd and 30th years [sc. until 1929], that I granted him everything that I understood of him." Altman makes this point as if to implicate all of Strauss' mature thought in some nihilistic intent, but it is quite clear from an examination of Strauss' early writings that in fact the opposite was true.²⁴

24 Quoted in William H. F. Altman, "Leo Strauss on 'German Nihilism': Learning the Art of Writing," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 68 (2007), 590-591. To further establish his point, William H. F. Altman cites another passage in "German Nihilism," in which he claims that Strauss identifies himself with the young nihilists. See Altman, 597. Altman then tries to use this assertion to claim that Strauss is defending German nihilism esoterically. Strauss did defend the innocent and positive *motives*, if not the aims or the results, of the nihilists he describes in this lecture. However, Altman misinterprets this passage by mixing up the antecedents of the pronouns. Furthermore, his argument ignores Strauss's capacity for change of thought through his academic development. Just because he may have been one of these nihilists in his youth (though an analysis of his work from that time shows he was not), or at least identified with their concerns, Altman claims no evidence that he still embraced such a philosophy in later life; this lecture in fact proves otherwise. Strauss also claimed in 1970 that while at the *Gymnasium* he read Schopenhauer and Nietzsche "furtively." However, pointing to Strauss' intellectual diet does not confirm his beliefs or intellectual orientation with those he read. It must be added here that Strauss' prior commitment to Judaism from a young age does not encourage Altman's interpretation. Leo Strauss, "German Nihilism," ed. David Janssens and Daniel Tanguay, *Interpretation*, 26 (1999), 362. Leo Strauss, "A Giving of Accounts," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth H. Green (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 460. Strauss, letter of June 23, 1935, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 648.

The two most relevant studies for this thesis are Laurence Lampert's *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* and Gregory Bruce Smith's "The Post-Modern Leo Strauss?" Smith has argued that Leo Strauss forged a post-modern synthesis of Nietzschean and Heideggerian thought with medieval scholars and ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, but he fails to show where Strauss created anything new.²⁵

Lampert has written the seminal work on Leo Strauss and Nietzsche. In *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, Lampert focused almost exclusively on Strauss' single published work on Nietzsche, a sixteen-page commentary entitled "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*." Lampert asks whether Strauss is a man with the visage of an innocent scholar but the potential for something dangerous, like Nietzsche, underneath. According to Lampert, Strauss defends Nietzsche by showing that Nietzsche's critique of the Platonic Socrates may be misplaced and attempts to show that Socrates is more Nietzschean than Nietzsche supposed (thus averting charges made against Nietzsche for his rejection of the worth of the Socratic question). Even so, according to Lampert, Strauss ultimately said "no" to Nietzsche. I show by analysis of Strauss' writings on Socrates and reference to his other works on Nietzsche, that Strauss did not vilify Socrates like Nietzsche did, although he did recognize the Platonic Socrates as a caricature and held that Xenophon's Socrates was the closest historical record available. Strauss' relation to Nietzsche was paradoxical, allowing for a mediated consideration rather than dismissal of Nietzsche's position, which Strauss saw had some legitimacy

25 Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*. Gregory Bruce Smith, "The Postmodern Leo Strauss?" *History of European Ideas*, 19 (1994). See also Lawrence Lampert, "Nietzsche's Challenge to Philosophy in the Thought of Leo Strauss." *The Review of Metaphysics*, 58 (2005), 585-619; and Catherine H. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida*. (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Zuckert argues along very similar lines with Smith.

despite his own disagreement on material points. I address Lampert's thesis that Strauss reinterpreted Plato as non-Platonic; i.e., he understood the limits of language in descriptions of reality and thus addressed the linguistic concerns of Heidegger.

Lampert claims that Strauss' praise of Nietzsche in his "Note on Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*" should be a scandal to Straussians.²⁶ Nothing could be further from the truth. Throughout Strauss' writings and class lectures, he adopted and employed phrases wholesale from Nietzsche. Lampert asserts that Strauss saw Plato's errors of the pure mind and the thing-in-itself as surface particulars hiding a closer alignment with Nietzsche. Whether with legitimate reason or no, Strauss purposely brought Nietzsche closer to Plato's stance than he is traditionally interpreted. Lampert examines Strauss' "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*," where Strauss compares Nietzsche to Plato, showing that Nietzsche failed to avoid a "relapse into Platonism." Then Lampert claims that Strauss brought Plato closer to Nietzsche than ever before by asserting that as Nietzsche claimed the gods, like men, philosophize, Strauss' Plato may also have believed the same. For Nietzsche, the good in itself and the pure mind both are replaced by the will to power, but Strauss is not so fast to adopt Nietzsche's stance.²⁷

Lampert claims Strauss was not a Platonist; he points to a passage in *The City and Man* where Strauss says Platonism (the doctrine of ideas) is "utterly incredible, not to say

26 Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*; Willis G. Regier, "Review: Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, and William H. Schaberg, *The Nietzsche Canon: A Publication History and Bibliography*," in *Modern Language Notes*, 111 (Dec. 1996), 1023.

27 Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, 28. Classical philosophy had focused on the understanding and articulation of nature rather than human convention. Plato's concern was with the best regime according to nature. Strauss' Plato understood nature not necessarily as a fixed entity, but an organism in flux, experienced by humanity that was itself in flux.

that it appears to be fantastic.”²⁸ This assertion is a bit problematic as proof that Strauss was not a Platonist, for when examined in context, it nods to Platonism’s *seeming* incredulity but goes on to explicate its tenability. In my view Strauss tentatively upheld Plato, reinterpreting Platonism as non-Platonic while he did so. For example, Strauss points to the *Republic* (501b2) to show in agreement with Plato that ideas, which exist “beyond all becoming” are linked with nature: “‘the idea of justice’ is called ‘that which is just by nature.’” Strauss opposes this at first by raising the unanswered problem of why the idea of the dog should be more true than the actual dog who lives and “participat[es].” Strauss here points out that Socrates seems to be supported in his assertion by the fact that mathematical things will never be encountered in the world perceived by the senses, i.e. the mathematical ideas only remain in the realm of ideas; secondly, our ideas, or ideals, transcend anything that can ever be realized: “precisely the justest men were and are the ones most aware of the shortcomings of their justice.” From this discussion Strauss jumps to the gods and in parallel fashion explains that, for example, the god of victory, *Nike*, was understood by the Greeks not as a particular victory or statue, but someone beyond, who was displayed in many forms.

Smith has argued that Strauss forged a post-modern synthesis of Nietzschean and Heideggerian thought and that of select ancient and medieval philosophers--namely Plato, Aristotle, and Farabi--in an attempt to transcend the greatest late modern thinkers. Smith states that Strauss’ project was to use philosophy to recover the ground of *praxis* as

28 Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 119-121; quoted in Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, 48, note 15. Here, Strauss writes of the *good*: “As indicated by the facts that there are many ideas and that the mind which perceives the ideas is radically different from the ideas themselves, there must be something higher than the ideas: the idea of the good, which is in a sense the cause of all ideas as well as of the mind perceiving them,” 119. For “beyond all becoming” quote, see 119.

Aristotle used it. In Smith's understanding, Strauss' thought was essentially postmodern—a pastiche of borrowed and re-combined ideas, void of anything new.²⁹ If so, Strauss would then be guilty of creating an amalgamation of thought that would be only the most despicable display of the postmodern inability to create anything new. The terms “modern” and “postmodern” are troubling in their usage, as the varied meanings and historical periods attached to these terms obfuscate, rather than elucidate, the subject at hand. These will be examined in more detail in the ensuing discussion; suffice it to say here in the simplest of terms, that “postmodern” in my usage means a particular constellation of thought that denies the possibility of objectivity in human knowledge, and acknowledges the central role of the particular historical period and individual's perception in the formulation of knowledge, historical or otherwise. In other words, it is a thought phenomenon of European importation that arose in the United States in the early twentieth century, and is hallmarked by the belief in the eclipse of any recognizable measuring rule, or metanarrative of history, and embrace of relativism. This follows Perez Zagorin's definition of postmodernity, as a rejection of realism and a commitment to “linguistic idealism,” meaning that the way in which humanity thinks through language limits or defines reality, and there is no reality outside of our construction

29 See Steven B. Smith, “Destruktion or Recovery? Leo Strauss's Critique of Heidegger,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, 51 (1997). Laurence Berns, “The Prescientific World and Historicism: Some Reflections on Strauss, Heidegger, and Husserl.” In *Leo Strauss's Thought: Toward a Critical Engagement*, ed. Alan Udoff (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1991); Nasser Behnegar, “Leo Strauss's Critique of Historicism,” PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 1993; Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*; Eugene R. Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of A Political Philosopher* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2006). Neil Robertson, “The Closing of the Early Modern Mind: Leo Strauss and Early Modern Political Thought,” *Animus*, 3 (1998): 211-226. Available: <http://www2.swgc.mun.ca/animus/Articles/Volume%203/robert3.pdf>. Accessed 6 February 2010; Gregory Bruce Smith, “The Post-Modern Leo Strauss?” *History of European Ideas*, 19 (1994), 191-192. For *praxis* to be possible, Smith claims that Strauss maintains that our conception of reality is hierarchical in the sense of our ability to order in varying degrees of importance. This is philosophy's possibility of superiority to modern science.

within language.³⁰ Postmodernity in this sense is a direct successor—and many would argue outgrowth of or reaction to—modernism. Thus, a discussion of Modernism follows.

Historians typically refer to Modernism as a particular historical period following the Victorian age, beginning in the United States in the early twentieth century.

Modernism of this sort is seen as an erosion of Victorian-era beliefs, including the establishment of relativity and chance, which early founders of Pragmatism began to move toward as they broke with Victorianism. My use of the term here differs, however, in order to dialogue within Strauss' very conscious conception of "modernity" in opposition to "ancient" (classical Greek) thought, with the Middle Ages somehow balanced precariously in between. I will sidestep the more precise and narrowly-defined early-twentieth century Modern historical period. "Modernism" is used here to encompass a set of ideas whose roots can be found most prominently in the Enlightenment period, including a subject/object dualistic worldview, with a belief in the necessity of detachment and disinterest of the knower for arrival at the "truth."

Modernism hails the birth of an approach that is commonly known as scientific objectivity, elevated as both a state capable of being arrived at, and an ideal to be sought after. It is a belief in linear historical Progress and that objective truth can be found and

30 Michael Gillespie, *Hegel, Heidegger, and the Ground of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953). Gillespie identified Descartes and Kant as the definitive thinkers of modernity and the subjective-objective duality arising from it. Gillespie's treatment of Hegel and Heidegger in this book has been much criticized by his colleagues for obscuring, rather than illuminating the thought of Hegel and Heidegger, ignoring some of the most important of Heidegger's works, like *Being and Time*, and for understanding consciousness as the "ground of history" for Hegel instead of Geist, or spirit. For postmodernism: "[Postmodernism] regards language itself as a system of signs that refer only to one another internally in an endless process of signification that never arrives at a stable meaning." Perez Zagorin, "History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now." In *History and Theory* 38 (1999), 7.

agreed upon by individuals using the right tools of inquiry. In contrast, postmodernism's reference points do not prescribe precisely the existence of one truth. The belief in rationalism as the means to achievement of a universal, enlightened, and therefore peaceful society was the means and aim of Modernity.³¹ Michael Gillespie sees the essence of the modern in his equation of the ground of history with human consciousness, i.e. nothing outside of consciousness is. Heidegger identified the modern subjective tendency "in which our conceptual representations...preempt the being of the 'objects' they are used to designate."³²

In contrast to Smith's conclusions about Strauss' position, this thesis argues that Strauss' thought was more than a postmodern pastiche. Rather, he attempted to forge a whole new thought path. Instead of synthesizing the ancients (who represented for Strauss the pre-theoretical, natural awareness he and Heidegger had each adopted from Edmund Husserl) and the greatest late moderns (like Nietzsche, who had exposed the nihilism to which Western moderns had taken their particular assumptions combined with rationality), Strauss took a third way, seeking to rescue Western philosophy from several

31 In his discussion of the historical profession's confrontation with postmodernity, Perez Zagorin chronicles the unaltered ideal of objectivity historians continue to hold. Zagorin, "History, the Referent," 1-24. Leo Strauss did not consider objectivity an ideal; he thought, along the lines similar to Peter Novick, that it was an unrealistic and misplaced concept entirely. See also Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Telling It As You Like It: Postmodernist History and the Flight from Fact," in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins, (London: Routledge, 1997): 158-174; Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999). Also of note is the work of John E. Toews. Toews stated that "Modernism was a historical product of the failure of thinking with history to provide convincing meanings for the experience of modernization...the result was a culture that...thought...without history." See his review of Carl E. Schorske, *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism*. In *Central European History*, 34 (2001), 109-112.

32 Zagorin specifically orients postmodernism in German philosophy beginning with Nietzsche and stretching to Heidegger, including the adoption and adaptation of the French in the 1960s of poststructuralism. See his article, "History, the Referent, and Narrative," 5. See also Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). For quote explaining Heidegger's position on linguistic categories, see Frederick A. Olafson, Review of Michael Gillespie, "Hegel, Heidegger, and History," in *History and Theory*, 25 (1986), 68.

positions equally distasteful: the traditional Platonist approach that froze reality into artificial “truths,” the nihilism Nietzsche identified as the end of Western rationalism, or the relativism of Heidegger’s position, which in Strauss’ mind disallowed the existence of an ethics and encouraged the postmodern belief in nothing, or nihilism.³³ Strauss surveyed the problem of postmodernism from Jewish, philosophical, and ancient/classical positions, without modernity’s premises, and decided that the postmodern assertion of linguistic limitations did not prohibit the existence of one framework of truth existing independently of history (but not necessarily objectively), no matter how poorly, grandly, or diversely articulated that truth might be by various historical situations and actors. This is not to be understood as a flight into the metaphysical. Strauss was a radical promoter of realism, stating that the real and common things in life were the most profound.³⁴

Strauss arrived at this object of his philosophy—the universal structure underlying diverse historical manifestations—quite simply by rational deduction. Strauss pointed to Socrates and Plato as origin of this idea. They, Strauss claimed, had elaborated it first: each manifestation of “truth” about any subject in any culture actually points beyond itself by that culture’s contradiction of their own truth, leading them to a truer truth, “if a

33 Strauss’ intellectual relation to Heidegger’s thought will be elaborated later; it is sufficient to state here that Strauss simply reasoned that if for Heidegger our thoughts—limited by our language—limited our reality, and there was nothing higher than our valuation based upon our perception, the idea of ethics independent of individual evaluation lost all meaning. Other scholars have also identified a “standing outside of,” or mediating (detractors might say non-committal approach); Steven B. Smith identified this in Strauss in relation to the problem of the “one and the many” or “universalistic commitments and particularistic identifications.” Smith, “Leo Strauss: Between Athens and Jerusalem,” 78.

34 Smith argues that Strauss sees philosophy’s superiority to *modern* science in that it is aware of the “life-world”—true philosophy knows no Cartesian detachment from reality. Gregory Bruce Smith, “The Post-Modern Leo Strauss?” 193. See also Joseph Cropsey, ed. *Ancients and Moderns: Essays on the Tradition of Political Philosophy in Honor of Leo Strauss* (New York: Basic Books, 1964).

philosopher should arise among them.” In other words, Strauss believed the particular presupposes a comprehensive view, without which life is impossible.³⁵

Philosophy’s Politics: Weimar Historicism and the Problem of Nihilism

Strauss inhaled Nietzsche during his intellectually formative years, and Nietzsche’s thought patterns and philosophical questions set the tone for many of Strauss’ own philosophical questions. Nietzsche’s influence in the Germany of the young Strauss cannot be overstated. After 1890, Nietzsche’s works became very popular in Germany on a national level, appearing regularly in literary journals. Nietzsche’s ideas were taken up mostly by the literate middle classes, especially as a critique of Wilhelmine society. His thought became part of the German identification and nationalism debates and was used as ammunition by the avant-garde. A tidal shift in the intellectual mood at the turn of the century propelled Nietzsche’s thought more and more into the limelight; he gave words to the rebellion many felt against positivism, materialism, and the spreading bourgeoisie. Steven Aschheim describes the fuel Nietzsche provided those whose dissatisfaction with current social mores caused widespread upset:

Nietzsche’s vitalism was moreover a seminal influence on the post 1890 *Lebensphilosophie* fad and its claims for the primacy of intuition and life over stultifying reason. Nietzsche too had dwelled on what was to become a central and continuing fin-de-siecle European preoccupation: the perception of pervasive decadence and degeneration and the accompanying search for new sources of physical and mental health.³⁶

35 Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), 124-125. This conflict of opinion leading to a more comprehensive truth is like that articulated much later by David Hollinger’s intersecting ethnoi circles. However, unlike Hollinger’s search for consensus rooted in action and politics, like the pragmatists, Strauss relegates it primarily to the realm of thought. See David A. Hollinger, “How Wide the Circle of the ‘We’? American Intellectuals and the Problem of the Ethnos Since World War II,” *The American Historical Review*, 98 (1993), 317-337.

36 Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*, 13-29, quote on 13-14. *Lebensphilosophie* was a life-philosophy that saw life as a whole that could only be understood internally, not as an abstract

In this climate Strauss did not follow Nietzsche's rejection of rationalism. He spoke later of his formative years: "I began...to wonder whether the self-destruction of reason was not the inevitable outcome of modern rationalism as distinguished from premodern rationalism, especially Jewish-medieval rationalism and its classical (Aristotelian and Platonic) foundation."³⁷

Like Nietzsche's uncovering of the arbitrary premises of reason, Strauss uncovered the arbitrary bases of historicism, centered in Enlightenment dogma, and posed nature in opposition to Nietzsche's history. In addition, rather than seeing will to power (self-overcoming, in Strauss' understanding) as the fundamental experience, Strauss posited love and mystery as the defining experience for understanding humanity.

