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Eli Karetny

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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**UNGODLY FREEDOM: HOW PHILOSOPHERS RISE AND
EMPIRES FALL IN THE WORK OF LEO STRAUSS**

by

Eli Karetny

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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PROFESSOR COREY ROBIN

Date

Committee Chair

PROFESSOR ALYSON COLE

Date

Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:

Corey Robin
Alyson Cole
Carol Gould

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

UNGODLY FREEDOM: HOW PHILOSOPHERS RISE AND EMPIRES FALL IN THE WORK OF LEO STRAUSS

by

Eli Karetny

Advisor: Professor Corey Robin

This dissertation argues that to fully understand the work of Leo Strauss, scholars must look beyond the Platonic and Machiavellian elements in Strauss and explore how Nietzsche's ideas about nihilism, the will to power, the eternal return, and the ubermensch influence Strauss's critique of modernity, his understanding of the relationship between philosophy and politics, and his redefinition of the philosopher as a prophetic lawgiver. This study examines the Nietzschean origins of Strauss's hierarchical theory of freedom, which vests reimagined philosophers with the authority to create truth and meaning. I argue that Strauss's concept of philosophy and corresponding pedagogy cultivates new intellectual elites who aim at the transformation of democratic regimes based on Strauss's vision of permanent cyclical movement propelled by an aristocratic ideal of excellence and the possibility of an emergent monarch. Strauss's defense of noble imperialism and his critique of modern universalism are rooted in an apocalyptic theory in which the destruction of existing orders clears the way for the emergence of future founders.

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Introduction

After 9/11 and the Bush administration's declaration of a war on terror, journalists and scholars began to debate the teaching and legacy of the philosopher Leo Strauss.¹ While Strauss's work had long been a subject of controversy in the academy, the ascendancy in the Bush administration of neoconservative policy intellectuals, many claiming Strauss as a teacher, created a reputation for the philosopher as the inspiration of a new American empire. This reputation was created through both journalistic accounts and academic treatments. While several of these new treatments of Strauss properly focus on the Nietzschean elements of his thinking, which could plausibly be linked to robust programs of warfare and domination, this dissertation argues that that Nietzschean element of Strauss's teaching has been radically misconstrued.

This dissertation argues that Strauss's political philosophy has nothing to say about the promotion of freedom and democracy through imperial expansion, but does advocate noble expressions of freedom and imperialism, which combine aristocratic and authoritarian principles with an apocalyptic vision. The argument here is that the Nietzschean elements in Strauss's teaching shape his understanding of the philosopher's intellectual and political purpose and that a reimagined conception of freedom as the creation of truth and meaning is central to that purpose. Though Nietzschean ideas are at

¹ see James Atlas, "Leo-Cons: A Classicist's Legacy: New Empire Builders," *New York Times*, May 4, 2003, sec. 4, Week in Review, 1; Alain Frachon and Daniel Vernet, "The Strategist and the Philosopher," *Le Monde*, April 19, 2003 (trans. Mark K. Jensen); Steven Lenzner and William Kristol, "What Was Leo Strauss Up To?" *Public Interest*, Fall 2003, 10; Jim Lobe, "Neo-Cons Dance a Straussian Waltz," *Asia Times Online*, May 9, 2003; Richard Lacoyo, "You've Read about Who's Influential, but Who Has the Power?" *Time*, June 17, 1996, 56; Brent Staples, "Undemocratic Vistas: The Sinister Vogue of Leo Strauss," *New York Times*, November 28, 1994; Seymour Hersh, "Selective Intelligence," *New Yorker*, May 12, 2003, 6; Jeet Heer, "The Philosopher," *Boston Globe*, May 11, 2003, H1; William Pfaff, "The Long Reach of Leo Strauss," *International Herald Tribune*, May 15, 2003; Richard Bernstein, "A Very Unlikely Villian (or Hero)," *New York Times*, January 29, 1995, E4; Charles Larmore, "The Secrets of Philosophy," *New Republic*, July 3, 1989, p. 32; Paul Gottfried, "Straussians vs. Paleo-Conservatives," *Lew Rockwell*, May 17, 2002.

the core of Strauss's political philosophy, Nietzsche's influence is often concealed and downplayed as certain Platonic and Machiavellian themes are elevated. A recurring Platonic theme that Strauss draws attention to is the concept of noble lies, but in Strauss's Nietzscheanized interpretation, the emphasis is on the philosopher's need to suppress dangerous truths and create life-giving truths. The Machiavellian aspects of Strauss's teaching tie the philosopher's creative thinking to an uber-heroic justification for political deception that blurs the difference between political and theological concepts.

I argue that Strauss's thinking is both utopian and apocalyptic in the way that it aims to create a new class of thinkers who can transform reality through philosophy and politics. Strauss's teaching is based on a vision of cyclical political movement in which constitutional regimes become corrupt and give way to "post-constitutional Caesars" who prepare the way for a "pre-constitutional situation" that creates space for new philosophers to become founders and lawgivers. This dissertation explores how Strauss's ideas about freedom and imperialism point to a rebellion against modern democratic regimes, which Strauss sees converging toward a World State² that represents the Final Tyranny,³ which ends the prospects of future founders. Freedom and imperialism come together in Strauss's work not to propel the movement toward a universal empire, but as a noble countermovement animated by Strauss's monarchical ideal in which philosophers are treated as god-like kings because they are the highest source of truth, meaning and wisdom. But for Strauss's wise men to emerge as founders and lawgivers, modern civilization as we know it must come to an end.

² Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 149.

³ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 208.

The Political Context

The debates about Strauss's influence on neoconservatism brought the relevance of Strauss's work to a wider audience as journalists and scholars raised concerns that policymakers influenced by Strauss's teaching were pursuing an agenda that differed from what was publicly proclaimed. Critics across the political spectrum pointed to various aspects of Strauss's thought to alert the public of the potential disaster that could result from US policies. Three crucial themes came out of those writings about Strauss's work: his focus on civilization-defining wars, his defense of elitism and hierarchy, and his promotion of "noble lies" to justify political deception.

First, critics suggested that when neoconservative policy intellectuals framed the war on terror as a civilizational conflict they were guided by Strauss's teaching. James Atlas saw in the Iraq War the expansion of the American Empire motivated by "nothing less than a defense of Western Civilization - as interpreted by the late classicist and philosopher Leo Strauss."⁴ Others noted that Strauss's defense of Western civilization was based on a worldview that was atypical for proponents of Western liberal democracy. Seymour Hersh pointed to Strauss's "tendency to view the world as a place where isolated liberal democracies live in constant danger from hostile elements abroad, and face threats that must be confronted vigorously and with strong leadership."⁵ Hersh saw in Strauss's scholarly defense of freedom and democracy a way of thinking that leads to militarism and authoritarianism. William Pfaff described Strauss's theory as a "bleak and anti-utopian philosophy that goes against practically everything Americans want to

⁴ James Atlas, "Leo-Cons: A Classicist's Legacy: New Empire Builders," *New York Times*, May 4, 2003, sec. 4, Week in Review, 1.

⁵ Seymour Hersh, "Selective Intelligence," *New Yorker*, May 12, 2003, 6.

believe,” a theory that “contradicts the conventional wisdom of modern democratic society.”⁶ What these characterizations miss are the utopian aspects of Strauss’s work and the way his defense of freedom and imperialism were expressions of rebellion against the modern democratic principles that grew out of Western civilization.

The second common theme present in the debates about Strauss’s influence on neoconservative intellectuals is his reputation for elitism, which promotes a hierarchical worldview. Jeet Heer framed Strauss’s elitism as something more troubling than a simple defense of wealth and privilege. Heer pointed out that when Strauss says “only philosophers can handle the truth,” he is invoking a deeper justification for hierarchy, which runs counter to the enlightenment principle that truth and freedom lead to human happiness.⁷ According to this reading, Strauss’s elitism is tied to his teaching that philosophers are uniquely wise in knowing how to protect ordinary people from dangerous truths. Insufficient scholarly attention has been given to the idea that for Strauss, the philosophers’ unique wisdom grants them the authority to create alternative truths.

The third theme present in the commentaries on Strauss’s teaching highlight the way Strauss invokes Plato’s concept of noble lies as a philosophical justification for political deception. Even Strauss’s students acknowledged that the Machiavellian aspects of Strauss’s teaching justify political deception in pursuit of unstated, idealistic aims.⁸ Critics treated Strauss’s treatment of Plato’s noble lies as little more than a philosophical

⁶ William Pfaff, “The Long Reach of Leo Strauss,” *International Herald Tribune*, May 15, 2003, <http://www.iht.com/articles/96307.html>.

⁷ Jeet Heer, “The Philosopher,” *Boston Globe*, May 11, 2003, H1.

⁸ Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 7.

veil for Machiavellian duplicity.⁹ Whereas Plato used myths and untruths for pedagogical purposes to promote social harmony, Strauss's version focused on esoteric communication between elites in pursuit of a hidden agenda.¹⁰

Even as scholars sought to correct the critics by drawing attention to the misunderstood elements of his teaching, they paid too much attention to how his students used political lies to justify policy goals and too little on his own justification for the use of philosophy to create truth. Anne Norton even argued that journalists were wrongly blaming Strauss for a political program promoted by errant pupils who misunderstood Strauss's higher philosophical aims.¹¹ She saw in neoconservative policies an expression of imperial adventurism justified by Straussian intellectuals who, like Alcibiades, were inspired by their teacher's words to set sail for Sicily. Mark Lilla attempted to set the record straight by explaining that Strauss's work on Plato was a cautionary tale that warns intellectuals not to succumb to the tyrannical temptation and not to embark on heroic adventures that may bring ruin to the empire.¹² Lilla is right that Strauss's Platonic teaching about noble lies goes beyond a Machiavellian justification for political deception. And Strauss does explicitly oppose tyranny, just as he does indeed warn against pursuing empire as an end in itself. But my argument is that we must look beyond Strauss's readings of Plato and Machiavelli to see how the Nietzschean elements in

⁹ See Seymour Hersh, "Selective Intelligence," *New Yorker*, May 12, 2003, 6; Richard Bernstein, "A Very Unlikely Villian (or Hero)," *New York Times*, January 29, 1995.

¹⁰ See Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 27, Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 77, Nicholas Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue: Unveiling Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 118.

¹¹ Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 200.

¹² Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), pp. 130-136.

Strauss led him to imagine something greater than tyranny, something more glorious than empire.