The challenges posed by nihilism were not ephemeral problems for Strauss; they grew out of social and political angst of the Weimar Period, the war years, and his later observation of the American political scene. Speaking years after about the Nazis, Strauss commented that "passionate political action" against them was necessary, but

phenomenon in Kantianism or a positivistic sense. Aschheim makes an excellent case for the selective filtering devices used by various groups like Socialists, Nihilists, anti-Semites, Wagnerians, etc. who appropriated and misappropriated Nietzscheanisms to further their causes. Anti-Nietzschean publications also grew in response, attempting to show the un-Germanness of his thought. Ludwig Stein, philosopher and publicist, wrote in 1893 that Nietzsche's use of the aphorism, while not logical and a weak philosophical argument, made inroads in an era of mass society, newspapers, and salons. Referenced in Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*, 38-39. Furthermore, one can look at statements made in the early twentieth century to see how thoroughly Nietzsche's relativism and the idea of the creation—rather than discovery—of values had permeated German culture. A statement made by artist Ludwig Thoma in Munich in August 1914, regarding the German people follows: "I was struck by the impression of how this courageous and industrious people has to purchase with its blood the right to work and to *create* values for mankind." [emphasis mine]. Quoted in Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), 91-92.

37 Leo Strauss, "Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*," 173. Strauss says of Nietzsche: "The critique of reason is connected with the critique of consciousness or of the ego, to which he opposes the self. And in order to make quite clear that the self is not anything what traditional philosophy meant by it, he says the self is the body." Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 3, p. 1-2.

would not have been sufficient, if not joined with a cogent philosophy.³⁸ Yet Strauss believed the academics of the Weimar Republic had failed to provide to his generation the philosophic approach by which to formulate a political stance that was both reasonable and incorporated life-giving human elements of respect for freedom and rights. Instead, many academics tended to stand above the fray of interest politics, and the opinions they did hold had degenerated into prejudice. One group of academics, the largest part of the older generation, forced into the position of “*conservateurs*” by their accepting the burden of proof that their detractors placed upon them—the “merely academic philosophers,” whose thought was not impacted in a significant way by the war—continued traditions inherited from the nineteenth century and earlier and were “utterly ineffectual” in the political or social realm because of their failure to engage with the changed society: “Public opinion of postwar Germany was determined not by them,” Strauss asserted, “but by those men who were in contact with the revolution of thought.” Of those who were in contact with the intellectual revolution, one group had a “direct and revolutionizing effect on the more open-minded and excitable part of the academic youth”—a group of professors who, Strauss claimed, helped pave the way for Hitler, including Moeller van den Bruck, Carl Schmitt, Ernst Jünger, and Martin Heidegger.³⁹

Strauss cited historicism and the depreciation of reason—“which is one and unchangeable or it is not”—as the source of the conservative academics’

38 Strauss, “Existentialism,” 7. For a description of the Weimar years, see Michael Zank, “Introduction.” In *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings, 1921-1932* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002).

39 Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 361; Leo Strauss, “The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy,” in *Leo Strauss and the Theological-political Problem*, ed. Heinrich Meier, trans. Marcus Brainard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 117.

ineffectiveness.⁴⁰ Historicism had rendered any philosophy the product of the time, and thus robbed tradition and reason of any legitimacy. Strauss could not understand how they could resist “the voice of the siren [of nihilism] who expect the answer to the first and the last question from ‘History’ ...who believe in a progress toward a goal which is itself progressive and therefore undefineable [sic]....”⁴¹

Youth in the Weimar Republic years in Germany were in conflict with the older generations as they faced declining career opportunities in a poor economy. Additionally, in 1925, the youth in age from 15-25 reflected a peak in the birth rate, which afterwards declined. Detlev Peukert has shown how these changing demographics caused conflicts over the role of youth, and many in the crisis sought out traditional ideas of the home as a shelter from the social upheaval.⁴² Many youth had embraced a particular form of nihilism that Strauss claimed stemmed from a *moral*, non-nihilistic impulse—the desire, not for destruction of everything, but only for *modern* civilization, defined as the “conscious culture of reason,” or the unification of morals and modern science. This was a rebellion against *civilization*, understood in the French sense as rationalism and utilitarianism, in favor of the German cultural spirit. The youth, Strauss explains, knew against what they fought, but had little conception of the world they wanted to put in its place, and thus their protest against science and reason deteriorated into an almost absolute nihilism: “Their Yes was inarticulate—they were unable to say more than: No! This No proved however sufficient as *the* preface to action, to the action of destruction.” This nihilism culminated in militarism, Strauss reasoned, because courage was the one

40 Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 364-365, quote on 364.

41 Ibid.

42 Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), 88-105.

“non-utilitarian” virtue: a person does not act out of self-interest when displaying courage on the battlefield.⁴³

The antithesis between French and English “civilization” and German “culture” was a historical phenomenon very much alive in the German imagination before the first World War and afterward. While often linked with a conservative stance, some Weimar intellectuals on both the Right and Left held a set of values that looked negatively on mechanistic science and modernization that has been labeled holism. German idealism and mysticism were embraced as alternatives to the cosmopolitan nature of their society. The German Enlightenment, or *Aufklärung*, was not equivalent to the French and English; it was in fact a criticism of the Anglo-French empiricist tradition and its utilitarianism. The Germans were not empiricists; rather than rejecting Christianity, they had sought to modernize Protestantism, preserving the moral and spiritual implications and trying to maintain its intellectual validity by revising orthodoxy. Culture was acquired through the cultivation and spiritual discipline of education—*Bildung*, the formation of the whole person—that was a significant theme of the eighteenth-century German Enlightenment. Germans believed that the French concept of *civilization*, which denoted humanity’s social and intellectual accomplishments, was superficial and utilitarian. Some Idealists sought for a guarantee of the correspondence between our ideas and the world as it is, and from this postulated an abstract mind or spirit that in the Idealist tradition took on a spiritual meaning of a universal spirit.⁴⁴ Anson Rabinbach has

43 Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 360-363. Peter D. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement 1900-1945: An Interpretive and Documentary History* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), 14-19, 40, 46-53, quote 15.

44 For holism, see Anne Harrington, *Reenchanted Science: Holism in German Culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the*

shown how, after 1914, writers like Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch changed the promise once imagined in idealized European culture into the promise of political redemption for the mythic German people. Politics was invested with an apocalyptic expectation that could be realized historically, fusing the roots of German idealism with a Hegelian belief in the state as the impetus for bringing about this change. They identified fascism as a vehicle for falsely reenchanting the world, as a “socially powerful myth of redemption.”⁴⁵

The political situation of Weimar was as tenuous as the philosophical; after the revolution of 1918 and the permanent abolition of the monarchy, a new era in Germany brought republicanism and with it liberalism, but this was looked upon as an imposition by the victors of the war and not a German tradition with historical roots. Democracy was

German Mandarins: the German Academic Community, 1890-1933 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), 87. In 1784, Kant wrote of civilization versus German culture, envisioning civilization as a set of social norms and manners, and culture as morality, learning, and art. In Oswald Spengler's theory of decadence, he wrote, “civilization is to culture as the external is to the internal, the artificially constructed to the naturally developed, the mechanical to the organic, ‘means’ to ‘ends.’” Quoted in *ibid*, 88-89. This tradition traced its roots from Leibniz, Kant's predecessor, who adopted a Platonic orientation to the world. Kant developed the “thing-in-itself” that made up the “supersensible world which surrounds and limits the world of experience to which the understanding is confined.” Hirshl Haldar, “Leibniz and German Idealism,” *The Philosophical Review*, 26 (1917), 380. The Kantian critique of experience is, simply stated, the stance that there is a gap between experience and the thing-in-itself, or that our ideas of things are gathered from an accumulation of various sensory perceptions, but they are not immediately related to the thing that is perceived. Some Kantians distrusted empiricism. Sebastian Gardner and Paul Franks have argued in “From Kant to Post-Kantian Idealism,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 76 (2002), 211-246, that German idealism was an extension of Kantian idealism grounded in axiology. For more on Strauss and idealism, see Robb A. McDaniel, “The Nature of Inequality: Uncovering the Modern in Leo Strauss's Idealist Ethics,” *Political Theory*, 26 (1998), 317-345.

⁴⁵ Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 14-19, 40, 46-53, quote on 15. Fritz K. Ringer argues that the “orthodox,” or conservative, educated elite legitimated state existence (and expansion as an assumed necessity of continued survival in competition with other nation-states) with the state's embrace of moral and cultural goals they considered superior. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, 118; Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 64; For Oswald Spengler, See Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 18. Strauss, “Living Issues.” On balance, Nietzsche had claimed that the state was a source of self-alienation from human nature, as it created an authority that hid from humanity its true condition and thus allowed for an artificial existence, as religion had before it. See Lester H. Hunt, “Politics and Antipolitics: Nietzsche's View of the State” *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 2 (1985), 458.

not a viable option to many of Strauss' Weimar contemporaries because of the stigma attached to it as a German concession imposed by Allied victors of the war, and the economic ruin and social decadence associated with it. The election of Paul von Hindenburg—who desired to return to a more traditionally German authoritarian rule—as President in 1925, showed the opprobrium attached to Weimar. Only a few elites, like Thomas Mann, spoke out for the republic, if only out of principle for the ideas for which the freedom of democracy stood. This statement should be mitigated, however, by the consideration that there is much evidence that republicanism versus monarchism was less a concern than social relations. Peter Fritzsche argues in “Did Weimar Fail?” that liberalism is not the most useful defining characteristic against which to view the republic. He cites recent scholarship that has sought to see Weimar as an experiment in initiatives to address the modern (in the post-Victorian sense) condition as opposed to an abject failure of democracy, as it was characterized by earlier scholarship in the light of the rise of National Socialism. The Weimar Republic is so interesting, Fritzsche states, because the public life “was formed so forcefully by the sense that nothing was certain and everything possible.” Ultimately, economic instability sealed any question of the republic's success.⁴⁶

46 For a comprehensive historical explanation of the political situation in Weimar, see Mary Fulbrook, *History of Germany, 1918-2000: The Divided Nation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002).

24-39. See also Peter Fritzsche, “Review: Did Weimar Fail?” *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 68 (1996), 629-656, quote p. 633. For a discussion of liberalism and the complications in using it as a lens for viewing the Weimar Republic, see Konrad Jarausch, “Illiberalism and Beyond: German History in Search of a Paradigm,” *Journal of Modern History*, 55 (1983), 268-84. See also Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), and Fritz Stern, *The Failure of Illiberalism: Essays on the Political Culture of Modern Germany* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972). The inflation that hit Germany starting during the First World War and which peaked in 1923, aggravated by the Versailles settlement and the government's response of printing money to satisfy war debts, combined with an unstable political situation. This destroyed savings, made the cost of living to relative salaries skyrocket, and spelled economic ruin especially for the officials,

Strauss wrote in his “Preface to Spinoza’s Critique of Religion” that the Weimar Republic was weak. It had few friends in high places; the elite on the Left criticized capitalism; the Right, democracy. Churches and schools taught doctrines that undermined the Republic. Democrats and Social Democrats sought to create equal access to the educational system, and thus to the professions, whereas the People’s Party and the Catholic Center took more conservative stances. Students’ leagues were formed in further hopes of changing the institutions of higher learning, but the leagues turned to emphasize gymnastics, Pan-Germanism, *völkisch*, and racist ideologies.⁴⁷

The Weimar youth, well-versed in historical argument, had committed a fallacy by accepting the alternatives communism set up—a choice between the proletarian revolution and the destruction of civilization—and they chose the latter. In other words, they believed that the communists had all the rational arguments, and thus made what they called an “irrational decision,” in choosing the negation of the present order with

professionals, academics, and small artisans and shopkeepers, two of the oldest segments of the middle class. The university suffered too; travel research became an impossible luxury; the costs of printing were so high that scholars could not publish research. An academic proletariat emerged in the Weimar period, consisting “mainly of those groups which had already been disadvantaged by industrialization and which were hardest hit by the collapse of the mark.” Ringer, *Decline of the German Mandarins*, 61-67. In July 1914, 4.2 marks equaled a dollar. By the end of 1923, the currency had fluctuated to 4200 billion marks to a single dollar.

47 Leo Strauss, “Preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*,” 137-177; Ringer, 76. Fulbrook, *German History Since 1800*, 28-34. Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 359. Fellow émigré Carl Mayer stated that the Weimar Republic’s “moral-intellectual climate had contributed to the rise of National Socialism. Mayer, 225-247. It is curious to note—given Strauss ended up there—that the New School was itself born of issues over academic freedom, and an academic’s perceived non-support of the state. For a detailed study of German academics’ cooperation or non-cooperation with the National Socialists and the state’s cooptation of the academy for state use, see various works by Robert Proctor; Monika Renneberg and Mark Walker, eds. *Science, Technology and National Socialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Klaus Hentschel, *Physics and National Socialism: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, trans. Ann Hentschel, in *Science Networks—Historical Studies*, vol. 18 (Basel/Boston: Birkhauser, 1996); Kristie Macrakis, *Surviving the Swastika. Scientific Research in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Max Weinreich, *Hitler’s Professors: The Part of Scholarship in Germany’s Crimes against the Jewish People*, 2^d ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

no clear idea of what they wanted to put in its place, “for that modern astrology, predicting social science, had taken hold of a very large part of the academic youth.”⁴⁸

The extent to which a causal line can be drawn from German academia, as from any other sector of society or political group in Weimar Germany to the success of the National Socialist party remains an open question. Nonetheless, Strauss was not alone among his contemporaries in making these connections. Contemporary scholarship was much concerned with this question, but recent work has problematized assertions drawing simplistic lines from social ills as causation for the political success of National Socialism. Hans Sluga showed the history of the political nature of German philosophy and its philosophical nationalism, while displaying the spats and disciplinary battles of the intellectuals, for the most part, removed from the racial ideology of the National Socialists and the broad-sweeping popular political waves.⁴⁹

48 Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 361.

49 Strauss, *ibid.*, 357, 362; Strauss, “Living Issues,” 117. Heinrich Meier, “Preface to the American Edition,” *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. Marcus Brainard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xv. This lecture is mentioned in the *Philosophic Review*, 49 (1940), 492. Leo Strauss, “The Living Issues,” 117. Quotation from Leo Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 361, emphasis in original. Note too that historian Fritz K. Ringer in 1969, from a historical standpoint, stated that German academics of the Weimar period were unable to recognize the social implications of the ideas they taught. Ringer, *Decline of the German Mandarins*, 82. Hans Sluga, *Heidegger’s Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). See also Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, and Art* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990). Zimmerman offers a balanced view of Heidegger, not excusing his political position, but rather moving beyond it to see the theoretical constellation in which he operated. Nietzsche had similarly stated, “Because there is no time for thinking and no rest in thinking, we no longer weigh divergent views; we’re content to hate them.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 282, quoted in Lampert, 10. Strauss did not criticize Weimar intellectuals solely for their alignment with National Socialism, but also for their conservative stance. He said of conservatism: “There is no possibility of a return to something past...Conservatism doesn’t work, because that only retards and therefore makes the explosion still more dreadful...” Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 3, p. 10. For a discussion of German conservatism, see Larry Eugene Jones and James Retallack, eds. *Between Reform, Reaction, and Resistance: Studies in the History of German Conservatism from 1789 to 1945* (Providence: Berg, 1993). See also Thomas Rohkramer, *A Single Communal Faith? The German Right from Conservatism to National Socialism*, vol. 20 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007). Richard Beyler has shown that not all reactionary conservative intellectuals were conservative or traditional in their scientific research. See “Science and Late Weimar Conservatism,” unpublished; manuscript in author’s possession.

Strauss was a member of the small sector of the educated elite in Germany whose academic prowess had not only historically provided them a cultural and social status, but which had additionally been affirmed by the burgeoning German bureaucracy under Emperor Wilhelm I. In the 1880s, the reforms of Wilhelm helped bolster the university as a powerful force in German society, especially as the educator of Wilhelm's statesmen. Germany's distinction in comparison with other Western European nations was its academy; it was a leader in pioneering the modern system of research and education, just as Britain had led industry. German academics had become allies of the monarch as the educators of the state's bureaucracy, which bureaucracy extended the monarch's modes of rule by its rationalization of the law; its non-interested, impersonal logic was a convenient substitute for the divine right that no longer sufficed for the ruling of the German people. Fritz Ringer argues that a concern for the fairness of anonymity the new bureaucracy ostensibly offered the public sphere was combined with the idea of a strong spiritual and cultural "mission" of the state, which was necessary to give it legitimacy for rule and expansion.⁵⁰

The academics controlled the direction of spiritual cultivation acquired through study, and developed a strongly anti-utilitarian stance toward learning. This education had its roots in the Idealist tradition stemming from the late eighteenth century that advocated *Bildung* (cultivation) as the highest and best calling for humanity. The state-run educational system encouraged the development of a metaphysical and classical education in Latin and Greek that cultivated an elite educated group. The graduate qualifying examination (*Abitur*) was selectively offered only at gymnasiums that focused

50 Ringer, *ibid.*, 14.

on classical languages, narrowing the focus of and access to higher education. This access to a classical higher education—itsself a kind of “specialization”—was the substitute for nobility of birth in social influence in the public sphere during Germany’s transition from a monarchical state to a democratic one.⁵¹ German protest against *Spezialistentum* was not an uncommon phenomenon at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was understood as particularly threatening to the German way of life in relation to the technological separation of life into different sectors and the elevation of French or Anglo “civilization” over German “culture” represented by the United States, Britain, and France. Ringer, among other historians, has interpreted this protest in light of the changing educational structures that threatened the academic status quo, opened the educational system to demographic and disciplinary diversity, and dethroned the classical canon. However, it would be reductionist to interpret Strauss’ concerns with specialization as stemming solely from a structural or methodological change in the educational structure; his concerns were much more ephemeral and theoretical, grounded in his confrontation with the differing constructions of reality by modern and ancient writers.

In the rapid industrialization that occurred between 1870 through the turn of the century, the position of the academic caste began to crumble. Modernists called for reforms in the educational system and purpose: Emperor William II held a conference on education in 1890 seeking further reforms. Changes threatened the historical ideal of the university that had been solidified at the turn of the eighteenth century on the Idealist search for pure learning without a necessary practical value. The democratization of the

51 Ibid., 14-37.

German universities contributed to the unease of the academics, for entrepreneurs and the rising welfare of the masses brought a stronger democratic component to the political scene. In 1908, graduates of the *Realgymnasium* and the *Oberrealschule* were permitted to enroll in universities that had previously been the privilege only of those graduates from the *Gymnasium*. University attendance swelled and many of the academic elite saw deterioration in the educational system and deemed the growth of utilitarianism and technical education in the curriculum as a negative consequence of Germany's modernization. Academics responded both intellectually and emotionally to the technological age: they abhorred cultural vulgarization effected by the masses and the tendency of technology and the growing commercial world to marginalize the relevancy of their abstract knowledge base. There was a widespread sense of crisis among these academics, but no viable alternatives in view to correct the situation.