The Scholarly Literature

The scholarly task of interpreting Strauss's work is made difficult by the way he read and wrote about political theory and the way crucial influences are concealed in his interpretation of other thinkers. The interpretive techniques Strauss described in his discussion of esoteric writing should be applied to his own work because, as his students acknowledge, he incorporates methods of hidden communication that can only be understood by first recognizing that he employed the same "rules of writing" that he attributed to other political philosophers.¹³

Academics influenced by Strauss and his interpretive techniques offer clues as to why Strauss's work has long been misinterpreted by scholars. Strauss scholars provide good reasons for believing that the techniques of concealment and "writing between the lines" which Strauss attributed to other political philosophers are employed in his own writings. Harvey Mansfield, a prominent student of Strauss's, acknowledges that Strauss used various methods of concealment and misdirection in his scholarship.¹⁴ Mansfield's discussion of Strauss's work on Machiavelli draws the reader's attention to some of the ways Strauss concealed his true teaching and the fact that there is a hidden teaching to uncover. Strauss's readings of Plato and Machiavelli are especially relevant in this regard because they demonstrates how central themes in Strauss's political philosophy were presented in a manner that concealed his actual teaching.

¹³ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 30.

¹⁴ Harvey Mansfield, "Strauss's Machiavelli," *Political Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 4, November 1975, pp. 372-384.

The reactions by Strauss's students to scholars who critique Strauss's methods help explain the reasons behind Strauss's esoteric style of reading and writing, which has long frustrated scholarly efforts to understand his work. Soon after Strauss's death, J.G.A. Pocock tried to engage Harvey Mansfield in a scholarly debate about Strauss's interpretation of Machiavelli. The result is an important published exchange in which Pocock describes various writing techniques used by Strauss, which obscure his meaning and make academic discussion of his work exceedingly difficult.¹⁵ For outsiders, his style of reading and writing act as a barrier to entry meant to keep away unwanted observers. For his students, these techniques have served as a kind of philosophical training. Strauss's pedagogy of close textual reading comes along with his use of concealment, confusion, paradox, inconsistency, and irreconcilable tensions, which force readers into constant engagement with mysterious gaps, curious contradictions, and purposeful silences alongside intriguing allusions and complex puzzles. Those who withstand what Pocock refers to as Strauss's efforts to "condition and brutalize the subliminal consciousness" are inspired to fill the gaps, solve the contradictions, and see in pregnant silences the space where new truths can be born and put into the mouths of others. Pocock explains how Strauss's method is to impute intention to an author wherever there is silence, anomaly, inconsistency, or contradiction; "wherever the example seemed not to prove what it was intended to prove," Strauss claimed that the author "was alerting us to his intention of saying something other than what appears on the face of the text."¹⁶ The method ultimately makes the interpretation non-falsifiable,

¹⁵ J.G.A. Pocock, "Prophet and Inquisitor, Or, A Church Built Upon Bayonets Cannot Stand: A Comment on Mansfield's 'Strauss's Machiavelli,'" *Political Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 4, November 1975, pp. 385-401.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

prevents open academic discussion, and creates a mechanism for Strauss's followers to promote their own truths and recruit others to advance those truths.

Due to the obstacles Pocock points out, scholars have misinterpreted the significance of Strauss's reading of Machiavelli. Scholars influenced by Strauss's teaching have, over the years, tended to focus on his critique of Machiavelli as the founder of a modernity that leads to nihilism.¹⁷ This reading of Strauss neglects entirely the Nietzschean elements of his teaching, but even those scholars who see Nietzsche's influence in Strauss's reading of Machiavelli focus on the use of political deception in pursuit of an imperial agenda or in the service of a Schmittian conception of permanent warfare.¹⁸ There is good reason why scholars look to Strauss's work on Machiavelli to understand Strauss's glorification of founders and lawgivers, but along with the Nietzschean emphasis on philosophers as creators, the religious dimension of Strauss's Machiavelli has also been concealed.

Even as Strauss criticizes Machiavelli's overt atheism and faults him for initiating a mode of modern thought that puts nature and philosophy at the service of all mankind, at a deeper level Strauss glorifies Machiavelli as a prophetic lawgiver and the creator of a new world. Paradoxically, an atheistic Machiavelli showed Strauss how philosophers can be politically mobilized by religious modes of thought and expression. Mansfield presents the political wisdom Strauss learned from Machiavelli as a secret, sacred doctrine that can only be properly expressed in religious terms: "Strauss's secret teaching

¹⁷ See Robert J. McShea, "Leo Strauss on Machiavelli," *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 4, December 1963, pp. 782-797; Kim A. Sorenson, *Discourses on Strauss*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Nicholas Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue: Unveiling Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

is classical natural right, but he chose to ally this with, or express it in, the tradition of religious belief.”¹⁹ Strauss criticized Machiavelli qua *modern* political thinker who subverted existing religious beliefs, but Strauss honored Machiavelli the philosopher who restored a pre-modern religious spiritedness and inspired the actions of future founders. Peter Minowitz argues that Strauss’s most far-reaching claim about Machiavelli has not gotten the scholarly attention it warrants. Minowitz says that “Strauss’s Machiavelli, between the lines, not only recommended techniques of political control that incorporate lessons he’d gleaned from Christianity’s unprecedented global influence; he also recruited a future brigade of philosophers who would employ such techniques on behalf of an entirely worldly agenda. The explanations that Harvey Mansfield and Leo Paul S. De Alvarez have provided of such “spiritual warfare,” I maintain, have yet to be sufficiently developed and assessed.”²⁰ Though Strauss claims this combination of philosophy, politics, and religion are embedded in Machiavelli’s writings, Mansfield admits that “Strauss has put a teaching in Machiavelli’s mouth in order to prepare a return to his own classical teaching.”²¹ Strauss’s reading of Plato has long been recognized as central to that teaching.

Miles Burnyeat’s critique of Strauss’s work on Plato was a seminal event in Strauss studies because of the way Burnyeat refuted Strauss’s interpretation and claimed that it contained a political agenda meant to inspire future followers.²² Burnyeat’s critique triggered a wave of published responses from Strauss’s students, all of which

¹⁹ Harvey Mansfield, “Strauss’s Machiavelli,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 4, November 1975, pp. 372-384.

²⁰ Peter Minowitz, “The Enduring Problem of Leo Strauss?” *Claremont Review of Books* Special Edition, Fall 2014.

²¹ Mansfield, p.381.

²² Miles Burnyeat, “The Sphinx Without a Secret,” *New York Review of Books*, May 30, 1985, pp. 30-36. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1985/05/30/sphinx-without-a-secret/>.

focused less on the faults Burnyeat exposed in Strauss's reading of Plato and more on Burnyeat's claim that Strauss taught his students to surrender their critical faculties and devote themselves to realizing Strauss's own goals. Due to Strauss's gifts as an inspiring teacher, Burnyeat wrote, an academic cult formed around him that "gives his ideas a potency that they lack on the printed page."²³ Strauss's students demonstrate in their responses to Burnyeat how the religious themes Mansfield and Minowitz said were present in Strauss's Machiavelli were also present in Strauss's own pedagogy to such an extent that his teaching is transmitted to his students as religious wisdom.

Whereas Mansfield's response to Pocock's critique of Strauss's Machiavelli demonstrates a form of interpretation that promotes a political agenda rather than open scholarly debate, the responses by Strauss's students to Burnyeat's critique of Strauss's Plato demonstrate how Strauss's teaching contains a religious dimension. Harry Jaffa's response stands out, and not only because he is recognized as the founder of the West coast school of Straussianism that promotes a unique mythology of American nationalism.²⁴ Jaffa's response focuses on Burnyeat's charge that Strauss was an inspiring teacher, and rather than denying the claim, he embraces it and elevates Strauss in the manner that Strauss elevated Machiavelli, which is to say, he treats him as a prophetic lawgiver by comparing him to Moses. Jaffa focuses on Strauss's concept of natural right and explains how it is the source of a higher wisdom "for the American people as much as were the tablets of law brought down by Moses from Sinai for the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

children of Israel.”²⁵ Jaffa’s response shows how Strauss transformed political philosophy into a religious experience:

It is difficult to convey to anyone who has not shared such an experience the excitement I felt - now nearly forty years ago - when I realized that I had been emancipated from the dungeon of historicism, from that dark place of the soul in which the great questions, the only questions that make life ultimately worth living, are treated as “essentially meaningless.” That excitement has however never left me, and I can have only pity for those - like Professor Burnyeat - who seem likely never to know it.²⁶

This is philosophic freedom as a kind of religious emancipation, a never-ending source of excitement and energy that makes life meaningful and worth living. Jaffa captures how the Platonic Strauss taught his students to think about freedom. For Strauss, “Platonizing” entails philosophical truth-creation that reflects Nietzsche’s influence on Strauss and redefines the task of philosophy by turning thinkers into lawgivers, meaning-makers, and founders. Like Mansfield says about Strauss’s Machiavelli, Jaffa was taught by Strauss that Plato contained a “classical natural right” teaching, but both the Machiavellian and Platonic sides of Strauss interpret that teaching as the lawgiving authority of supra-human thinkers who create the foundations for all meaningful truth and order.

Scholars have misunderstood how the Nietzschean dimensions of Strauss’s work influence the Platonic and Machiavellian elements that scholars have long viewed as the constitutive features of his political philosophy. The discovery of personal letters from Strauss to friends and colleagues have forced scholars to further explore Nietzsche’s influence on Strauss’s work. One of the most significant discoveries in those letters is Strauss’s admission to Karl Lowith that “Nietzsche so dominated and charmed me

²⁵ Allan Bloom, Joseph Cropsey, Robert Gordis, Harry V. Jaffa, Clifford Orwin, Thomas L. Pangle et al., “The Studies of Leo Strauss: An Exchange,” *New York Review of Books*, October 10, 1985. In response to Miles Burnyeat, “Sphinx Without a Secret,” *New York Review of Books*, May 30, 1985, pp. 30-36. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1985/10/10/the-studies-of-leo-strauss-an-exchange/>.