Ringer believes that these intellectuals failed to separate their concerns over academic standards with the older intellectual ideals of classical "cultivation," which they viewed as the spiritual development of the whole person through *Bildung* and *Kultur*. The new utilitarian education that was creeping into universities threatened this ideal. These academics believed that the German *Wissenschaft* (a term used to denote an organized body of knowledge and its procurement) should create a *Weltanschauung*, or worldview. Rather than instituting reforms, they held onto ideals of the past and complained about the society changing around them and the specter of mass education. Additionally, as early as 1890, some academics also began to feel their social status threatened by the growing economic and political power of the middle and entrepreneurial classes. While recognizing wide divergences between and within groups, Ringer divided the

intellectuals into two basic stances: those *conservateurs*, who wholly opposed mandated changes in the academy that moved away from the study of classical languages and emphasized the more practical modern education that would bring the universities into step with the nation and the larger societal changes, and accomodationists, who were willing to adopt some forms of the new era in an attempt to conserve that which was most essential.

This problem was exacerbated in the academic mind because while the Western traditions of natural right and the social contract had been used historically as arguments against despots, in Germany, Ringer shows, the state was reenvisioned as the guardian of these liberties, rather than the potential threat to them. In the nineteenth century, the word *Kulturstaat*, the “culture state,” came into use, describing the collective attitude centered around a concept of the legal state equated with the cultural one. Thus, academics on the whole, by the turn of the twentieth century, were conservative and supportive of the legal state, and were envisioned as its official bearers of culture. The decline of the existing culture, for these academics who equated it with the state, meant the eclipse of the nation. Faced with increasing challenges to their status as bearers of the status quo, the majority of academics took on a defensive and conservative position, while a minority took a more accomodationist stand, willing to allow some elements of modernity to creep into the academy in exchange for keeping their relevancy and the core tenets of their stance intact. Friedrich Meinecke and Max Weber were some of those who saw the attempt to stem the tide of modernity impossible and were willing to make compromises.⁵²

⁵² Ringer, *Decline of the German Mandarins*, 113-134. The idea of Germany as bearer of culture to the world is revealed even in a statement issued by the rectors of Bavarian universities to students in August, 1914, “The issue is battle, the battle forced on us for German *Kultur*, which is threatened by the

CHAPTER TWO:

QUID SIT DEUS: THE PROBLEM OF SOCRATES

Rootedness requires a non-self-conscious immersion in a dark, incomprehensible substratum. Lightness of spirit requires the closed, parochial, and indigenous, not the universal. The pursuit of the universal leads to the Spirit of Revenge. One needs 'rootedness,' not 'autonomy.'⁵³

Socrates: The Nietzschean and Straussian Center

It was in part Nietzsche's attack on Socrates and Nietzsche's radical questioning of the Western tradition that compelled Strauss to attempt a recovery of the relationship attributed to philosophy and poetry in the cosmology of the ancient Greeks. His goal in thus doing was not to return Western society to the past, which Strauss considered impossible (nor necessarily completely desirable), but to attempt a recovery of the ancient approach to philosophy that incorporated both city and man, or found the universal within the particular, in order to free philosophy from reduction to ideology or from a quiet death by irrelevancy to modern purposes, which Strauss believed the accepted disciplinary modes of social science were effecting.

Socrates is the recurring compass point throughout Strauss' mature writings; he is the center from which emanates the other, more widely studied aspects of Strauss' thought. I show here by an exploration of Strauss' writings (both published and

barbarians from the east, and for German values, which the enemy in the west envies us." Quoted in Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 93.

⁵³ Gregory Bruce Smith, *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Transition to Postmodernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 103.

unpublished) on Socrates and on his relation to the poets, that Strauss did not see the philosophy-poetry relationship for the Ancients as a conflicting mutually-exclusive dualism to be chosen between, but rather as two descriptive modes of approaching an understanding of the totality of the universe; not one (science, reason) true of the world and the other (poetry, religion) of myth, but rather philosophy as one mode of knowledge in approaching the totality of the human experience which was painted by the poets:

Whatever the significance of modern natural science may be, it cannot affect our understanding of what is human in man. To understand man in the light of the whole means for modern natural science to understand man in the light of the sub-human. But in that light man as man is wholly unintelligible. Classical political philosophy viewed man in a different light.⁵⁴

The Ancients had framed the choice as that between the philosophical (thought) and the political (action of the city) life; it was only with the advent of the Modern that the question had been changed to a choice between philosophy (thought) and religion (belief). As has been previously stated, the Ancient approach held Reason and Religion as equally competing approaches, neither of which could completely eclipse the other. “Political atheism is a distinctly modern phenomenon,” Strauss wrote in *Natural Right and History*.⁵⁵ Scholars have made much of Strauss’ attempted revival of classical rationalism. The less-emphasized counterpart of rationalism in his project was the revival of the classical poetic approach.

54 Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy and Other Studies* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959), 38. Steven B. Smith expounds that Strauss understood Socrates’ view of man in light of the “fundamental problems.” Steven B. Smith, “Destruktion or Recovery?: Leo Strauss’s Critique of Heidegger,” in *The Review of Metaphysics*, 51 (1997). For a parallel discussion of the quotation, see Leo Strauss, “Existentialism” LSP, Box 7, Folder 6, 1.

55 Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), 169. Strauss claimed that Martin Heidegger’s Catholic upbringing had “inoculated” him from interpreting Aristotle through Modernity’s lens; similarly I think Strauss’ Jewish roots opened other avenues of thought that led to his unwavering insistence that the Modern had gone wrong when he claimed that science/reason had eclipsed poetry/religion.

Strauss maintained that this spirit of finesse was an experienced reality of pre-theoretical Western humanity—the ancient Greeks, whose values of *arête*, or excellence, has been lost by the modern, and our world is impoverished because of it. For the Greeks this finesse—which was so a part of the fabric of daily life in a pre-theoretical environment—is exemplified in the man-of-all-excellence, like Homer’s hero Odysseus, who mastered the kingly art of hospitality and war, ship-going and athletic games. The gods favored him. Strauss defined finesse as subtlety, refinement, tact, delicacy, and perceptivity:

The spirit of finesse is characterized by attachment or love and by breadth (as opposed to the spirit of science, which is “characterized by detachment and by the forcefulness which stems from simplicity or simplification”) ...yet they are barely visible; they are felt rather than seen. They are not available in such a way that we could make them the premises of our reasoning...[it] is active, not in reasoning, but rather grasping in one view unanalyzed wholes in their distinctive characters.⁵⁶

Classical political philosophy, Strauss claimed, was an exercise in liberality—“it is guided by the awareness that all man seek by nature, not the ancestral or traditional, but the good.”⁵⁷

The most fascinating philosophic or historical figure for Strauss was Socrates; he is *the* pivotal point in history for both Strauss and Nietzsche—for Strauss because Socrates represented the moment philosophy became political in the Western tradition; for Nietzsche because Socrates represented the turn toward the questioning of the gods. Socrates represented for Strauss the inherently political nature of philosophy; the moment of Socrates’ death demonstrated that the philosopher was at odd with the *polis*. Strauss

⁵⁶ Leo Strauss, “Social Science and Humanism,” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁵⁷ Leo Strauss, “Preface,” in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), x.

describes it this way: “The movement to which the reader of the *Republic* is exposed leads from the city as the association of the fathers who are subject to the law and ultimately to the gods toward the city as an association of artisans who are subject to the philosophers and ultimately to the ideas.”⁵⁸

Nietzsche sided with the poets over the Socratics, “accepting the supremacy of falsehood, or deception, of art,” in Strauss’ words. Homer falsified things by magnifying them for art’s sake; that was Thucydides’ complaint against him. The questioning of truth and science, Strauss says, makes art rise in value; he acknowledges that humanity needs to know the meaning of things as well as the facts, and science can only give us facts. It is art and poetry, Strauss concludes, that provide the essential framework for understanding life.⁵⁹ Because Homer was pre-philosophic; he was an easy target for philosophy. Strauss says Socrates merely needed to ask Homer, What is virtue?, and Homer would stammer.

Strauss’ interpretation of Socrates’ central problem, as was evident in Strauss’ interpretation of Plato and Nietzsche in the previous chapter, is indicative of another deeper concern of his, namely the interplay of religion and beliefs in the private sphere with politics in the public; it demonstrates that, contrary to popular and scholarly opinion, Strauss was not the enemy of democracy, but rather a critical supporter, with qualifiers, of the best possible regime that had conceivably yet existed in reality.⁶⁰ This chapter

58 Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 119-121.

59 Leo Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Class lecture transcript, Department of Political Science, The University of Chicago, Winter 1967, in possession of Dr. Doug Morgan, College of Urban and Public Affairs, Portland State University, Portland, OR, Lecture 17, p 1-3; Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, aphorism number 27, quoted in *ibid.*, Lecture 17, p 3.

60 Strauss was both a supporter of democracy and also its critic; while he recognized that liberal democracy had achieved great freedom, he considered the freedom a freedom “from” rather than a freedom

explores the basic, or essential problems, with which Strauss concerned himself in relation to the classics: open versus closed societies, Reason in the Western tradition, and the classical tension between poetry and philosophy.

Socrates is also the wedge that splits Strauss' thought in its essentials from Nietzsche and Heidegger, both of whom considered Socrates a problem for the West. Nietzsche and Heidegger had discounted the ancients, in Strauss' estimation, because the ancients lacked the historical sense and were thus limited in their ability to speak to the modern. Nietzsche had drawn a straight line, Strauss observed, from the ancient Greek conception of reason = virtue = happiness, to the last man—the ultimate degradation of man.⁶¹ Strauss considered the ancients' lack of historical sense the *reason* they were eminently qualified to speak to the modern in a way no others were. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche called Socrates the "incarnation of the scientific spirit," in Strauss' words—the theoretical man.⁶² Socrates had opposed mystery and myth with reason. Nietzsche considered this stance inimical to life and sided with the pre-Socratics. Thus, Strauss saw Socrates as *the* antagonist for Nietzsche, even though in Nietzsche's middle period, Strauss admitted, he made more favorable remarks.

This is not to simplify Nietzsche's complicated, paradoxical posture toward Socrates. For Nietzsche, Socrates was a wise man, who yet saw life as alienation from true existence, and practiced philosophy as "preparation to die." Nietzsche turned this premise on its head and said that life must be the standard—the aim, and the highest good. Nietzsche's problem with Socrates was that he moved the center of existence from

"for." In other words, democracy's effects on the multitude had a tendency to encourage apathy and perhaps contribute to a degenerate population similar to Nietzsche's last man.

61 Ibid, Lecture 2, p.11.

62 Ibid, Lecture 7, p. 10.

this world to the transcendent. In Nietzsche's eyes, Socrates saw the human soul as immutable, and considered life something to be escaped. Nietzsche's Socrates, along with modernity's science, had supposed all of existence was understandable—able to be codified and thus modified. Nietzsche put Thucydides the historian into a more exalted category with the sophists, which for him represent the realistic life as opposed to Plato's idealist one.⁶³

Nietzsche held that Reason, which rested on unverifiable premises like myth, had arisen in the ancient world due to rapid change experienced by the Ancients in the wake of the devastation of the Peloponnesian War, which brought into question the Greek ethos of the bravery and glory of war. Myth and the illusion of tradition were questioned and the Greek conception of the hero as warrior was replaced by the dialectician. The authority of tradition and the noble classes broke down, and dialectic and reason (and the development of universal principles based on that Reason) replaced older sources of authority. The spontaneous noble who acted according to instinct, habit, and tradition was replaced by the self-conscious plebian, who had to have a reason for defense of his every action when deferment to tradition no longer held coinage. This led Socrates to believe, in Nietzsche's estimation, that only the examined life was worth living, and only universal principles could be clear and comprehensible. Gregory Bruce Smith observed that dialectic was the means for the plebian to overcome the aristocrat—the aim was mastery and control, not truth. For the modern, knowledge came to equal power—and Nietzsche envisioned Socrates as a proto-modern.⁶⁴ Socratic philosophy, like Christianity

⁶³ Ibid., Lecture 17, p. 7-8.

⁶⁴ Smith, *Nietzsche, Heidegger*, 75, 76, 130. Smith writes, "In Socratic dialectic, the seeds of cosmopolitanism and egalitarianism were sown." Nietzsche opposed instinct to self-consciousness, which

after him, had shielded humanity from its true condition. Strauss opined in his lecture “The Problem of Socrates”: “In an age when the instincts had lost their ancient surety, and [were disintegrating], one needed a non-instinctual tyrant; this tyrant was reason.”⁶⁵

Strauss argued for the direct relevancy of Socratic studies for the philosophical problems of the twentieth-century West. Strauss tended to focus on philosophic problems while largely ignoring in his discussions social, economic, or even concrete political or historical forces. While concerned very much with politics, Strauss’ emphasis was always on the theoretical concerns underlying specific policy, “disentangling primary from the derivative”; his study of Socrates and ancient Greece is an example.⁶⁶

The scholar of antiquity is faced with the choice of three different accounts of the Socratic tradition, since Socrates himself did not write down any of his teachings: that of Xenophon the historian, Aristophanes the dramatist, or Plato the rhetorician. Strauss

would be obvious only to a post-Kantian, Smith argues in developing his thesis that Nietzsche’s thought contains thoroughly modern elements.

⁶⁵ Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 11, p 10; for quote, see Leo Strauss, “The Problem of Socrates,” April 17, 1970, LSP, Box 21, Folder 1, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library,” 2. Strauss delivered six lectures in 1958 at the University of Chicago, also entitled “The Problem of Socrates.” Five of these have been published in Thomas L. Pangle, ed., *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989). Pangle incorporated a few pages of the lecture of the same title (distinguishable by its subtitle), “The Problem of Socrates: Five Lectures” from the 1970 lecture referenced in this note in a different lecture in the same volume, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism.” Gregory Bruce Smith, in *Nietzsche, Heidegger*, argues that Nietzsche poses Socrates as the savior to the aristocrats whose instincts were in “anarchy” by posing another tyrant, reason, which would shield them from their true human condition, as the traditions and beliefs of their society eroded. The result of Socrates’ efforts was that instinct was seen as decay, and reason progress. Nietzsche believed Socrates short-circuited what would have otherwise been a natural decay and rebirth in Greek culture, and that Socrates saw at the end of his life that Reason was an illusion, but not before he had destroyed the instinctive basis for values in his society. Smith continues that for Nietzsche, Socrates’ legacy was his optimism in reason’s ability to describe and comprehend the whole. The sad result, for Nietzsche, was destruction of the basis of tragic, noble culture, 133. See also Christopher Bruell, “Strauss on Xenophon’s Socrates,” *Political Science Reviewer*, 14 (1984), 263-318.

⁶⁶ For quote, see Seth Benardete, “Leo Strauss’ ‘The City and Man,’” in *Political Science Reviewer*, 8 (1978),” 2. See also Brett Dutton, “Leo Strauss’s Recovery of the Political: The City and Man as a reply to Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political*” PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2006; and Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*. Translated by J. Harvey Lomax. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

relies on Xenophon's testimony of Socrates as the most historical, despite the scholarly criticism that Xenophon did not know Socrates well. Strauss bases his claim of Xenophon's reliability on the fact that Xenophon was a historian (though he wrote only a single work of real history, the *Hellenica*).⁶⁷ However, Strauss does not deign to exhaust the works of Plato and Aristophanes either, showing that once their relationship to the philosopher is understood, their accounts give us valuable additional information on Socrates. Plato's and Xenophon's Socrates differs from that of Aristophanes', in that his wisdom is portrayed as superior to the poets; hence the truth of the poets must be incorporated into the comprehensive truth of the philosopher, whereas the reverse is true of Aristophanes' account.⁶⁸

"The Problem of Socrates" is the title of a 1970 lecture at St. John's College that Strauss gave near the end of his life. Strauss attributed his title phrase to Nietzsche, who titled a section in the *Dawn of Idols* with the same. "Do we know what Socrates stood for? Have we understood him?" Strauss asks, referring to the need for a historical understanding. Then he states that Socrates has become a problem for the modern (including Nietzsche). Strauss recognized that such a statement was not self-evidently defensible; many of his audience thought Socrates was not a problem, but rather an irrelevancy. Thus Strauss begins his lecture with a defense of his topic's importance in the waning of the twentieth century.⁶⁹

67 Leo Strauss, "The Problem of Socrates: Five Lectures," in Pangle, *The Rebirth*, 126-132.

68 Leo Strauss, "Conclusion," in *Socrates and Aristophanes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 314. See also Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socrates* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), and Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse: An Interpretation of the Oeconomicus* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970).

69 Strauss, "The Problem of Socrates," 7.

Some of the questions that must have come to his audience's minds were "What is the problem of Socrates?" and "Do people have a problem with Socrates," or "Did Socrates address a problem with which we should be concerned?" Strauss leaves a gaping hole in this lecture; he never states what the problem of Socrates *is*. I turn to an earlier work for illumination on the problem and a treatment of it: Strauss had taken up the "Problem of Socrates" four years before, in 1966, in his monograph *Socrates and Aristophanes*.⁷⁰ In this work, he elucidates what that problem is, and it is two-fold. First, he questions why pre-Socratic philosophy was not preoccupied with the political. Socrates had been a natural philosopher before his turn to the political and the question of the perfect gentleman. The second question implicit in the "problem of Socrates" is this: Does the Modern (and Strauss' contemporaries) have a problem with Socrates, and what form does that problem take? Both Nietzsche and Heidegger stumbled at Socrates' lack of the historical sense and his seeming preoccupation with idealism, or rationalism and its universalizing tendencies.

The answer that Strauss formulates to the first inquiry is that pre-Socratic philosophy had turned political due to a crisis it had come up against in searching for ultimate causes; the absence in nature of an ultimate cause and the absence of a teleology had turned philosophy's focus to the city and man: by questioning the tenets of the city and its gods, philosophy had set limits to the city and risen above it; yet philosophy at the same time presupposed the existence of the city—and the city enabled the practice of philosophy. Opinions about the gods have a status, Strauss wrote, though this status differs in each culture, of the "frozen results of abortive reasonings which are declared to

70 Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 4.

be sacred. They are (to borrow from a Platonic simile) the ceilings of caves. The (caves, the) ceilings are (by convention) which is understood in contradistinction to [by nature].”⁷¹ The primary, or fundamental unanswerable questions of causes which philosophy came up against, or as Strauss worded it, the problem of “irreducible facticity—bumped up against the corollary “all-important question which is coeval with philosophy although the philosophers do not frequently pronounce it”—Strauss began his inquiry and would end his 1964 work *The City and Man* asking: *Quid sit deus*, or What would God be?⁷²

The answer to the second inquiry is the problem of the Historical sense; what has already been elaborated as Nietzsche’s seeing humanity through History, which the Ancients had not done. History had been applied by the Modern to religious texts (by Spinoza and also nineteenth century critical theory in biblical scholarship) and arbitrarily subsumed the authority of those texts under it. Reason was hoped to universalize human knowledge. Before the modern advent of History as a defining (and limiting) force, the

71 Strauss, “The Problem of Socrates,” 8; quote on p. 9. Seth Benardete, in “Leo Strauss’ ‘The City and Man,’” *Political Science Review*, 8 (1978), 3, recognizes that the difficulty of finding “effective causation” and teleology in nature “foreshadows the modern opposition between man and nature.” It “resides ultimately in the enigma of ‘two,’ for the two causes of ‘two are opposites—conjunction and disjunction...inasmuch as the desire for knowledge of the whole cannot be assumed to be necessarily consistent with the desire of the goodness or wholeness of the soul, philosophy is caught between the urgency of the human and the importance of its primary quest...Modernity lives and thinks in the element of negation and hence parasitically; the ancients proceeded by way of the double negative and hence were truly liberating.”

72 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 241; Benardete, *ibid*, 1-20. Benardete observes that this monograph displays signs of the changes in Strauss’ mature thought; while Strauss was still concerned with the same themes, Benardete sees a progression from Strauss’ beginning with the ancients, to making them his end. In *The City and Man*, Strauss goes from Aristotle, back to Plato, and then to Thucydides. If one looks at *Natural Right and History*, for instance, one sees a progression from the pre-Socratics to the moderns. For quote, see p. 2. *The City and Man* was published nine years before Strauss’ death. This monologue was about the “common sense” understanding of the city and political life. Benardete understands it this way: “The restoration of political philosophy demands the ‘deconstruction’ of the tradition of political philosophy,” returning to an understanding of the dualism of city and man that existed for the ancients. Modern political science did not account for the dualism; it was merely ideological; philosophy only could prevent ideology. For more, see Dana R. Villa, “The Philosopher versus the Citizen: Arendt, Strauss, and Socrates,” *Political Theory*, 26 (1998), 147-172.

Ancients had organized their cosmos into a dualism of the city (political) and man (individual). Furthermore, the Socratic discourse had been developed as a mode of discovering the universal in the particular.

Nietzsche's problem of Socrates was particular and this-worldly: He judged a philosopher, Strauss claimed, based on the social and political consequences of his thought. Strauss wrote, "Nietzsche himself has said that in order to understand a philosopher one acts soundly by first raising the question of the moral or political meaning of his metaphysical assertions."⁷³ Nietzsche's attack on Socrates, then, Strauss reasons, must be primarily a political attack. Nietzsche's concern was with the future of Germany and of Europe. He considered the contemporary West of socialism, universal enlightenment, democracy, liberalism, and utilitarianism the outgrowth of Socrates' rationalistic optimism. Whether the contemporary West was the only or necessary outcome of Socrates' thought is another question. Strauss here diverges from Nietzsche, claiming that in fact the modern West is not a reflection of ancient thought, because the Modern had asserted that reason (i.e. Science) could, by liberating humanity from prejudice through the discovery of universal truths, relieve the human condition. Modernity had not preserved the equally valid assertion of the poets. In the manuscript of his 1970 St. John's College lecture, Strauss elaborates the folly of the modern elevation of reason as the liberator from prejudice:

⁷³ Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 7. Regarding this assertion, Strauss references Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, nos. 6 and 211. I understand no connection between the thought of Leo Strauss and political neoconservatism, except by a serious misunderstanding or misreading of his work. Shadia B. Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*. 2d ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). For alternate accounts, see Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006); Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); and Jenny Strauss Clay, "The Real Leo Strauss," *New York Times*, June 7, 2003, A15.

Nietzsche's attack on Socrates is an attack on reason: reason, the celebrated liberator from all prejudices, proves itself [for Nietzsche] to be based on a prejudice, and the most dangerous of all prejudices: the prejudice stemming from decadence...reason, which waxes so easily and so highly indignant about the demanded sacrifice of the intellect, rests itself on the sacrifice of the intellect.— This criticism was made by a man [Nietzsche] who stood at the opposite pole of all obscurantism and fundamentalism.”⁷⁴

The sacrifice of intellect required by reason is the limitation of the human condition to History, to the physical realm, a priori, as an arbitrary decision. Strauss understood Nietzsche's attack as justified against modern rationalism, but not applicable to classical rationalism, which understood the limits of rationalism. In response to Socrates, Nietzsche elevates the poets and tries to unite them with philosophy, offering a hope for the future of philosophy that is not based on theory, but on decision—an act of the will. Strauss' position relative to Nietzsche is acknowledgement of Nietzsche's angst about the Western tradition, but an alternate formulation of a solution: the Great Tradition combines the highest veneration for both Socrates and the tragedy of Sophocles, i.e. it holds equally valid the essential unity (but inherent conflict) of science and art.⁷⁵

Socrates and Aristophanes

Strauss set about looking at Socrates and Aristophanes as examples of the interaction between philosophy and poetry. He turns to Aristophanes' *The Clouds* as the most important documentation of the ancient conflict between the poets and the philosophers. That conflict is based upon differing views of the nature of human

⁷⁴ Strauss, “Problem of Socrates,” 4.

⁷⁵ Strauss claims that Nietzsche's concern is not theoretical; he is concerned with the future of Germany and of Europe, and he launched an attack on Socrates that in his mind directly related to that concern with the present. Ibid, 5.

existence and the problems facing it. In this play, Aristophanes denigrated the young Socrates as the foremost sophist; however, Strauss has quite a different take on this matter. He looks to Plato's account of a conversation on comedy and tragedy between Socrates and Aristophanes recounted in the *Banquet* and shows that Aristophanes and Socrates were friendly and quite close on a personal level. This meeting occurs seven years after the first staging of *The Clouds*, Strauss reminds us, and from that conversation recorded by Plato, he infers that the explanation for the subject matter of *The Clouds* is an outgrowth of Aristophanes' envy of Socrates' wisdom and Socrates' freedom from appealing to the crowd for approval. The philosopher is ridiculous in the eyes of the multitude, and at odds with the polis.⁷⁶

Strauss saw esoteric writing as the means for a philosopher to protect himself from persecution by an unfriendly regime, as well as the means by which the philosopher could outwardly uphold the ideals of the city (or society) for the maintenance of order and continuance of civilization, which is essential for the continuation of the philosopher. Because philosophy questions all assertions, it undermines both the beliefs of the city and the very reason for authority. Philosophers, then have to "invent a rhetorical foundation for the city," as Stanley Rosen has put it. "Philosophy is the attempt to replace opinion by knowledge; but opinion is the element of the city, hence philosophy is subversive; hence

⁷⁶ Strauss defines "philosophy" in *The City and Man* as "the ascent from what is first for us to what is first by nature," 240. He left open-ended the question of divine revelation as a possible, but non-quantifiable, variable. Socrates was intransigent; it was Plato who introduced nuance, or the ability to outwardly support the city's established beliefs while secretly questioning them in an active search to replace the accepted opinions with the truth.

the philosopher must write in such a way that he will improve rather than subvert the city.”⁷⁷

Strauss uses this encounter to highlight the differing positions of the philosopher and poet in society; the philosopher serves the city by questioning the prevailing

⁷⁷ Esotericism was the ability of a great writer to imbed a secret message to readers who are educated to look for it in a text through semantic, linguistic, or other means, while the surface of the text may communicate something altogether different. The philosopher can print the “heterodox truth” if he is capable of “writing between the lines,” Strauss maintained. Strauss used the phrase “writing between the lines” metaphorically, for a literal explanation of the method of esoteric writing would be to expose a “terra incognita” that had yet to be fully researched. Strauss published “Persecution and the Art of Writing” in direct response to the repression of freedom of thought in Germany. Fears of government-sponsored censorship of intellectuals and concern over its effects for the good of the nation was not absent during the early twentieth century even among Americans. Leo Strauss, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” *Social Research*, 8 (1941). Reprinted in *Leo Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). For elaboration, see Eugene R. Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 79. Stanley Rosen, “Leo Strauss and the Quarrel Between the Ancients and the Moderns,” in *Leo Strauss’s Thought: Toward a Critical Engagement*, ed. Alan Udoff (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1991), 163. Leo Strauss and Jacob Klein, “A Giving of Accounts: Jacob Klein and Leo Strauss,” in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. by Kenneth Hart Green (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 463. Strauss wrote, “The highest duty of the scholar, [seeking] truthfulness or justice, [that] acknowledges no limits”...the philosopher’s thought—whose virtue “is a certain kind of mania”—dares all. However, because humanity requires a horizon in which to live, the philosopher would respect not just the prevailing religion, but moral and customary norms as well. Leo Strauss, “German Nihilism,” Edited by David Janssens and Daniel Tanguay, *Interpretation*, 26 (1999), 353-78, 363. Defining the boundaries of this horizon became a central project of the second half of the twentieth century. See Richard Rorty in “Science as Solidarity,” 38-52, in *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs*, ed. John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and Deidre N. McCloskey (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987); David A. Hollinger, “How Wide the Circle of the ‘We’? American Intellectuals and the Problem of the Ethnos Since World War II,” *The American Historical Review*, 98 (1993), 317-337; and Sandra Harding, “After the Neutrality Ideal: Science, Politics, and ‘Strong Objectivity,’” in *The Politics of Western Science, 1640-1990*, ed. Margaret C. Jacob (New York: Humanity Books, 2000): 81-101. Individual psychology colored much of Strauss’ work and seems to have been particularly prominent in the work of German refugee émigrés in general, who had a tendency to “convert biography into theory,” as Edith Kurzweil stated, due to the deep challenges posed to their thinking, identities, and professional status; referenced in Mitchell, Ash, “Migrations and Their Consequences,” in “America and the Emerging Europe,” *Partisan Review*, 62 (1995), 645. In this essay, Ash notes that it was a common practice in 1940s and 1950s America to diagnose societal problems using categories appropriated from individual psychology. Strauss, “A Giving of Accounts,” 463. Nietzsche stated the natural imperative for a horizon this way: “But even for the few, ‘what such a nature cannot master it knows how to forget’ because ‘every living thing can become healthy, strong and fruitful only within a horizon’.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, quoted in Smith, *Nietzsche, Heidegger*, 84,133. Smith writes, “Tradition requires belief, practice, a playful taking-part-in. It means a forgetting of oneself as one is enveloped in a larger community of meaning that honors and accepts the past, looks with joyful celebration on the present, and hopeful anticipation of the future.”

wisdom—the poet, by upholding it; the poet’s concern is to make men in the cities good and noble by portraying justice.⁷⁸

Strauss compares Nietzsche’s study of this encounter in *The Birth of Tragedy* and understands Nietzsche to imply that Aristophanes’ attack on Socrates would have been launched regardless of whether Socrates would have defended or derailed justice and piety, or upheld the belief in the gods. One concludes, Strauss says, that the problem the poet has with the philosopher is not that he questions the beliefs of the city, which the poet upholds (and arguably also helps create), but that his rationalistic optimism about universal truths is a sign of a degenerate culture—it is inherently opposed to the mode of the poets.⁷⁹ Aristophanes’ attack, Strauss claims, is not against Socrates himself, but against the philosopher in general; Aristophanes chose the best among philosophers to represent the entire school of philosophy.

In the *Banquet*, Socrates states that the gods *possess* wisdom; they do not *seek* wisdom, or philosophize. Nietzsche has said that the gods too philosophize.⁸⁰ In Nietzsche’s estimation, the gods were not perfect beings, but themselves becoming wise. They are not Being, but Becoming. If the gods had possessed wisdom, and men are

78 Why Strauss focuses upon comedy in his analysis of poetry rather than tragedy is the object of a separate discussion. Strauss sees Socrates’ rationalism as the embodiment of optimism, and thus more in line with comedy than tragedy. Benardete says this: “Plato completes Aristophanes presumably because comedy, though it soars higher than tragedy, is parasitic on tragedy, and philosophy altogether transcends their difference.” Benardete, “Leo Strauss’ *The City and Man*,” 7. See also John R. Wallach, “Smith, Strauss, and Platonic Liberalism,” *Political Theory*, 29 (2001), 424-429. Laurence Lampert makes the observation that Strauss took Aristophanes’ attack on Socrates, as a poet’s response to philosophy, seriously, and read both Plato’s and Xenophon’s accounts of Socrates as answers to Aristophanes’ account. Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 7, note 4; Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 5-6.

79 Ibid., 3-8.

80 See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, number 293. Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 12, p. 7.

seeking it, there is the implication that philosophy is seeking a truth somewhere in the metaphysical.⁸¹

Strauss examines ten other plays and shows that they support Aristophanes' belief that he was superior to Socrates for his ability to uphold justice in his plays, without stooping to see justice exactly as the city saw it, i.e. while recognizing its limitations. The falsehood of the comedy, which for Strauss presupposes tragedy, points to the truth which is coeval with humanity, and caused by both *physis* and *nomos*:

That harsh truth is indicated but also obfuscated by what human beings say about the gods...One could say that both tragedy and comedy present the transgressions of sacred laws...the poet knows the souls of men while the philosopher, concerned with things aloft, does not: Hence not the sophist-philosopher but the poet is able to raise and answer the question that Socrates never raises, let alone answers, as to the goodness of the gods. Socrates, one may say, is a leader of souls without being a knower of souls. If this is so, the truth discerned by the sophist-philosopher about the things aloft must be integrated into a whole that is the concern of the poet, despite the fact that that whole is a part of the all-comprehensive whole with which the philosopher is concerned."⁸²

Strauss was not willing to throw out Reason and make philosophy dependent upon human history as was Nietzsche. He recognized philosophy's limits, which the poet made clear in his access to the whole of humanity, which is larger than the universe, but contained within it. The poet displays the relationship of the individual to the gods, bypassing the middle entity, the city, with which political philosophy is concerned.⁸³

81 Laurence Berns questions whether Heidegger, in contrast with Strauss, missed the point of philosophy, the "fundamental objects of human concern" or the *pragmata*, because of his disregard of ethics. Strauss stated that it was dangerous to separate the state of being from beings themselves, as Heidegger had done. Heidegger stressed resoluteness (he understood action as an inherent aspect of resoluteness) as a substitute for virtue in the question of justice. Laurence Berns, "The Prescientific World and Historicism: Some Reflections on Strauss, Heidegger, and Husserl." In *Leo Strauss's Thought: Toward a Critical Engagement*, edited by Alan Udoff (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1991), quote on p. 170.

82 Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 313.

83 Strauss, "The Peace," in *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 158.

Strauss stated in 1957 that Greek philosophy was inseparable from Greek poetry because the “perfect book” represents the “perfect evidence of knowledge which is aspired to but not reached” in the search for knowledge, and thus acts as the “countercharm to the charm of despair” ensuing in the never-ending search for knowledge.⁸⁴

The problem of Socrates is the problem of “irreducible facticity” to which Strauss came when the essentials, or fundamentals, are seen in their true light as in no way accessible to man. This led Strauss to recognize the basic problem of the nature of existence are based upon the experience one attributes to Being, a question with which Martin Heidegger so famously engaged. For Strauss, one’s Being was defined in part in relation to the gods: “the greatest test of intellectual probity concerns one’s ideal, one’s God.”⁸⁵ Strauss articulated love, the spirit of finesse, and attachment, or engagement as the fundamental experience of humanity, whereas Nietzsche had posed the will to power (understood as self-overcoming) and Heidegger had posed angst and mortality. Strauss states it this way:

Desespoir presupposes *espoir*, and *espoir* presupposes love: is then not love rather than despair the fundamental phenomenon? Is therefore not that which man ultimately loves, God, the ultimate ground? These objections which Heidegger made to himself were fundamentally the same objections which Hegel had made to Kant. The relation of Heidegger to his own existentialism is the same as that of Hegel to Kant.⁸⁶

Strauss identified the thoroughly modern elevation of rationalism that both Nietzsche and Heidegger had both adopted and then strongly reacted against. Strauss studied the Ancient poets and philosophers, who had originated and recognized the limits to

⁸⁴ Strauss, “On the Interpretation of Genesis,” In *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 374.

⁸⁵ Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 7, p. 7.

⁸⁶ Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism,” in Pangle, *The Rebirth*, 39.

rationalism. He sought to revive, not just classical rationalism, but the classical poetic mode that questioned that rationalism. He showed that ancient philosophy, because it could not answer the final causes, turned toward the individual and the city, and political philosophy was born. This was an aid to the city in its questioning of established norms for the city, but its power lay in its separateness from the beliefs of the city; it remained the private preserve of the philosophers. Far from antiquarian in his tendencies, Strauss sought in the ancients a means to revive for his contemporaries the ancient uncertainty that in his estimation would address the needs he identified in his world of liberal democracy and the technological West.

CHAPTER THREE: THE HORIZON-FORMING PROJECT

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!...Whither is God?...I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns?...Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God?...What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto...What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?"

--Nietzsche, *The Madman* ⁸⁷

History and Nature: The Limits of Man's Will

The primary question for Strauss when approaching Nietzsche's thought was this: "Is that whole within which Nietzsche understands everything history, with its peculiar freedom, and creative acts; or is it nature?"⁸⁸ He concludes that history was Nietzsche's framework; Strauss directed his study against the foil of the question "Is it nature?" as the

⁸⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Madman," in *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), n. pag.