²⁶ Ibid.

between my 22nd and 30th years that I literally believed everything I understood of him."²⁷ Some scholars like Steven Smith argue that Strauss ultimately broke free of Nietzsche's spell and turned to Plato "for the reconstruction of prescientific consciousness" as part of an effort to redirect the path thinkers like Heidegger took from Nietzsche and to redefine the role of philosophers.²⁸ In this reading, the Platonic elements in Strauss point to the religious and mythical sources of wisdom, which are then incorporated into Strauss's reading of other political philosophers like Machiavelli, who Smith sees as the basis of Strauss's understanding of "the primacy of political things."²⁹

Other scholars accept that Strauss's turn to Plato and Machiavelli involve an effort to redirect the post-Nietzschean path of philosophy, but they see Nietzsche's influence persisting throughout Strauss's writings. Nicholas Xenos emphasizes that the apparently Machiavellian sources for Strauss's understanding of the relationship between politics and philosophy actually originate from Strauss's encounter with Carl Schmitt.³⁰ Others see Strauss's critique of Schmitt's concept of the political as both an admission of Schmitt's influence and a signal that Nietzsche remained Strauss's true guiding star. Alan Gilbert sees Strauss's critique of modernity as "a Nietzschean denunciation of the epochs-long revolt of the poor, the triumph of 'slave morality' and equality."³¹ Moreover, Gilbert sees Strauss's defense of freedom in opposition to modern tyranny as not only Nietzschean but also apocalyptic because it "envisions nuclear destruction as a

²⁷ Leo Strauss letter to Karl Lowith, June 23, 1965 in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 148.

²⁸ Steven B. Smith "'Destruktion' or Recovery?: Leo Strauss's Critique of Heidegger," *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol.51, No.2 (Dec. 1997), pp. 345-377.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Nicholas Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue: Unveiling Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

³¹ Alan Gilbert, "Strauss's Vision of a Great Anti-modern Tyrant and its Bizarre American Consequences," June 2, 2009. <http://www.democraticindividuality.com/2009/06/strauss-vision-of-great-anti-modern.html>.

return to a human ‘spring’ as if everything would grow anew and then cycle through again to the ‘last men.’”³² This reading is reflected in the scholars who see an “apocalyptic utopianism” animating Strauss and those influenced by his teaching who are guided by a “hope that a purgative fire will clear the ground for a new world order.”³³

Shadia Drury has long promoted the interpretation that Strauss’s diagnosis of and response to the “crisis of modernity” is a Nietzschean confrontation with nihilism in a godless world.³⁴ Drury explores how Nietzsche’s ideas about absent gods shape Straussian pedagogy and how Strauss embeds Nietzsche’s themes of suffering, heroism, and meaning-creation into his recruitment efforts: “Nietzsche thought that only when suffering is witnessed by gods did it become meaningful and heroic. Soaring high, Strauss discovered that there are no gods to witness human suffering; and finding the job vacant, he recruited his acolytes.”³⁵ But Drury overemphasizes the aspect of tyrannical rule by elites in her reading of Strauss. Despite his view that a philosopher should see himself as the “ruler of rulers,”³⁶ Strauss’s aim is to inspire future philosophers to be creators of new regimes rather than the hidden power guiding existing rulers.

Unique among Strauss’s defenders, Laurence Lampert embraces the Nietzschean influence on Strauss but argues that the crucial difference between Nietzsche and Strauss is that Strauss insisted on publicly concealing the death of God. Beyond that important

³² Ibid.

³³ Corey Robin, “In the Shadow of Tyranny,” *New Statesman*, June 13, 2005. <https://www.newstatesman.com/node/162260>.

³⁴ Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

³⁵ Shadia Drury, “Leo Strauss and the Grand Inquisitor” *Free Inquiry Magazine*, Volume 24, Number 4, November 2004. <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article7395.htm>.

³⁶ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 86.

difference, for Lampert, Strauss's political philosophy, exemplified by his readings of Plato and Machiavelli, is decisively influenced by Nietzsche. Lampert shows how Strauss used Plato's views about eros to reformulate Nietzsche's concept of the will-to-power: the good-in-itself, according to Lampert's take on how Strauss read Plato, is "a satisfaction of striving that can only be the initiation of new striving and not satiation."³⁷ Lampert sees Strauss making Nietzsche's ceaseless striving compatible with the affirmation of a permanently unchanging world. According to Lampert, Strauss gives new expression to Nietzsche's paradoxical embrace of two seemingly contradictory doctrines, the will-to-power and the eternal return of the same. Lampert accepts Strauss's explanation that according to Nietzsche, the fact of the will-to-power is the basis for "the new highest value, affirmation of the eternal return of the world as it is, the real world."³⁸ Strauss scholars who confront Nietzsche's influence on Strauss tend to see in his political philosophy an anti-nihilistic effort to discover truth and meaning in a post-Nietzschean world.³⁹ But Lampert makes the interesting claim that Strauss, like Nietzsche, actually sees philosophers as creators of truth, even though Strauss publicly claimed that philosophers discover rather than create truth because, unlike Nietzsche, Strauss was too timid to openly legislate values.⁴⁰ Lampert is right to argue that, unlike Zarathustra, Strauss refuses to publicly proclaim the death of God. But Lampert is wrong to argue that Strauss's political philosophy aims at an aristocratic form of liberalism.

³⁷ Laurence Lampert, *The Enduring Importance of Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 117.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See Gregory Bruce Smith "Athens and Washington: Leo Strauss and the American Regime," eds. Kenneth Deutsch and John Murley, *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield 1999), pp 103-128; Peter Berkowitz, "Leo Strauss's Political Philosophy: Reviled But Redeemed," www.PeterBerkowitz.com August 16, 2014.

⁴⁰ Lampert, p. 118.