⁸⁸ Leo Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, class lecture transcript, Department of Political Science, The University of Chicago, Winter 1967, in possession of Dr. Doug Morgan, College of Urban and Public Affairs, Portland State University, Portland, OR, Lecture 3, p. 10.

alternative for his students precisely because nature was the siren that wooed his understanding of human existence. “Is there an alternative to nature and reason—and of course I don’t say a word about the will of God, because that is out for other reasons.”⁸⁹ Strauss leads his students to history, “a strictly immanent standard,” or said another way, a situational ethics. Strauss puts it this way: “If you see your situation properly and honestly, then it points you to something, to *a* way which is *now* the right way.”⁹⁰ In other words, there is a right in a given situation, which might be reversed in a different situation, but there is not an unchanging principle that is so inflexible to be ridiculous in changing historical settings, because each individual experiences different aspects of reality. It sounds almost as if Strauss is in agreement with this notion, but he qualifies it, stating that a wider horizon is needed due to limited perspectives of individuals.

Throughout his seminar on Nietzsche, Strauss opposed nature as an alternative to Nietzsche’s choice of history as the horizon within which to understand the human condition. However, one must also realize that Nietzsche envisioned history as a unique phenomenon on a line which faded into nature at both history’s ends continuing interminably; Nietzsche considered that it was late-modern man’s task to get back to a state of instinct and the following of impulse, or innocence; the world would again be ruled by chance and the unpredictable.⁹¹ Nature is, ultimately, the north star Strauss returned to again and again, though he understood it clearly to be his preference and not a discovered fact. Hobbes had defined nature as a negative standard against which to

⁸⁹ Ibid., Lecture 8, p. 2.

⁹⁰ Ibid., Lecture 8, p. 3

⁹¹ Gregory Bruce Smith, *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Transition to Postmodernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 150-154. Smith explains that Nature is itself a mask in Nietzsche’s cosmology—that it is an “Apollonian surface stretched over what is at best a mysterious, evanescent, malleable, and probably entropic core,” quote 152, note 23. See also John G. Gunnell, “Strauss before Straussianism: Reason, Revelation, and Nature” *The Review of Politics*, 53 (1991), 53-74.

measure civilization. While in exile in France and England between 1932 and 1937, Strauss had undertaken an extensive study of Hobbes, whom he deemed central to his understanding of the modern mind. Hobbes wrote at a crucial moment, Strauss believed, when science had not yet been established, but the old foundations of theology and classicism were being questioned.⁹² In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss described a primary law rooted in nature as understood by pre-moderns:

Traditional natural law is primarily and mainly an objective “rule and measure,” a binding order prior to, and independent of, the human will, while modern natural law is, or tends to be, primarily and mainly a series of “rights,” of subjective claims, originating in the human will.⁹³

Strauss’ series of Walgreen Lectures, later published in a monograph under the title *Natural Right and History*, were an exploration of the bases for the existence of a universal natural right common to all humanity. He states the following there:

Nothing that I have learned has shaken my inclination to prefer ‘natural right,’ especially in its classic form, to the reigning relativism, positivist or historicist. To avoid a common misunderstanding, I should add the remark that the appeal to a higher law, if that law is understood in terms of ‘our’ tradition as distinguished from ‘nature,’ is historicist in character, if not in intention. The case is obviously different if appeal is made to the divine law; still, the divine law is not the natural law, let alone natural right.⁹⁴

Nature was a void in Nietzsche’s estimation—yet a return to a natural state was foremost among Nietzsche’s visions for the future. Nietzsche held that the ideal of a good life as that according to nature held up until the seventeenth century was based on a

92 Eugene R. Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2006).

93 Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes, Its Basis and its Genesis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), vii-viii.

94 Leo Strauss, “Preface to the 7th Impression (1971),” *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1950). Strauss comments that Germans, defeated politically in World War II by the Allies, conquered in the world of thought by the infiltration of historicism into American social science.

certain set of values—the wrong values, according to Nietzsche—imparted to nature by the Stoics. Nature is actually a barren void, he wrote, whereas all philosophy appeals to nature with a certain prescribed value...all philosophy is a form of the will to power, as philosophers seek to imprint their ideal onto nature. Philosophy, to Nietzsche, is the most spiritual will to power. Nietzsche says those who reject metaphysics are not scientific; rejection of metaphysics is also an act of the will.

Strauss observes that Nietzsche, in speaking of ascribing ideals to nature, states that he is building on Kant, who asserted that it was the understanding that prescribed to nature its laws. Where nature is a void and there is no meaning inherent in reality except that which humanity attributes, traditional philosophy, which was supposed to observe, or discover the truth—knowledge which was directed toward itself independently of the will, as Strauss explained—is no longer relevant. In response to this predicament, Nietzsche remade the nature of philosophy. Strauss criticizes Nietzsche's assertion that there can exist a void of nature: "Is not Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power *itself* such an attempt to put a stamp on nature, and not a verity simply...Nietzsche speaks of non-metaphysical thinkers of his age, who reject metaphysics. But he says that this is again not simply scientific, but also a certain kind of will."⁹⁵

Nietzsche, like Strauss, was concerned with "the whole fact of man." He took the approach of the poet, rather than the scientist, in his philosophy—no longer was philosophy, as it had been earlier, concerned solely with the mind of man, or the soul, but humanity's whole. According to Strauss, Nietzsche maintained that historicism was the defining characteristic of human experience: "We can say [that for Nietzsche] man's

95 Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*., Lecture 4, p. 8

being a historical being, man's historicity is the salient point in the whole fact of man, the totality of man."⁹⁶ In other words, man's potential is found within and bound by history, i.e. the past is the limit of the will. It is not within humanity's power to change the past, no matter how hard one wills. This realization is the origin of Nietzsche's famous "eternal return," the abettor for the past's intransigence. It is important to note here that Nietzsche envisioned human history as a line that faded into nature on either end; humanity's consciousness of history seems to support history's temporary existence for him. It is significant to take into consideration that Nietzsche's focus here is narrowed in on his contemporary and future Europeans, whereas Strauss' formulation is directed toward humanity as a whole. Nietzsche does not, in this formulation, address humanity on either side of the line of History.⁹⁷ By self-conscious forgetting, Nietzsche's men of the future were to usher in again the natural state of humanity that was most conducive to life. In his use of history as the lens through which to see humanity, Nietzsche was thoroughly modern. History had been used as a replacement for the duality of the city and man that existed in the cosmos of the Ancients.⁹⁸

Strauss defined historicism in 1970 as "a view according to which all thought is based on absolute presuppositions which vary from epoch to epoch, from culture to

96 Ibid., Lecture 2, p. 1. Cf. Laurence Lampert's discussion of Nietzsche's protestations against historicism on two grounds: 1) It destroys the horizon necessary for life, i.e. it is a deadly truth; and 2) Historicism claims to be transhistorical, or the ultimate insight, and thus misunderstands life because it stands outside of life. Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 6-7. Strauss wrote that Nietzsche saw his generation's great virtue being the historical sense and intellectual probity. As attestation of this intellectual probity front and center in Nietzsche's mind, Strauss points out the scholar in *Zarathustra*, who out of desire to be a true expert, becomes an extreme specialist and studies only the brain of the leech.

97 Steven B. Smith writes, "The discovery of nature was only a necessary and not a sufficient condition for the possibility of political philosophy. It was only when Socrates applied the idea of nature to the study of the human and political world that political philosophy proper was born." Smith, "Leo Strauss: Between Athens and Jerusalem," *The Review of Politics*, 53 (1991), 80.

98 For elaboration, see Seth Benardete, "Leo Strauss' *The City and Man*," in *The Political Science Reviewer*, 8 (1978), 3.

culture, which are not questioned and cannot be questioned in the situation to which they belong and which they constitute.” Historicism posed a problem philosophically for Strauss for two reasons. First, it was not self-evidently true, but a mere arbitrary choice; it called into question prior notions of philosophy (understood as the path to discovery of universal truths that transcended historical epochs)—something that seemed to Strauss an essential element in a rational defense of an ethical norm. Second, as applied to the Orthodox Jewish tradition in which he was raised, historicism conflicted with revelation’s claim to originate outside of human history.⁹⁹ Historicism dealt a death blow not just to revelation or philosophy, but to the universality of modern science as well, showing it to be merely the emanation of one culture at one time.¹⁰⁰

The appropriation of History as the vehicle of realizing a national mythic or spiritual goal was a common preoccupation of German historians, and the latter half of the nineteenth century was no exception. The concomitant disillusion over the failure of history to usher in an expected age in which cultural transformation would resurrect German solidarity and spiritual/mythical meaning for the nation in an age of the societal “disintegration” of emancipation and technological progress was similarly profound on the face of German thought: “the intellectual conversations of the second half of the

99 Strauss reasons that “the falsity of a judgment is no objection to it, for its very falsity may be a condition of life. But...in order to see the falsity of the logical fictions, Nietzsche must know reality as it is; and in the light of it he can see that these things are fiction. But this knowledge, the knowledte [sic] of the truth, as distinguished from the fictions, must be inimical to human life, since life needs the fictions. It renders questionable the conditions of life...But on the other hand, it makes life more risky—dangerous perhaps [sic]—more exposed, more dangerous, free, hence higher than it ever was.” Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 4, p. 7; Lecture 11, p. 9. See also Nasser Behnegar, “Leo Strauss’ Critique of Historicism” PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 1993. For the relationship between Strauss and Heidegger, see James F. Ward, “Political Philosophy and History: The Links between Strauss & Heidegger.” *Polity*, 20 (1987), 273-295.

100 This is in line with Nietzsche’s claim that physics, like metaphysics, is only an interpretation, and radically subjective. Science, he claimed, rests on metaphysical assertions, whether it is aware of and acknowledges this or not. Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 4, p. 9.

nineteenth century are, accordingly, seen as attempts to come to terms with the growing recognition that historical experience could not sustain a belief in historical redemption.”¹⁰¹ Not only was the rational unfolding of history questioned, but hopes in history (cultural or political “progress” and processes) as the vehicle for ushering in any redemption of the human condition were abandoned. Anson Rabinbach has shown how some German intellectuals at the turn of the century fused the anticipation of spiritual redemption with earthly historical processes in Hegelian fashion, in an expectation of apocalyptic experience that would relieve the human condition of the angst modernity experienced. The stance was exacerbated by the problem of the death of the old gods who had made the idea of historical transcendence possible. In the post-war years, Meinecke’s work continued to support the German idealistic tradition, accepting Ranke’s historicist base of the historical and concrete contingency of all value, though having become disillusioned with the state as the vehicle for social enlightenment. Otto Hintze, on the other hand, was published only posthumously and had influence after the second World War. At the same time Meinecke was writing, Hintze had criticized German historicism, and broke with the contemporary tendency to link metaphysical values to institutions. He tried to remove the individuality of the state and institutions that had existed in the German mind, and replace it with the concept of a co-op of individuals. He

101 Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). For quote, see John E. Toews, Review of J.W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason*, in *The Journal of Modern History*, 74 (Dec. 2002), 824. Burrow’s argument centers around the “disillusionment of the intellectuals,” surrounding the revolutionary periods, specifically 1848, many of whom experienced it as a “feeling that we had staged a play about the French Revolution rather than that we were continuing it,” in Alexis de Tocqueville’s words. Burrow, 14. German historical scholarship was closely tied to political aims, and the failure of the German Revolution of 1848-49 was particularly painful for German historians of the nationalist bent. They saw Bismarck’s unification as the fulfillment of prior expectations. See Georg G. Iggers, “The Decline of the Classical National Tradition of German Historiography,” in *History and Theory*, 6 (1967), 384.

demythologized the state as only an “abstraction derived from perception,” about which there was nothing holy or revered. With this admission, he effectively stripped away the unbridled power that had been misused in imperialistic Germany.¹⁰²

In his later description of the philosophical climate of the interwar Weimar Republic, Strauss presented Max Weber and Oswald Spengler as icons of the age. From a survey of Strauss’ writings, it is clear that he was not preoccupied with the leading scholarly work; his focus was on those publications that touched the popular imagination. In addition to his lengthy treatment of Spengler in 1940, Strauss mentions him again in a class lecture entitled *Historicism and Modern Relativism* in January 1956, and in a series of lectures delivered at the University of Virginia in 1962. Strauss seems to allude to Spengler’s “Faustian culture” again in a lecture entitled “German Nihilism,” presented on February 26, 1941, before the Graduate Faculty at the New School. There is another reference in 1967 in his *Seminar on Nietzsche*, showing Spengler’s dependence upon Nietzsche. Spengler takes Nietzsche’s last man for granted and sees Nietzsche as a hopeless romantic trying to oppose the inevitable.¹⁰³ Strauss found Spengler’s work

102 In his 2002 review of J.W. Burrow’s *The Crisis of Reason*, John Toews highlights the avant-garde’s indecision between their two apparent choices of surrender to artificially-constructed order, and irrational momentary experience, which he claims Burrow believes is a dichotomous choice we today have not been able to transcend: “The incarnate divinity of objectively meaningful experience, based on a secure metaphysical ground and articulated in an overarching narrative coherence for individual identities, remains beyond our grasp,” Toews, Review of Carl E. Schorske, *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism. Central European History*, vol. 34 no. 1 (2001), 109-112; For treatment of Otto Hintze, see Iggers, “The Decline of the Classical,” 387-389. See also David N. Myers, “Anti-Historicism and the Theological-Political Predicament in Weimar Germany: The Case of Leo Strauss,” in *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

103 Leo Strauss, *Historicism and Modern Relativism*, transcript of class lectures, Department of Political Science, University of Chicago, 1967, Lecture 1, p. 2, LSP, Box 11, folder 10, Special Collections, University of Chicago Library. Lectures delivered at the University of Virginia in 1962 were later published in monograph form as Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964). Leo Strauss, “German Nihilism,” ed. by David Janssens and Daniel Tanguay, *Interpretation*, 26 (1999), 364; Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 1, p. 12; Lecture 17, p. 16.

significant as much for its main thesis as for its inherent presuppositions. His examination of the bases of a mode of thought became a method of inquiry that would become characteristic of Strauss' entire corpus of work.

Oswald Spengler, in Strauss' estimation, asserted that Enlightenment progress had sought to establish a new tradition that would settle the "basic questions" that would eventually become prejudices to be taught to succeeding generations who would then learn from and build on them:

Accordingly, the process of intellectual development during the modern centuries consists in this, that each generation *reacts* to the preceding generation and to the preceding generation *only*, without raising the question whether the whole basis on which the discussion takes place—that basis discovered by the founding fathers—is valid...i.e...Locke refutes Descartes, Berkeley refutes Locke, Hume refutes Berkeley, Kant refutes Hume, Hegel refutes Kant, etc.¹⁰⁴

Strauss thought that Spengler's analysis of the decline of the West, while on a surface level partially accurate, was fundamentally misguided because of its "philosophical deficiency," which included envisioning philosophical truths "relative to human existence," as Martin Heidegger would later do. Basically, Strauss asserted that Spengler had built his thesis on an unexamined base of historicism, as had so many of his contemporaries. Strauss believed a radicalized historicism had no room for transhistorical values, i.e. the ability of accommodating an ethics.¹⁰⁵ Because radicalized historicism envisioned thought as an outgrowth of a historical place and time, i.e. made it captive to history, humanity had no basis to value the ethos of one particular society above another,

104 Leo Strauss, "The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy," in *Leo Strauss and the Theological-political Problem*, ed. Heinrich Meier. Trans. Marcus Brainard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 124.

105 Proponents of historicism have argued that it is the most ethical position because it regards all historical eras as equally distant from the gods, without claiming an absolute moment of history in Hegelian fashion.

including the anti-Semitism rampant in Weimar Germany. The problem of historicism would form a central preoccupation for Strauss for the rest of his life.

Whereas Nietzsche identified the modern orientation as one inimical to a “natural” state, he found the idea of nature, and Nature aligned again with the idea of the good life, problematic (he framed the word in quotation marks). In modern centuries, a natural right doctrine (Strauss points to Hobbes as an example) based on nature as a negative standard emerged, and therefore the moral law was no longer natural law, or a standard derived from nature, rather than from the caves, which were the opinions. Nietzsche’s Nature was indifferent--all that existed was natural. Anything thought to be innate is actually acquired, so there is no human nature either. By this he means that men have always humanized nature, but before thought they saw it as it was; now, we know that we impute meaning to it. Nature seems to favor mediocrity, or the herd, which, Strauss concludes, may be the reason Nietzsche had such a problem with it. Strauss saw Nietzsche preparing *the* change from chance to the rule of human will. Does not *the* change require *the* true values? Strauss asked.¹⁰⁶ Nietzsche’s superman brings about the rule of man and the end of the rule of chance—very consciously. There is no word for “nature” in Hebrew; there is an imported Syrian word, but the original Hebrew of the prophets had no word. Nature was not a separable category from experience. Nature, like religion, was not a category—a foil against which, or in relation to which one posed, but a seamless part of life.¹⁰⁷

Nature is Strauss’ keystone. It is his point of departure from Nietzsche: Man’s creativity, he reasons, presupposes nature, because our creativity was not created by us;

106 Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 8, p. 13; Lecture 9, p. 6.

107 Ibid., Lecture 15, p 7.

however, Nietzsche understands nature as something that is willed: “Is it so, that Nietzsche *needs* nature and yet cannot recognize it *as* nature?”¹⁰⁸ Zarathustra emerges from his cave into the light of the sun—or truth—which apparently does exist as a given in Nietzsche’s cosmos, Strauss concludes. Whether this is Zarathustra’s private sun—an individual truth valuation—is an open question that will not be resolved because Nietzsche did not write his main work; *Zarathustra* is only the introduction to that unwritten work. In *Zarathustra*, according to Strauss, Nietzsche looked to move beyond individual good and evil, replacing all *Oughts* with individual will. There is not *the* way; only *the* way for each individual. Simultaneously, Nietzsche seeks to create/identify a universal goal, which religion and science had promised but failed to provide.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps,

108 Ibid., Lecture 3, p. 8.

109 Ibid., Lecture 5, p. 8. Strauss explains that Nietzsche, in using aphorisms, could show insights as they occurred rather than trying to write the all-comprehensive view of the whole that the philosopher wrote. *Zarathustra* presupposes, Strauss says, the overcoming of both the spirit of heaviness (the individual tables of the nations) and the spirit of revenge (the revolutionary’s impetus for justice against those in power). Strauss, *ibid.*, Lecture 4, p. 8-9. Gregory Bruce Smith argues that one of the postmodern elements in Nietzsche’s thought is his effort to liberate philosophy from dictating to and transforming praxis by liberating philosophers from the Spirit of Revenge, birthed by dissatisfaction with the past. Nietzsche’s use of the modern notions of self-conscious willing of forgetfulness helped pave the way for an understanding that what was broadly recognized as knowledge was in fact interpretation—the same thing Thomas Kuhn had effected in regard to scientific truths in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970). Smith, *Nietzsche, Heidegger* 99, 100. See also Gregory Bruce Smith, “Who Was Leo Strauss?” *The American Scholar*, 66 (Winter 1997), 95-104. Nietzsche supposedly *discovered*—Strauss notes the use of “discovered” connoting a pre-existing truth—that nothing has value in itself, by nature. All values have been created by human will. According to Nietzsche, this is the will to power—men trying to overcome themselves. The values have been put on a higher plane so that people would reach higher, and in the past people believed the values were there by nature. The decisive change in this, according to Strauss, came with Kant. Kant asserted that humanity could not follow nature as a standard of good; he is only a slave of nature in that case, and should be free; morality originates in the individual, if people are to be free. Kant wrote reason was that which legislates, and if all are reasonable, all should come to the same conclusions. Nietzsche, however, saw no guidance in nature or reason; each person must overcome his or her self. Nietzsche claimed all moralities owe their being to acts of human will; because Nietzsche had “discovered” this, Strauss observes, he could establish the final value system, and identify one goal of humankind, and therefore end the rule of chance. Strauss retorts that the insight into the will to power presupposes a specific heritage, namely, the post-Christian West. For all his rejection of a metaphysics, Nietzsche still has a metaphysics, Strauss contends. Strauss points to Nietzsche’s use of the word “found” in the phrase, “‘where I found the living, there I found will to power,’” as evidence of this. Nietzsche treats it as a discovery rather than invention, and therefore, Strauss reasons, has elapsed back into the very thought modes he supposedly destroyed. *Ibid.*, Lecture 4, p.4

then, to be consistent, the truth that all truths are human valuations is the sun into which Zarathustra comes. Strauss stops short of this conclusion, however.

The “truth” of historicism is that all epochs form the limits of particular thoughts. Yet, Strauss claims, the very fact that this truth transcends and is applied to history presupposes history’s finitude. Additionally, it is as theoretical as other philosophical assertions are. This leads to utter homelessness, Strauss says, as Nietzsche understood: it is a paralyzing, deadly truth, because when it is self-created, there is no basis for belief or measure in it except for the power of the will:

But still we live, we think, we articulate things. How do we do it? We don’t have the power to have another absolute presupposition, and therefore we live on the heritage of the past by having such a hodge-podge...does not every explanation of the change of categories, or world-views, however you call it, presuppose specific categories, specific absolute presuppositions, which are as little simply true as those underlying earlier philosophies? In other words, is it not perhaps so that the change of categories cannot be truly explained, but is the ultimate at which we arrive? If I’m not mistaken, that is the key difference, or implies, includes, the key difference between Nietzsche and Heidegger.¹¹⁰

To deal with Nietzsche’s inconsistency of needing, but not acknowledging nature, Strauss turns from his examination of *Zarathustra* with the class to an examination of *Beyond Good and Evil* (a commentary on *Zarathustra*) and *Genealogy of Morals*, a critique of contemporary traditional thought that, Strauss states, was not positive or constructive, but rather animated by the very spirit of revenge which Nietzsche described as belonging to his generation.¹¹¹

Nietzsche asserts that neither nature, nor human nature as a part of that nature, is a static entity; man is evolving, and thus the bounds of history pose the upper limits to

110 Ibid., Lecture 5, p. 5-7.

111 Ibid., Lecture 3, p. 1.

man's potential. The realization of the ideal society formulated by political philosophy was limited to human frailty and the limit posed by the past. This is the key to Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power. It was through self-overcoming that individuals transcended their past for the future—the "ape and worm" that was a part of man, by sheer strength of will. Nietzsche did not see an inevitable path in history, but rather an open question of whether man could transcend the worm in his past and get to the superior man, or super man (*Übermensch*, or overman). Nietzsche maintained that he differed from all earlier philosophers due to his awareness of History. It is on this basis that Nietzsche discounted the usefulness of much of the philosophy of classical Greece.

Nietzsche's project was redemption from fragmentariness that comes from revenge—the feeling of revenge birthed by the desire to change an unchangeable past, which is the "absolute limit of the will"—the "will's ill will against time and its 'it was,'" which is the essence of tragedy (in the Greek conception, the dramatic hero's "tragic flaw" is his incorrigible insistence on a course that runs against history, fate, present possibility, and the will of the gods).¹¹² The spirit of revenge had previously caused humanity to seek the eternal—the unchangeable—for this redemption, but Nietzsche looks to the ushering in of the willing of that past that is unchangeable—the willing of the "is," or the past returning eternally (the doctrine of eternal return).¹¹³ Strauss did not discount the *possibility* of a metaphysical—he pointed out that Nietzsche's surmise was

¹¹² See, for example, Aeschylus and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.

¹¹³ Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 3, pp 7-8. Traditional philosophy saw the soul as immutable; Nietzsche holds that the soul had a long genesis, and is changeable. In the *Zarathustra*, the desire for the eternal stems from the spirit of revenge; Zarathustra admonishes listeners to be radically earthly and to remain loyal to the earth. All philosophers prior to Nietzsche were searching for the eternal. For example, the Platonic idea was the pure mind understanding the eternal ideas. Strauss says this is incompatible with a doctrine like the will to power, and it is Nietzsche's great failure that he is concerned with metaphysical doctrines given his premise, Strauss opines. Ibid., Lecture 17, p 13.

an opinion, and as all such opinions, open to question. Therefore, he did not feel the urgent need to address the doctrine of eternal return.

Strauss framed the problem for Nietzsche as a choice between restoring Plato's noble lie, i.e. leaving the effects of historicism understood as a transhistorical truth the preserve of a small group of philosophers, or else denying the possibility of theory and making philosophy dependent upon life, as Martin Heidegger had done. Strauss saw human nature as a fixed entity whose interpretation changed, and rather sought to change minds and the way in which problems were framed.

Strauss departed from Nietzsche by seriously questioning historicism on its own definition of universality: He reasoned that if all thought is a function of its time, and historicism claims to be a universal truth, it is by its own definition a product of its time, and thus its truth is limited, unless the age that birthed it can claim to be the absolute moment in history, birthing the absolute insight, in Hegelian fashion. However, claiming such for one's own time is to put an end to history. Strauss concluded that historicism was merely the emanation of a democracy no longer certain of itself—historicism was not self-evidently a timeless truth that was discovered; it is rather one interpretation, no more valid than another. The question for the future, then, became what to put in its place.

The German historical tradition arose out of a conservative reaction to the French Revolution, Napoleon's domination of Germany, and the West European Enlightenment's practice of making generalizations about the past and then measuring their own scientific progress against that past. In the German Romantic preference for particularism, the Historical school reacted to history as it was told, trying to

accommodate for the individual in history, and to see an age in light of itself rather than in light of a subsequent one. It did not claim to be scientific or to use the methods of science; the German conception of a discipline recognized philosophic inquiry as valid a source for knowledge as science.¹¹⁴ Revolutionaries had claimed rights based on a universal human principle. Conservatives, in turn, sought to ground rights in citizenship in particular countries, which countries are the products of historical acts. This led to assertions of rights based on citizenship within a particular nation rather than a universal standard of “humanity.” In reaction to the universality promised by Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and later by modern science, Strauss opined, “philosophers began to prefer the particular (the local and temporal) to any universal instead of merely accepting the particular...[e.g.] they replaced the rights of man by the rights of Englishmen.”¹¹⁵ The rejection of the natural law doctrine and the consequent dismissal of universally valid norms discouraged generalizations in historical writing that violated living reality. The German state was considered an individual, with its own rights to develop full potential, interpreted as the national political expansion on the international stage. German historians believed God’s will was manifested through history.

It is not difficult to see the paranoia surrounding this intellectual change when one considers *fin-de-siecle* Germany, which for Strauss was a lived reality. If rights of humanity originated in the state, it became necessary to define who belonged to the state.

114 Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), 97-100, 103; Iggers, “The Decline of the Classical,” 383. David N. Myers calls the nineteenth century the “golden age of historicism.” Jewish discontent over historicism in the last decades of the nineteenth century and beginnings of the twentieth was widespread among intellectuals. David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 3.

115 Leo Strauss, “The Problem of Socrates,” Leo Strauss Papers, Box 21, Folder 1, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, 10.

This became a legitimate scholarly pursuit in the nineteenth century.¹¹⁶ History and science became the bases for determining citizenship of a particular realm. Germany's situation was particularly tenuous because in the popular mind, Germany was a spiritual and cultural entity as much or more than it was a political entity. Christianity was a historical reality for the German culture—the Lutheran Bible had normalized the German dialect—Jews, then, could not be assimilated into a Christian state without shedding their Jewishness, i.e. becoming non-Jews. Given the historical premise, one could not find a ground for rights for the Jewish individual—or any non-German culture within the German nation, without stepping outside of rationality, for all rational thought paths based on the historical ground of human rights and the definition of Germany as a *Kulturstaat* would show that the Jew was not by definition a German, civic realities aside. The Jew may live within the political realm, but did not belong to the German culture and thus had no real rights protected by the state, defined as it was culturally. The problem came because the premise was not questioned among the loudest and most powerful voices; the scholarship conducted on the basis of the German-grounded rights premise (rather than rights sourced in nature) flourished along every branch imaginable. Strauss' contemporary Carl Mayer wrote an article in which he explained the advent of National Socialism as an intersection of German Idealism, Romanticism, Christianity (Lutheranism), and Hegelianism.¹¹⁷ Germans looked to politics (in the progression of

116 See Max Weinreich, *Hitler's Professors: The Part of Scholarship in Germany's Crimes against the Jewish People*, 2d ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); and Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

117 Carl Mayer, "On the Origins of National Socialism," *Social Research*, 9 (1942), 225-247. For the reference to Hegelianism, compare Smith's discussion in *Nietzsche, Heidegger*, 108. Hegel had seen totalitarianism and uniformity as the probable outcome of modernity, and in response had tried to preserve particularism by advocating the ownership of property, preservation of classes, and the family to mediate

History) to solve the culturally-grounded problem; an apocalyptic nature was infused into the idea of the nation, idealized as Anonymous poet and creator. Jews looked to Zionism as the answer to this problem, of which Strauss was an advocate in his youth. He later came to see the futility of a political solution to a philosophical problem and saw sole political Zionism as detrimental to the Jewish identity.¹¹⁸

“Historicism” is an oft-used word with many connotations; in addition to Strauss’ definition, it is helpful to view some of our contemporary historians who have undertaken a historical study of history. Carl Schorske in his book of essays on this topic identifies a shift in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries from centering meaning of the world in a vortex of religion, philosophy, or art, to history. The emergence for the first identifiable time in human history of History as such as a primary point of reference was marked, Schorske claims, by both a distancing from the past, and a reconstruction of that past as a foreign culture from which the present had emerged. History became a key operative in the making of meaning for a world grappling with urbanity, the city, and modernity’s challenges.¹¹⁹

Historical methodologies (and the development of History as a *Wissenschaft*) were formed in Germany in the late eighteenth century. While in its early stages, it consisted of regional histories, Stefan Berger has shown that in the second half of nineteenth-century Germany, the nation and historicism were the standard referents for

between the state and individual. Hegel’s substitute for the moral life of the ancient Greek polis, Smith argues, was the legitimization of legalism as the embodiment of reason—not particular convention—and bureaucracy as the mode for impartiality and universality rather than atomistic self-interested right, substituted for the eastern concept of freedom and responsibility in community.

118 See John Breuilly, “The National Idea in Modern German History,” in *German History Since 1800*, ed. Mary Fulbrook (New York: Arnold, 1997), 556-584; and Karen Friedrich, “Cultural and Intellectual Trends,” *ibid.*, 88-105.

119 Carl E. Schorske, *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

historical narratives. By historicism (*Historismus*), he denotes the understanding of a phenomenon under study primarily in reference to its historical development (in the manner of Leopold von Ranke) as opposed to teleological history (*Historizismus*). The historicism of Ranke became the embodiment of the historical mode. He espoused a value-free stance in historical understanding; this helped establish the national component of German historical inquiry.¹²⁰ During the German interwar years, there arose a particular sway amongst German historians in general in authoritarian government, military prowess, and an effective bureaucracy, which was the non-interested arm of the state, serving the needs of the nation as a whole. Only among the younger generation of historians were there Republicans such as Hans Rosenberg who questioned the national lens used to view the history of Germany.

Strauss did not critique historicism of the mode of Ranke as applied to the understanding of historical periods; he opposed the (non self-evident) deduction that there existed no universal norms to humanity outside of an epoch. This meant, by implication, that humanity itself did not mean the same in all historical periods. Strauss could not swallow the implication that the present norms seemed always justified. Where Strauss differed from Ranke was his insistence that the historical periods and “facts” did not exist independently of each other. Yet it is important to note that Strauss did not espouse history in the Hegelian mode of seeing overarching historical norms, and interpreting specific events in their light.

Strauss was not alone in his critique of historicism, nor was this a phenomenon of the European continent alone. This doubt could be called a hallmark of pre- and post-

¹²⁰ Stefan Berger, “The German Tradition of Historiography, 1800-1995,” in Fullbrook, *German History Since 1800*, 478.

World War I thought. After 1890, many German intellectuals, including Wilhelm Dilthey, Heinrich Rickert, Ernst Troeltsch, and Max Weber questioned some of the theoretical assumptions of historicism, particularly the ethical relativism inherent in the position, though by and large they accepted the historically-conditioned aspect of all values.¹²¹ The Great War, for the German people—academics included—was a war imagined to be in defense of German culture, and German historicism aided in the dissolution of ethical relativism and the nationalistic elements of German thought. David N. Meyers has described what he termed the “blow to epistemological confidence” Germany sustained as a result of the war, which changed the intellectual landscape. There occurred a widespread questioning of historicism and its implications, and a revival of theology, among whom were Theodor Lessing and Oswald Spengler. Ernst Troeltsch in *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, published in 1922, and Karl Heussi in *Die Krisis des Historismus*, published in 1932, questioned the historical mode.¹²² However, Iggers has shown that most German historians—even those who accepted the post-war Republic—maintained their historicist and nationalist views and were not eager to cast off their reaffirmation of Bismarck and his solution.¹²³

Strauss critiques Nietzsche’s assertion that there is no unchangeable essence of man as a mere assertion, as easily adopted as thrown out. Rationalism then is a game of logic built on shared—but arbitrarily-chosen—premises: “The assumption that we should act rationally and therefore turn to science for reliable information—this assumption is

121 Iggers, “The Decline of the Classical,” 384.

122 Georg G. Iggers, “The Dissolution of German Historicism,” in Richard Herr and Harold T. Parker, eds. *Ideas in History: Essays Presented to Louis Gottschalk by His Former Students* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1965), 296; Myers, *Resisting History*, 3.

123 Iggers, “The Decline of the Classical,” 386.

wholly outside of the purview and interest of science proper. The flight from scientific reason is the consequence of the flight of science from reason.”¹²⁴ Strauss understood science as actually dependent on a pre-scientific understanding, i.e. it presupposes a view of the whole:

However severe the scientist may object to the intrusion of any belief, as distinguished from hypothesis, into his science, his very basis is a belief....science is unable to give an account of itself...God forbid—I am speaking from the point of view of these people—there would be a demonstrable value, if you could prove the goodness of science. So that cannot possibly be tolerated, therefore the goodness of science is presupposed by science and science cannot answer the question why it is good.¹²⁵

Strauss insisted that science is “secondary” and “derivative”—the moment we allow it to describe or dictate the nature of the whole, we have bankrupted humanity.¹²⁶ Social science could use science as a tool subordinate to the aims of social science, but Strauss

124 Leo Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism,” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 33. Alan Bloom comments that Strauss recognized Nietzsche’s critique of reason was only valid for *modern* rationalism. There was not a straight line extending from the ancients to contemporary humanity. Alan Bloom, “Leo Strauss: September 20, 1899-October 18, 1973,” *Political Theory*, 2 (1974), 372-392. Compare to Nietzsche’s portrayal of Socrates confronting the limits of knowledge in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Paul Bishop and R.H. Stephenson trace this parallel to Goethe’s *Faust*. See Paul Bishop and R.H. Stephenson, *Friedrich Nietzsche and Weimar Classicism* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005).

125 Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 16, p 14.