Although Lampert's analysis of Nietzsche's influence on Strauss shows how an anti-liberal theory can be made compatible with an aristocratic defense of liberal democracy, other Straussian scholars dismiss claims that Strauss's critique of modernity emanated from a Nietzschean core. Peter Berkowitz argues that while "Strauss defended liberal institutions," he was deeply concerned about the consequences of modern thought and politics and thus "favored reforming liberalism from within."⁴¹ Though Berkowitz denies that this vision of internal reform comes from a Straussian understanding of the philosopher which is inspired by Nietzsche's *ubermensch*, he frames Strauss's defense of liberal democracy in terms of resisting democracy's own worst tendencies by cultivating a kind of freedom that fosters the development of humanity's best, philosophers whose wisdom make them appear "almost superhuman."⁴²

But Berkowitz's all-too-vocal protest sounds too much like a silent admission that liberal critics like Stephen Holmes are right to read antiliberalism into Strauss's defense of democracy against fascism. "Strauss's argument," Holmes explains, "is stupefyingly paradoxical. Indeed, it is so foreign to our ordinary way of thinking that it is at first difficult to absorb. From a Platonic perspective, it turns out, fascism was excessively democratic and egalitarian. Like Christianity and liberalism, it wholly neglected 'the best human type.'"⁴³ Berkowitz rejects what he sees as Holmes's "effort to characterize Strauss as a disciple of Nietzsche and Heidegger," an effort that "paints an ugly portrait of Strauss as a thinker endowed with an almost superhuman contempt for ordinary human

⁴¹ Peter Berkowitz, "Liberal Zealotry," *The Yale Law Journal*, Vol. 103, No. 5 (Mar., 1994), pp. 1363-1382.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 77.

beings.”⁴⁴ The key point is not that Strauss’s contempt for ordinary people is superhuman, but that his concern above all else is to produce philosophers who see themselves as superhuman, as founders and lawgivers who Strauss misleadingly refers to as perfect princes. Strauss acknowledges that he is “almost solely concerned with the goal or end of education at its best or highest – of the education of the perfect prince.”⁴⁵ But Strauss’s perfected princes are not rulers or even wise teachers and advisors directing the ruler’s hand. Berkowitz defends Strauss from the charge that he is an antiliberal, antidemocratic Nietzschean and portrays Strauss’s focus on *the best human type* as a “provocative defense of democracy” rather than a Nietzschean effort to destroy it.⁴⁶ My view is that Strauss’s teaching does aim to destroy democracy because destruction of existing regimes clears the way for the creation of new regimes.

Because the Platonic, Machiavellian, and Nietzschean elements of Strauss’s work are interwoven with philosophical concepts containing a religious dimension, his teaching defies contemporary political categories. And yet scholarly responses to Strauss’s work are often grouped according to the perceived or professed political orientations of the scholars. There are leftists and conservatives who similarly argue that Strauss’s anti-utopian political philosophy results in managerial tyranny of intellectual elites.⁴⁷ There are leftists, liberals, and libertarians who see Strauss’s work containing

⁴⁴ Peter Berkowitz, “Liberal Zealotry,” *The Yale Law Journal*, Vol.103, No.5 (Mar., 1994), p. 1377.

⁴⁵ Leo Strauss, “What is Liberal Education?” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 315.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ See Perry Anderson, *Spectrum: From Right to Left in the World of Ideas* (New York: Verso, 2007); Nicholas Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue: Unveiling Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Paul Gottfried, “Straussians vs. Paleo-Conservatives,” *Lew Rockwell*, May 17, 2002, <http://www.lewrockwell.com/gottfried/gottfried29.html>.

utopian elements that inspire rebellion against managerial-administrative rule of elites.⁴⁸

There are religious conservatives and paleoconservatives who see Strauss as a subversive atheist, and liberals and leftists who see in his teaching a traditionalist defense of religious orthodoxy.⁴⁹ Though Strauss's work triggers strong political responses, the scholarly efforts to explain his teaching do not fall neatly into political categories, but the scholarship can be characterized according to the Platonic, Machiavellian, and Nietzschean themes in his work that they emphasize.

Critics on the left and the right who argue that Strauss's Platonic ideal veils a Machiavellian political agenda that will lead to "managerial tyranny"⁵⁰ demonstrate how Plato and Machiavelli offer useful frames, but their argument neglects Strauss's Nietzschean critique of legal-bureaucratic rule and his disparagement of modern elites. Strauss's entire discussion of the "tyrannical teaching" can be understood as an attempt to inspire rebellion against administrative rule by elites and the cultivation of new elites inspired by something greater than managerial rule. Strauss's elitism is animated by a vision of founders and creators, not managers.

Other scholars see in Strauss a Machiavellian attempt to subvert America's Christian values. Self-described conservative traditionalists like Claes Ryn see in Strauss's teaching a conspiratorial element which focuses on replacing the traditional

⁴⁸ See Alan Gilbert, "Strauss's Vision of a Great Anti-Modern Tyrant and its Bizarre American Consequences," *Democratic Individuality* June 2, 2009; Corey Robin, "In the Shadow of Tyranny," *Newstatesman*, June 13, 2005, <https://www.newstatesman.com/node/162260>; Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); C. Bradley Thompson and Yaron Brook, *Neoconservatism: An Obituary for an Idea* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁴⁹ Claes G. Ryn, "Leo Strauss and History: The Philosopher as Conspirator," *Humanitas*, Vol. 18, Nos. 1, 2, 2005; Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Nicholas Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue: Unveiling Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁵⁰ Paul Gottfried, "Straussians vs. Paleo-Conservatives," *Lew Rockwell*, May 17, 2002, <http://www.lewrockwell.com/gottfried/gottfried29.html>.