126 Note that the use of the “whole” in Strauss’ works is nowhere, in my reading, found to be directly correlated with the particular doctrine of “holism” that arose in German culture in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Holism arose in direct response to the phenomenon described by Max Weber as “disenchantment”—*Entzauberung*—a phenomenon undermining transcendent and spiritual values in German culture by modern *Wissenschaft*. Holism was an attempt to re-enchant the value-free, meaningless modern technological society with human meaning—“Wholeness,” or *Ganzheit*—instead of the mechanistic alternative. See the work of Anne Harrington, *Reenchanted Science. Holism in German Culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler* (Princeton: U.P., 1996). This is not to deny that Strauss may have been influenced by holism, that its influence in intellectual circumstances did not impact his thinking, or that certain tendencies in German culture and thought may be at the root of both Strauss’ thought and the doctrines of holism. However, it is important to note the distinct difference between Strauss’ project and that of holism. Holism was reactionary—it accepted its adversary’s premise and took on the burden of proof itself. Strauss did not accept natural science’s renovation of the transcendent landscape as a self-evident given, to be accepted without question. Rather than accepting the Nietzschean premise that the world holds no meaning and it means only as we impute meaning to it, Strauss looked at the “truth” of the disenchanted nature of modern “reality” and stood it on its head; he asserted—and recognized it is an unproved assertion—that it is the modern who is disillusioned, not the ancients. To distinguish Strauss from holism, I follow Strauss’ own usage of “wholeness” here.

maintained that social science should never be the directional impetus for the study of society. Strauss believed the comprehensive, or pre-theoretical understanding of politics was available to the modern in classical writings such as Aristotle's *Politics*. Strauss showed that return to the classics made clear the fact that science is unable to justify its ends; it is merely a tool put into the service of the ends which the mass desire in a liberal democracy. Progress in science is defined by increasing specification, which equals a corresponding decrease in the ability of science to speak to the whole of human need. Human excellence is no longer regarded as the perfection of nature.¹²⁷

History is crucial because it is where time and being collide, and in time's wake change ceases and is no longer capable of change. While history affects the future, the past cannot be manipulated, except in the mind and humanity's valuation. Strauss comes squarely down on the assertion of the pre-existence of some matter that creates a structure, whose meaning is malleable by humanity's situation:

Even those things which do not change, change their meaning, and that is of crucial importance. For man is a part of the whole; and how any part is understood depends on how the whole is understood...the interpretation

127 Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 11-12. Gregory Bruce Smith effectively shows that Strauss was not advocating a simple return to the ancients, by showing the post-Hegelian elements in his thought. See Gregory Bruce Smith, "The Post-modern Leo Strauss?" *History of European Ideas*, 19 (1994), 191. Yet a return for contemporary humanity to a previous position, such as classical political philosophy, is believed to be impossible, Strauss observed, because of a dogmatic assumption that is "the belief in progress or in the rationality of the historical process." Leo Strauss, "Social Science and Humanism," in Pangle, ed., *The Rebirth*, 3-8. Robert Proctor has taken up the facts-values debate in his book *Value-Free Science? Purity and Power in Modern Knowledge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). Propounding the views of proponents of value freedom like Werner Sombart, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber, Proctor advocates a historical approach to the debate, as he notes the problems in the tendency of attaching concrete meanings in particular historical periods and social or political contexts to abstract theoretical discussions. This is apropos to Strauss as an illustration of his point; different historical periods, Strauss argued, have had more or less clarity on what he would term the "natural"—or fundamental—position of humanity, and the idea of any objective value-free stance is a particularly modern—and artificial—emanation not held by the ancients. Max Weber added a useful nuance to his value-free position by qualifying it with the allowance of differing cultural significations attached to and determining traits selected by an individual in the formulation of an ideal. See Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1949).

presupposes some meter...which is in no way created by man...its meaning depends on the forms which are stamped on it, and these forms change from epoch to epoch.¹²⁸

Our debt to Nietzsche, Strauss said, is that he made “Why science” the question; he asks what science’s relation to life is. Strauss asked whether science is a modification to our natural awareness, or its perfection, and concluded the former. Strauss reframes this “problem” in another way in “Existentialism,” stating “The meaningful genesis of science out of pre-scientific understanding is a problem.” What does Strauss mean by this? Consistent with Edmund Husserl’s critique of neo-Kantianism, he sees science as a derivative of experience, but not necessarily the most evident.¹²⁹

Nietzsche claimed that traditionally what was called Nature was not permissiveness, but tyranny against the self; convention, which was not considered a useful object of focus by earlier philosophy, became the most important thing for Nietzsche precisely because in his reaction against the suppositions of modernity, he placed a higher premium on life over theory, and art was his way back to that life.¹³⁰

In the section of *Zarathustra* entitled “The Leech” Nietzsche speaks of a seer as a “redeemer of accidents.” Strauss interprets this as “overcoming man’s

128 Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 5, p. 4.

129 Strauss, “Existentialism,” 3. Strauss elaborates that although science claims to be theoretically superior, with the ability to provide an adequate explanation of everything, in addition to infinite progression, in fact the mysteries of life remain, though they may change. In the seventeenth century, the disciplines of philosophy and science split, and because of science’s more narrow objective it appeared more successful than philosophy and philosophy became questionable. Philosophy turned against itself, Strauss wrote, and in the nineteenth century became something like linguistic analysis. For more on Edmund Husserl, see Vladimir Nikiforov, *The Collapse of Philosophy and Its Rebirth: An Intellectual History with Special Attention to Husserl, Rickert, and Bakhtin* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006).

130 Nietzsche saw every morality as a tyranny against nature and reason. His advocacy of going “beyond good and evil” did not mean anarchism or straight utilitarianism per se; it presupposed an existing higher morality than currently existed; it meant the self commanding itself, and not answering to God, nature, or reason.

fragmentariness.”¹³¹ There is a nod here to the insufficiency of nature, if current man is indeed representative of natural man; or is it the insufficiency of modern man, who is not natural? There is in Nietzsche a mystery here still inaccessible; even conscious creativity has its root in the unconscious self; there is still the unabated tension between knowledge and life; “knowledge can never grasp life,” Strauss observes (this is another nod to Heidegger’s exploration of the insufficiency of language).

Strauss thought he had uncovered the critical fact that at the beginning of modern times (Machiavelli and Spinoza), thinkers had created a distinction between nature and history that previously had been a unity in the mind (hence the ahistorical nature of the classics—everything that is, including humanity and its creations, is natural). Moderns had transformed the idea of human convention into History and then sought either to escape from nature or return to it, depending upon the conception they superimposed on Nature. More than intellectual smoke and mirrors, Strauss’ concern with these orientations is that if what Nietzsche had posited about the human condition as Creator (Strauss would qualify this stance as Creator within bounds of Nature as a mutable given rather than Nietzsche’s bounds of History as past) was accurate, then either orientation of the modern toward nature was artificial—itself unnatural for seeing humanity outside of nature.

Strauss did not object to historicism or the historical mode as such; he was concerned primarily with the adoption of historicism as the fundamental truth which had become the prevailing consensus, witnessed by such remarks as historian James T. Kloppenberg’s 1987 announcement, “it is now uncontroversial to conclude that the

131 Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 3, p. 7-8.

nonhistorical study of ideas is dead.”¹³² An obscure discussion in an article about liberalism’s relation to Christianity and Republicanism in the making of the American democracy reveals the “givenness” of historicism to the contemporary age, which was Strauss’ concern. He had no doubt that “modern history has brought us into very serious troubles.”¹³³

Strauss envisioned historicism as a cave in which his contemporaries resided—below the “natural” cave that had been inhabited by the ancients. Plato had described this cave as that horizon of societal beliefs that the philosopher transcends. Strauss held that the modern cave below Plato’s cave had severely restricted the horizon of plausible questions that could be asked and the methods of interrogation, and hence the modern understanding of the whole human experience—descriptions of the world, humanity, and human relationships were limited. The limits the modern had imposed appeared to be arbitrary; they were not rationally defensible and hence their results were not either. Strauss had concluded this based on an examination of the writings of the seventeenth century Baruch de Spinoza, whom Strauss considered to have articulated the best critique of revelation, or the faith of orthodoxy. He found Spinoza’s critique fundamentally flawed, and exposed it as a denunciation, rather than disproof, of revelation.¹³⁴

The modern project had sought to limit fortune and chance, and put control of human destiny in the hands of humanity. Coupled with a desire for certainty to replace the uncertainty of ancient philosophy, and a seemingly insatiable appetite for and belief

132 James T. Kloppenberg, “The Virtues of Liberalism: Christianity, Republicanism, and Ethics in Early American Political Discourse,” *The Journal of American History*, 74 (1987), 9-33.

133 Leo Strauss, “Thucydides: The Meaning of Political History,” in Pangle, ed. *The Rebirth*, 77.

134 For more on Spinoza, see Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, trans. E.M. Sinclair (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965). This was originally published in Berlin in 1930.

in scientific progress' ability to reconstruct the world, the modern had created a predicament for the philosopher. The philosopher living with the mental construction of the modern had not only to ascend from this unnatural cave, but then to ascend from the cave of accepted opinion, which had been inhabited by the ancients. The modern philosopher thus had a more formidable challenge facing him than did Socrates, who had only one cave from which to ascend. Human opinions adorned the walls of the cave inhabited by the ancients, but they were recognized as such, and therefore considered insufficient by the philosopher, whose ascent from this cave would lead him to the prescientific, or prephilosophic nature, as distinguished from convention, transcending the particularity of historical human experience.¹³⁵

The answer to historicism that Strauss articulated in 1970 (though he had formulated it as early as the 1940s) was that "*history should be applied to itself.*" "Historical consciousness is itself the product of a historical process," a process that is essentially blind, he reasoned, and therefore we have no reason to prefer it, or, by the implications of its own definition, to apply it to anything outside of our own historical position. Strauss staged an assault on historicism by seeing historicism as a historical--and thus transitory--phenomenon of the human mind. Only by leaving the historical stance that had been adopted wholesale, Strauss thought, could the philosopher become a

135 Neil Robertson has argued that Strauss was vehemently against any philosophical blend of nature's order and humanity's will working in unison. To support this assertion, Robertson points to two works: a passage in *On Tyranny* referring to Hegel's synthesis of Socrates, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, and "Jerusalem and Athens" published in *Commentary*. The former is a synthesis of Socrates and the worst elements (in Strauss' mind) of modernity, including the modern concept of nature and the state. The latter is a reference to one of Strauss' well-known dualisms, Jerusalem v. Athens, which is dealt with more in-depth elsewhere. Neither speaks directly to the topic at issue here: the paradoxical relationship of human understanding, interpretation, and relationship to the existing world and the interaction of ideas with it. Neil G. Robertson, "The Closing of the Early Modern Mind: Leo Strauss and Early Modern Political Thought," *Animus*, 3 (1998), 215, available: <http://www2.swgc.mun.ca/animus/Articles/Volume%203/robert3.pdf>; accessed February 6, 2010.

natural philosopher, one who “approach[ed] the natural, the basic and original question of philosophy in a natural, an adequate way.”¹³⁶

Paradoxically, the study of history became essential—the most important discipline—for Strauss so that the modern might understand the world of the ancients who had lacked the historical sense, and understand the writing of the authors of the great books of the West without the historical lens adopted by the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In other words, history was the post-historical age’s access to the pre-historical gaze of the past. Strauss advocated this study of history not for “self-forgetting and pain-loving antiquarianism,” but as a way to distance oneself from contemporary assumptions for a particular project of thought. Nature became an important alternative to History in Strauss’ conception. Strauss did not oppose the Historical School as such; he opposed the application of the principles of historicism to epistemology. He used history as a valuable means of access to the mind of a particular author of the past. He sought to suspend his own questions he brought to the text, and ask what questions the author was concerned with, and why. Whether Strauss was successful or not is a discussion for another place. It is clear that his concern to find a basis for human rights animated his scholarly pursuits all of his life.¹³⁷

The interpretation of texts was central to Strauss’ project. He insisted that the categorical systems for interpreting a specific culture lay in that culture. Studying cultures directly, i.e. interpreting their texts, rather than reading texts about them, became

136 Leo Strauss, “The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy,” in *Leo Strauss and the Theological-political Problem* ed. Heinrich Meier, trans. Marcus Brainard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 133.

137 For a discussion of his approach in his own words, see Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 10.

Strauss' method: "If it is crazy to interpret Brutus in terms of the French revolution, it is still more crazy for a historicist to talk of Greek *states*, of Greek *religion*, etc., i.e. to apply categories which are not Greek to Greek phenomena."¹³⁸ In Strauss' method, by using historicism's tenets, i.e. seeing the text under discussion as an emanation from a particular time and place, the scholar was allowed access to the mind of the author, and hence the true meaning of the text, the philosophy, which dealt with the basic universal questions.

Nietzsche, in keeping with his supposed discovery of the devaluation of all values and the will to power (self-overcoming) as the fundamental experience, had chosen History because he valued life over stultifying reason.¹³⁹ Gregory Bruce Smith sums up Nietzsche's position: "For Nietzsche, what was most needed at the end of the modern age was not the wisdom of the superhistorical, but the 'unwisdom' of historical men." Nietzsche saw the necessity of the "educated"—modernity's equivalent of the "cultured" of earlier ages—to consciously will "innocence and forgetting."¹⁴⁰ Smith continues his take on Nietzsche's position this way: "One must not will clarity above the 'mania, the injustice, the blind passion, and in general the whole earthly darkened horizon' of the truly great historical actor. Praxis with a good conscience is more important for life than

138 Strauss, "Living Issues," 119-120.

139 The rational conclusion given the modern presuppositions was that all values were historically contingent—the accident of time and chance and humanity's thoughts, and thus emanated from nothing higher. Humanity could not believe in anything transcendent beyond the temporal world; as Smith sums it up, "No mere poetic will to obfuscation or self-conscious horizon giving could change [the fact that values no longer had transcendent bases in the modern mind]. Eternity was driven out completely, and therewith Being, to be replaced by the unrelenting reign of Becoming," Gregory Bruce Smith, *Nietzsche, Heidegger* 139. Nietzsche realized that the ceiling of Plato's cave was gone, not just for the philosophers, but for all humanity, and he had no qualms about stating this to the world.

140 Gregory Bruce Smith, *Nietzsche, Heidegger*, 84; See also Steven B. Smith, "Leo Strauss's Platonic Liberalism," *Political Theory*, 28 (2000), 787-809; Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

knowing the truth.”¹⁴¹ In this, Strauss was in full agreement with Nietzsche; it was only for the small portion of philosophers to adopt the vocation of thought as a mode of life.

Making the Metaphysical Earthly: The Remaking of a Tradition

Nietzsche did away with the metaphysical because of its de-emphasis of earthly concerns. He thought that the Western Judeo-Christian tradition had merely repeated the atrocity Plato had committed previously—in moving the center of the universe outside of the world into the realm of the metaphysical, it had rendered the events of earth of little import. Nietzsche redeemed philosophy from the metaphysical and sought to make it radically earthly, beyond good and evil. Strauss takes up Nietzsche’s stance on the gods in “Existentialism.” Nietzsche’s philosophers of the future—while resembling those of Plato, Strauss points out—are concerned with the holy, as heirs of the biblical tradition, yet “they are atheists who wait for a god who has not yet been revealed.” Nietzsche made this god a god fully of this world; he broke with the biblical God, Strauss explains, because faith in Him necessarily led to asceticism and otherworldliness. He saw humanity’s task as becoming fully invested in the earth, understanding that “without forgetting it is impossible to live at all.”¹⁴²

Nietzsche, on the other hand, had brought heaven to earth. Strauss opines that “eternal return” is how Nietzsche sidesteps the eternal and still incorporates the possibility of redemption of suffering. Nietzsche could not abide the eternal because he claimed that obedience to any word of the gods or imitation of them was incompatible

141 Gregory Bruce Smith, *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Transition to Postmodernity*, 85. Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), 9-10; quote on 14.

142 Strauss, “Existentialism,” 20.

with individual creativity. Creativity, for Nietzsche, meant no railings—no support—complete exposure to the condition of man as creator of meaning. “There is no support for the values...except the creative act itself.”¹⁴³

Laurence Lampert argued that in Strauss’ mind it was Nietzsche’s doctrine of the will to power—meant by Nietzsche to explain the modern situation and human life—that paved the way for the high point of modern thought’s renunciation of eternity and caused “estrangement from man’s deepest desire and therewith from the primary issues...the price which modern man had to pay, from the very beginning, for attempting to be absolutely sovereign, to become the master and owner of nature, to conquer chance.” Strauss thought the Enlightenment project ended up in failure, yet did not have even the notion of eternity as a bulwark, which the ancients had held in lieu of the Enlightenment project.¹⁴⁴

In response to Nietzsche’s disposal of metaphysics because of its other-worldly focus, Strauss remade the Western religious tradition he knew—Judaism—to be concerned with the radically earthly, thus attempting to deflect Nietzsche’s attack. Strauss maintained the distinction between poet and philosopher, but sought to alleviate Nietzsche’s concerns regarding philosophers as discoverers of existing truths rather than assignor of values. Strauss’ commentary on Jewish texts show that he affirmed Nietzsche’s sentiments about the importance of the human world. Because of this, he shifted emphases in the religious tradition he knew—Judaism—to reinterpret the metaphysical as radically earthly, and thus deflect Nietzsche’s attack without sacrificing

143 Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 3, p. 1.

144 Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), quoted in Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, 8.

the *possibility* of a metaphysical realm. He reinterpreted the Creation account of the Hebrew Bible to make the earth the center of the drama of the heavens, thus in his mind alleviating Nietzsche's protestations against the metaphysical. Strauss acknowledged that according to the modern view of "causal contingency" of the origin of humanity, we could as likely never have come into being. He concludes that Nietzsche is correct that if we limit ourselves to the non metaphysical, the will is the only support for any decision.

In his 1957 lecture "On the Interpretation of Genesis," Strauss reinterprets the Creation account to show that the biblical tradition from the beginning was actually concerned with a depreciation of heaven—it is the first chapter's main thesis, he claims—for an emphasis on the importance of the earth. He does this by reasoning that the only two things in the creation story that are not blessed by God are heaven and humanity (but humanity is redeemed). "This integration of cosmology into an account of creation implies the depreciation of heaven. Heaven is not divine; heaven is subordinate in rank to earth, to life on earth."¹⁴⁵ Whether or not Strauss' rational argument and textual evidence was effective, his purpose is clear.

Strauss' Jewishness was central to the understanding he developed. While scholars have dedicated entire volumes to Strauss' Judaism, some small examination is due here, as an understanding of Strauss' thought is not complete without an understanding of his Judaism.¹⁴⁶

145 Leo Strauss, "On the Interpretation of Genesis," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 369, quote on 370. This lecture was given on January 25, 1957, at the University of Chicago. This is reiterated in *The City and Man* when Strauss shows that for the Greeks, the heavens were the focal point rather than man, but Socrates called down philosophy to deal with humanly things. Strauss, *The City and Man*, 13.

146 Strauss characterized the 1960s generation as a generation of unbelievers who were the children of Christians and Jews; because of this, he said they were "haunted men." I consider Strauss one of these "haunted men." Leo Strauss, "Perspectives on the Good Society," in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*

The Weimar Constitution had offered hope of a more inclusive society for previously-marginalized groups in Germany, such as Jews. Liberalism held out the promise of equality, at least on a political level. Previously outlawed from many official careers, Jews fell into other professions, including instructors at universities, of which Jews made up a disproportionate percentage. Though it was very hard for them to gain full professorships, they made up large numbers in the ranks of instructional positions.