ruling class with new philosophical elites, and thereby affecting internal regime change.⁵¹ Because Ryn sees Strauss's new elites as stand ins for disagreeable minorities with outsized political influence, his critique misses the extent to which Strauss's philosophers are Nietzschean value creators and not simply Machiavellian manipulators. Ryn's insistence that Straussian intellectuals cannot be trusted bears the odor of anti-semitism. Ryn's charge is that Straussians are a deceitful, insular minority who pursue a hidden agenda by manipulating those in power. "To avoid the resentment of the surrounding society," Ryn claims, "and be able to insert themselves into the counsels of the powerful, the philosophers must use deceit. Once in a position of influence, they can advance their own objectives by whispering in the ear of the rulers."⁵² Ryn frames those objectives as a betrayal of America's true moral-religious values. Strauss's defenders dismiss such arguments by aligning them with the work of Lyndon LaRouche.⁵³ But to borrow Strauss's notion of *reductio ad Hitlerum*, by which he means that a "view is not refuted by the fact that it happens to have been shared by Hitler,"⁵⁴ a critique is not refuted because it happens to contain antisemitic elements. But it can be refuted based on its neglect of the Nietzschean elements in Strauss's teaching.

Where Christian traditionalists see one kind of betrayal, libertarians see another. Libertarians see Strauss's work as an attempt to subvert America's liberal-economic values by pursuing a transformative nationalist-imperialist agenda. C. Bradley Thompson and Yaron Brook claim that neoconservatism is guided by Strauss's view that a

⁵¹ Claes G. Ryn, "Leo Strauss and History: The Philosopher as Conspirator," *Humanitas*, Vol. 18, Nos. 1,2, 2005.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 13.

⁵⁴ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 42-43.

militarized America willing to sacrifice for the principles it cherishes could save modernity from an existential meaninglessness.⁵⁵ They claim that Strauss believes nationalism offers the best way to respond to modern nihilism because it points back to an era when myths gave people something noble to believe in: “nationalism for Strauss is a suitable halfway house on the road back to the ancient polis.”⁵⁶ In this view, nationalist myths pave the way for a return to a previous age, when ruling elites reflected the highest human possibilities. Thompson and Brook claim Straussian elites condition ordinary Americans “to believe in the ‘idea’ of the public interest or the ‘idea’ of America so that whoever controls the ‘idea’ controls the regime.”⁵⁷ But my argument is that control is not the endgame. The Thompson-Brook critique captures how the Platonic and Machiavellian sides of Strauss point to deeper Nietzschean concerns, but those concerns are really about creating and recreating regimes that provide truth and meaning. Alan Gilbert sees in Strauss’s defense of imperialism the expression of a kind of greatness that allows aristocratic intellectuals to seek noble adventure as a way to overcome existential despair.⁵⁸ That reading parallels the libertarian critique which sees national greatness not just as an idea designed to enhance the power of idea-makers, and imperialism not just as a means to enhance the power of the state: together, ideas and state policy are “the ultimate antidote to nihilism.”⁵⁹ But the noble adventure to overcome nihilism does not aim at rule itself, it aims at creation.

⁵⁵ C. Bradley Thompson and Yaron Brook, *Neoconservatism: An Obituary for an Idea* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 142.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Alan Gilbert, “Do Philosophers Counsel Tyrants?” *Democratic Individuality*, May 13, 2009.

⁵⁹ Thompson and Brook, p. 233.

When Strauss's students explain that they were taught "how to look at modernity through pre-modern eyes" they point to the utopian aspect of Strauss's vision, which guides their thinking about the possibility of restoring noble conceptions of greatness.⁶⁰ Charles Kessler draws attention to how Strauss thought of the prospects for such a restoration within democratic regimes by distinguishing between an ancient concept of utopianism that he embraced and the modern utopianism he rejected. The ancient version imagines democracy differently than the modern version. In Strauss's ancient view, democracy is "resourceful and adaptable and contagious," but "democracy's health depend[s] on certain pre-democratic virtues of self-restraint, self-sacrifice, and statesmanship."⁶¹ According to Kessler, Strauss taught his students that over time a democratic "system would discourage and undermine the very virtues that had made possible its founding."⁶² And therein lies both the Nietzschean core and the utopian vision in Strauss's teaching as it applies to democracies. Whereas democracy is dehumanizing because it undermines the heroic spirit that animates creators and founders, democratic systems are also resourceful and adaptable because they are based on the principle of freedom, which can foster the development of the creators and founders who make meaning, truth and order possible and propel the movement toward aristocratic excellence. Social and political upheavals in the years after Strauss's death confirmed to policy elites influenced by his teaching something embedded in that teaching: "systemic renewal was possible, after all."⁶³

⁶⁰ Charles Kessler, "Iraq and the Neoconservatives," *Claremont Review of Books*, Vol.III No.3 Summer 2007.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

The Argument

A guiding premise of this dissertation is that Strauss's nominal defense of democracy is based on an apocalyptic vision that combines a Nietzschean notion of creator-freedom, a Machiavellian glorification of founder-princes, and a Platonic concept of human transcendence through contemplation and teaching. Despite containing the "severest indictment of democracy that ever was written,"⁶⁴ Strauss finds in Plato a way to transform democratic regimes by cultivating a new intellectual aristocracy capable of achieving the highest human possibilities: "since the principle of democracy is freedom, all human types can develop freely in a democracy, and hence in particular the best human type."⁶⁵ Strauss's political philosophy envisions a ruling class taught to believe that their intellectual superiority gives them the natural right to transform democratic regimes by promoting aristocratic excellence. But when he openly proclaims that his pedagogical endeavor is to "found an aristocracy within democratic mass society"⁶⁶ his boldness conceals a greater boldness. What sounds like the "natural aristocracy" of the American framers is actually a different kind of elitism altogether. The best human beings, says Strauss, are those who understand that in a godless world it is they who must create meaning, truth, and order. And when existing regimes fail to provide meaningful truth and order, then those regimes must be remade. Systemic renewal is possible.