Strauss was raised in an orthodox Jewish household, but his understanding of the rituals and observance was not deep in his youth. He was converted to Zionism—“simple, straightforward political Zionism”—when seventeen, and he maintained this direction into his twenties.¹⁴⁷ While some scholars have identified characteristic periods of an early, middle, and late Strauss from an analysis of his works, or constructed the “Strauss before Straussianism,” the underlying concerns that animated his thought—the “Jewish question” and the failure of the state—even the most liberal—to sufficiently resolve it, would remain a constant motif throughout his thought. Jacob Klein, one of Strauss’ closest friends, described Strauss in his student years as consumed by two interests: the question of God and the question of politics.¹⁴⁸

Some of Strauss’ German Jewish contemporaries in his later years called him an atheist, including Gershom Scholem. Hannah Arendt said in 1954 that he was a “convinced Orthodox atheist.” Werner J. Dannhauser understood Strauss as a Jew whose philosophy never quite eclipsed his Judaism. Yet, Strauss maintained that the philosopher

(New York: Basic Books, 1968), 261-263. Nietzsche believed his generation was characterized by the spirit of revenge, whose project was to tear down and negate the existing society so that a future generation would be able to build a positive future without the impulse to revenge.

147 For quotation see Leo Strauss and Jacob Klein, “A Giving of Accounts,” in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, edited by Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 460.

148 Strauss and Klein., *ibid.*, 458.

“forbids itself the lie of the belief in God.”¹⁴⁹ Allan Arkush “suspected” that a “desire to reclaim this lost relationship” with the Jewish God “lay behind his search for an intellectually viable form of Judaism.” Milton Himmelfarb claimed that all understood that Strauss’ Judaism was at the center of his being, witnessed by the high proportion of first-generation Straussians who were Jews and the lectures Strauss gave at the Hillel Foundation, which were events in themselves.¹⁵⁰ Scholars have been divided on the issue. What is not disputed is Strauss’ unqualified engagement with Judaism and Jewish issues his entire life. Strauss wrote of his position: “But while being compelled, or compelling myself, to wander far away from our sacred heritage, or to be silent about it, I shall not for a moment forget what Jerusalem stands for.”¹⁵¹

149 Strauss, “Existentialism,” 1-3; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, number 27, qtd in Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 17, p 3.

150 Allan Arkush, “Leo Strauss and Jewish Modernity,” in *Leo Strauss and Judaism: Jerusalem and Athens Critically Revisited* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996), 111-130, quote on 113. See also S. Orr, *Jerusalem and Athens: Reason and Revelation in the Works of Leo Strauss* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995). For accounts of Strauss’ atheism, see Sheppard, *The Politics of Exile*, 120-121; Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, eds. *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers Correspondence* (August 29, 1954), 247; Jacob Klein, “Memorials to Leo Strauss,” *St. Johns Review* 25 (January 1974), 2; Walter Benjamin and Gershom Gerhard Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, letter 72, 155-158. For his Judaism, see Milton Himmelfarb, “On Leo Strauss,” Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, Folder 7, Box 27; and Werner J. Dannhauser, Werner, “Leo Strauss: Becoming Naïve Again,” in *Masters: Portraits of Great Teachers* ed. Joseph Epstein (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

151 Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?,” 409. While Strauss as a scholar/philosopher did not allow himself access to Judaism, his personal leanings are clear. In class discussions he commented, “I think we all know from our own observation that compared with the world view presented by modern natural science the traditional religious world view is infinitely more bearable.” Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 17, p 2-3; quote page 3; “The world of concern to us...is the world of things in their fullness...also all value qualities, and especially the sacred. And therefore, there would be therefore God.” Strauss, *ibid.*, Lecture 7, p. 12. Again, “Perhaps the root of all our troubles and maybe even of the troubles of Nietzsche...the question of the meaninglessness of man—you know? Becoming just the inhabitant...temporary inhabitant of a negligible planet in a negligible planetary system. This didn’t exist [for the ancients].” *Ibid.*, Lecture 17, p 20. In his 1957 “On the Interpretation of Genesis,” Strauss takes an agnostic stance to the question of the existence of God. We cannot, from experience, know whether God exists or not, but the likelihood of the truth of the Bible is improbable, he states. Yet Strauss continues his line of reasoning that the tradition admits of its improbability—and this honesty makes a difference for him: “but whereas the Bible admits of its improbability, the same cannot be said for an absolute philosophy that makes completely comprehensible the otherwise unknown God.” That improbability poses a serious problem: “The comprehensible God, the God about whom we can speak without making

I hold that Strauss was an agnostic who *chose* Judaism (i.e. understood that it was an arbitrary choice and in no way legitimately proven knowledge). Strauss, with an individual commitment to Judaism, moved beyond the Jewish question—or more precisely—used the Jewish question (whether explicitly or more commonly implicitly) as a point of engagement to address the larger question it posed for society, specifically the problem of identity and categories in the modern West, with its unique blended heritage of Greek Reason and Eastern Christianity, or what Strauss termed the theological-political problem.¹⁵²

Steven Smith posed Strauss as a contributor to Jewish thought straddling both the Jewish and secular worlds. Strauss contributed lengthy treatises to Jewish themes including creation of the world, Jewish politics and Zionism concerns, elaborations of the

contradictions, we can say is the God of Aristotle and not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” The only way Strauss sees for that tradition to be refuted is by the formation of an absolute philosophy “the likes of which were attempted by Hegel, proving that no mystery whatever exists, that we have scientific knowledge of everything,” and that “all the fundamental questions have been answered in a perfectly satisfactory way.” Strauss, “On the Interpretation of Genesis,” 360. Strauss wrote in the essay “Social Science and Humanism,” “The macrocosm, the whole to which man belongs, is not human. That whole, or its origin, is either subhuman or superhuman. Man cannot be understood in his own light by only in the light of either the subhuman or superhuman. Either man is an accidental product of a blind evolution or else the process leading to man, culminating in man, is directed toward man. Mere humanism avoids this ultimate issue. The human meaning of what we have come to call Science consists precisely in this—that the human or the higher is understood in the light of the subhuman or the lower. Mere humanism is powerless to withstand the onslaught of modern science.” Strauss goes on to state that in this light, we can see again the original meaning of science: “science as man’s attempt to understand the whole to which he belongs.” Leo Strauss, “Social Science and Humanism,” 7-8.

¹⁵² See Steven B. Smith, “Jerusalem and Athens: Some Introductory Reflections,” in Thomas Pangle, ed., *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 147-173. Smith claims that Strauss was not particularly interested in Judaism per se, but in the larger question asked by Christianity, Islam, and Judaism about revelation’s relationship with the *polis*. For commentary on his Judaism and philosophy, see Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Nicgorski, *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 11-12. David Novak tries to remove the tension between philosophy and theology that lay at the heart of Strauss’ project: “In the full and adequate search for the truth, philosophy intends theology and theology presupposes philosophy.” He further claims that natural law exists independently of revelation—and thus has to do with philosophy only—because it is in relation to the “limits or ends of the human condition itself.” David Novak, “Introduction,” in *Leo Strauss and Judaism: Jerusalem and Athens Critically Revisited* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), xv. Yet Strauss rejects the Thomistic attempt at synthesis of philosophy and faith: “Syntheses always sacrifice the decisive claim of one of the two elements.” Strauss, “On the Interpretation of Genesis,” 373.

thought of important Jewish scholars like Spinoza and Maimonides, and similarly made his mark in the arena of secular political thought. Smith identifies themes in contemporary Jewish thought such as exile, homelessness, and the struggles to maintain ethnic and historical identity by a people group who has been for significant periods of history a “‘despised religion’ (Halevi),” a people which has responded in opposite polarities between assimilation and definite separateness among those with whom they have resided.¹⁵³

The “Jewish question,” for Germany, might be seen best in light of the “German question.” The latter was a question of national identity, or lack thereof, which extended, some scholars have claimed, from the Middle Ages and the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation up into the nineteenth-century era of nationalism. This historical schemata has been challenged in recent years, but many of Strauss’ contemporaries, including Carl Mayer, tended to view German history in this light. While historical causation is more easily inferred than demonstrated, one can also look to the influence of the Reformation, the Napoleonic defeat of Austria and Prussia, the relative “backwardness” of the German nation industrially (in comparison to Britain and France), Germany’s rather late—too late—entrance on the imperial front in relation to other Western European powers, and its relatively “advanced” educational system, to see Germany’s difficulty.¹⁵⁴ Later than

153 See Smith, “Leo Strauss: Between Athens and Jerusalem,” 76. Two of Strauss’ important monographs contributing to the Jewish literature are “Spinoza’s Critique of Religion,” trans. E.M. Sinclair (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), originally published in 1930; and *Philosophy and Law: Essays Toward the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), originally published in German in 1935. Kenneth Hart Green, “Editor’s Preface,” in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, xii.153.

154 See Mary Fulbrook, *History of Germany, 1918-2000: The Divided Nation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1991, 2002); Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins*; Sven Lindqvist, in ‘*Exterminate all the Brutes*’ trans. Joan Tate (London: Granta Books, 1992), asserted that in the first third of the twentieth century, Germany was exercising its imperial arm on the European continent, both in scope

elsewhere in Europe, Germany was unified under Bismarck, but identification with the legal entity of the state did not usurp that of the cultural aspects.¹⁵⁵ The historically-overlapping principalities and decentralized nature of the state had led Germans to define themselves culturally, religiously, and linguistically rather than politically.

The problem came in the fact that Germany defined its culture as historically Christian, and the German people could not see how a Jew could be German without conversion to Christianity. The state tried to redefine “German” politically, but Strauss acknowledged how difficult it was for a non-Orthodox Jew not to be critical of liberalism, with its promise of inclusion in the public sphere at least, as it cannot solve the problem in the private sphere. In his “Preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*,” Strauss observes that liberalism in the best case had brought about only legal equality, but not social equality. In the Preface to his 1968 *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, Strauss asks whether the liberal state can claim to have solved the Jewish problem, or if any state can.¹⁵⁶ He has answered his own question elsewhere; he considered *galut* part of the definition of Judaism; if *galut* ceased, so would Judaism lose all of its meaning.

Regardless, the experience of being an outsider in society in some way, however small, influenced Strauss’ philosophical development. An early Zionist, Strauss later

and method with disregard for human rights, as its European neighbors had done in the Southern Hemisphere.

155 It is now agreed upon by the scholarly community that to speak of Germany’s *Sonderweg*, or “special path,” is to presuppose that Britain and France, in contradistinction to Germany, represent the normative path to modernization. The historical development of the countries was different, but there is no reason to prefer that of Britain and France; however, Ringer does make a compelling case for the intersection of rapid modernization and industrialization coupled with an advanced educational system that caused social angst and political strife. See Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins*. Interestingly, Strauss makes Germany an exception in philosophy, stating that while the spirit of heaviness has been a characteristic of all philosophers, “perhaps of the German philosophers a bit more than of others.” *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 3, p. 11.

156 Strauss, “Preface,” *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, xi.

tempered his advocacy with the acknowledgement that politics would not wholly solve the problem. Many adherents of Zionism or assimilation saw *galut* as shameful and sought to overcome it. The German-Jewish synthesis Ernst Cassirer imagined would be made possible by a liberal society, and Martin Buber's efforts at bringing about a "Jewish renaissance," were both directed toward the hope that by means political or cultural, the Jew could overcome *galut*. Eugene R. Sheppard has shown how Strauss consciously conflated the idea of the permanent exilic condition, or *galut*, of the Jew with the "homeless" quality of the philosopher. Just as persecution and homelessness, in Strauss' estimation, had become both a source of identity and a prerequisite for the maintenance of an authentic Judaism, so persecution and exilic conditions that forced the philosopher to write esoterically also created the best conditions under which to philosophize.¹⁵⁷ Strauss envisioned the philosopher as intellectually homeless, or non-committed to any "truth." For, every orientation to the world, at its roots, rested upon unevident, or non-rational bases that were fundamentally arbitrary. This was the problem confronting the modern; Nietzsche had been the first to articulate it; it was the opposition Heidegger posed to his own philosophy.

The Jewish problem highlighted a larger political problem. Strauss' overall project was an outgrowth of his preoccupation with Judaism; he had gone back to study Baruch de Spinoza—praised for his "liberation" of Jews—to discover the roots of

¹⁵⁷ Sheppard, 106. Strauss writes in his "Preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion," that the problem with German Jewry was that they were spiritually and culturally dependent upon Germans, and thus had allowed that culture to permeate their ranks. He had no reason to fear political dependence as much as the former, 5-6. An ardent Zionist in his youth, Strauss later came to see Zionism as an inadequate answer to the "Jewish question" precisely because it gave the Jews a nation, thereby rendering them the same as any other people group and diminishing their "chosenness." Sheppard—and Strauss himself—acknowledges that a life in exile—Jewish *galut*—is not defined solely as a physical exile, as from a political entity or nation. It's most powerful manifestation can be mental, psychological, or emotional.

liberalism as a means of liberating the Jew, but in doing so, Strauss said Spinoza had undermined the essence of Judaism—he had incorporated Jews into Western European Christian society by ridding them of the essentials that made them Jewish. Strauss also discovered that Spinoza had made certain claims regarding the nature of revelation (which modernity had also understood as given) that did not appear to Strauss to be self-evident assertions. Spinoza had applied History as an *apriori* rubric to the Hebrew Scriptures that by self-definition claimed to originate outside of history.¹⁵⁸

Liberalism in the nineteenth century had promised a universal, open society which science was supposedly helping to achieve. Strauss, however, recognized that in the absence of the agreement of state boundaries by all parties, the political society remained a “practical particularism” whose first priority was self-preservation.¹⁵⁹ “Objective” social scientists, held up as purveyors of *the* truth (as value-free) had a built-in value system that was nevertheless invisible, making them effective propagandists for certain political or social purposes.¹⁶⁰ In such a political environment, Strauss recognized the necessity of esotericism, or secret, multi-layered writing, for the philosopher, who was the lover of truth as opposed to the obedient one. Outward accommodation to an institution or regime without loss of the ideal to the true good was the paradoxical tension afforded the philosopher in these conditions, i.e. in any self-preserving regime. Without the esoteric function, philosophy, for its very survival, would be reduced to supporting the existing regime—especially in totalitarian contexts—and would cease to function.¹⁶¹

158 Myers, *Resisting History*, 5.

159 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 6.

160 Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 13, p 9.

161 Strauss maintained that philosophy was fulfilling its purpose only when it questioned and undermined a society’s held beliefs. It is by nature, therefore, inimical to life—it points to the deadly

An iconoclast of the first degree, Strauss turned many traditional interpretations of philosophers on their head. In a classroom seminar on Nietzsche Strauss gave at Chicago in 1967, he made a comment about Nietzsche's intensely personal approach to philosophical problems. I believe this reflects Strauss' own approach. Strauss describes Nietzsche's methodology:

To fetter his heart and to give his mind many freedoms....And there lies very much in that. The merely objective man would be one who gives perfect freedom, or tries to give perfect freedom, to both his heart and his mind; and he is therefore not a true human being, a man without convictions, and therefore he is not likely to understand the things he is trying to understand.¹⁶²

This strange interpretation of subjectivity as a divided self, actually allows a greater platform for objectivity than the heart and mind in unison that Strauss describes. Strauss held that one cannot understand a tradition from the outside. He puts the scholar and philosopher alike in the impossible predicament of being unable to understand what they study unless they have experienced, and are a proponent of it, thus disallowing any possibility of objectivity. In this sense, Strauss is a foremost proponent of the experiential. This approach no doubt stemmed from Strauss' own divided self—a religious Jew who could never quite allow philosophy to eclipse his Judaism.

“truth,” ripping away the sheltering horizon within which life is only possible. It can drain a society's potential for development along *some* line, whatever is its choosing, which creates its identity and character. See Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, Trans. By Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage, 1954), 463-563.

162 Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Lecture 7, p.10.

CONCLUSION

Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it.

–Karl Marx

The laws of mathematics, insofar as they are true, do not refer to reality, and those that do refer to reality are not true. –Einstein

Strauss' animating concerns were an almost wholesale appropriation of Nietzsche's. Strauss absorbed much of Nietzsche's philosophical approach and concerns, while disagreeing on substantive points, including Nietzsche's historicism, will to power as the defining experience of humanity, attack on Socrates and the rationalism he represents, and rejection of the metaphysical. Strauss was an admirer of Nietzsche's power of thought without succumbing to nihilism; he understood the relevance of Nietzsche's concerns, and sought to address them with all the power of his own mind. Strauss interpreted Nietzsche as a historicist and then qualified Nietzsche's elevation of human valuation as that which gave meaning to human life that would otherwise be a void. Nietzsche had tried to address the conflict between the poets and the philosophers, shoring up what he considered the deficiencies in both by unifying them into one. Strauss found their mutual conflict to be their strength and sought rather to revive the legitimacy of poetry on par with reason for the modern world. He emphasized human experience as it presents itself to the average citizen: the universal as manifested in the particular. By a radical critique of Nietzsche's defining assertions, a radical reinterpretation of Plato, and

transformation of the traditional understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Strauss re-opened the horizon of thought that he felt had been severely limited by the modern.

Strauss began his career as a German Jew in the Weimar Republic with the problem of grounding human rights, and he spent the latter part of his life and scholarly career in the United States trying to uncover the roots of what he saw as the crisis of modernity that threatened to undermine the existence of those rights. American liberal democracy was the only contemporary regime, Strauss believed, that had partially evaded the fate of other Western European nations (or nations with a Western heritage) because it was not fully the product of the modern ideas he spent his life trying to uncover in the works of the great philosophers of the Western tradition. He sought to preserve the existence of those rights by restoring philosophy to its place of tentativeness afforded by the classics; one mode of inquiry into the world that was only as valid as poetry. By recovering “the permanent problems,” and thereby resuscitating philosophy from the deathblow he considered it to have suffered at the dawn of modernity as a valid and necessary discipline for the health of Western societies—a philosophy that was capable even of questioning itself.¹ He recognized that his position stood as a choice, just like his Judaism—just like Nietzsche’s irrationalism and Heidegger’s relativism—but he, like them, did choose.

¹ Strauss’ commentary on Nietzsche is rife with divergences and criticisms: Strauss does not accept wholesale Nietzsche’s philosophy or premises; in a side note, he claims that Nietzsche, by claiming that philosophers are motivated by other impulses than the search for truth, has unmasked himself. Leo Strauss, *Seminar on Nietzsche*, Class lecture transcript, Department of Political Science, The University of Chicago, Winter 1967. In possession of Dr. Doug Morgan, College of Urban and Public Affairs, Portland State University, Portland, OR, Lecture 4, p. 7

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