This dissertation looks beyond the different paths Strauss's students pursue and argues that his teaching inspires a common conviction about the superhuman role

⁶⁴ Leo Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?," in *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 36.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Leo Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?" *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 314.

political thinkers, writers, and advisers can play in a late modern, godless world. Mark Lilla explains that West Coast Straussians learned from Strauss how to see America as the culmination of a Western philosophical tradition that originated with Plato and that through his teaching, Straussians see the possibility that American democracy can be a source of civilizational redemption.⁶⁷ My argument is that all Straussians are inspired by utopian visions infused with religious sentiments. For nihilism to be overcome, according to Strauss, intellectual elites should see themselves as the source of ennobling myths, as the creators of truth who must claim for themselves the power and authority of gods.

I argue that this teaching, utopian in one way and anti-utopian in another, leads not to democratic expansion through imperialism, but to a self-destructive nationalism that undermines democratic values by combining authoritarian and aristocratic principles with an apocalyptic vision. Strauss's political philosophy presents the possibility of systemic renewal through a cyclical process that sees death and destruction as the path to redemption. Applying Strauss's teaching about freedom and imperialism to modern, democratic regimes involves transforming democracy into a mechanism for the destruction and recreation of modern Western civilization, which Strauss sees evolving into a World State⁶⁸ that represents the Final Tyranny.⁶⁹ The dissertation explores how Strauss's efforts to combat this modern tyranny led him to employ a premodern "tyrannical teaching" in his own pedagogy, and how his explicitly anti-nihilistic political philosophy led him to promote a "nihilistic rebellion" against universal moral principles and universal political institutions. By exploring the Nietzschean aspects of Strauss's

⁶⁷ Mark Lilla, "The Closing of the Straussian Mind," *New York Review of Books*, Nov.4, 2004.

⁶⁸ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 149.

⁶⁹ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 208.

ideas about freedom, tyranny, and nihilism, this dissertation helps explain Strauss's "nihilistic revolution" to prevent what Habermas refers to as "the completion of the modern project."⁷⁰ The dissertation began as an investigation into how Strauss's ideas about freedom influenced an American imperial agenda, but the results of that investigation make clear that Strauss's teaching about freedom looks beyond America and beyond empire.

This is not a story about how the fall of towers leads to the expansion of an empire. This is a story about how fallen towers can signal the collapse of existing regimes, and can set in motion conditions that allow for new creation based on ancient ideals. "Athens" and "Jerusalem" represent the two poles of ancient wisdom that guide Strauss. "Athens" represents ancient wisdom as expressed by philosophers who exhibit a higher kind of freedom, which justifies seeing them as higher beings. "Jerusalem" represents the source of sacred texts that inspire a chosen few to keep alive the belief in higher powers. In response to the way modern nihilism threatens the higher freedom of priestly kings and would-be wise men, Strauss turns to "Athens" to teach future philosophers to see themselves as the chosen few, and he turns to "Jerusalem" to teach those chosen few to restore mankind's highest potential by setting in motion the conditions for future creation: "the purgation of the earth through Flood," Strauss explains with reference to the biblical story of Babel, is "a restoration of mankind to its original state; it is a kind of second creation."⁷¹ This is a story about how Athens and Jerusalem come together in Strauss's mind to prepare the ground for future creators.

⁷⁰ See Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), p. 12.

⁷¹ Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens," In *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 159.

Chapter Outline

Each chapter of this dissertation presents different aspects of Strauss's teaching about the possibility of systemic renewal within a modern political regime. The first chapter explores how the Nietzschean origins of Strauss's theory of freedom animate his vision of philosophers as lawgivers. The second chapter looks at how politics and philosophy come together in that vision, and the third analyzes how his redefined conception of philosophy sees education as the development of politically engaged intellectual elites who see themselves as prophetic wise men. The final chapter looks at how Strauss's ideas about aristocratic excellence and noble imperialism point to an apocalyptic vision of regime transformation, which guides his would be prophets.

All the chapters analyze from different angles how Strauss's political philosophy grows out of an elitism that not only opposes modern egalitarianism but also rejects the Enlightenment notion that truth is the path to freedom, justice, and happiness. A connecting thread running through the chapters is Strauss's distinct elitism, which the Zuckerts explain in terms of Strauss's attitude toward truth: "[w]hat distinguishes Strauss's elite is not wealth, status, political, military, or economic power, but recognition of "the truth." This truth is hard to face: there is no God, and there is no divine or natural support for justice."⁷² Strauss follows Nietzsche in thinking that the truth leads to an existential abyss from which only philosophically creative minds offer a way out. But Strauss does not follow Nietzsche in shouting this alleged truth from rooftops. His attempt to correct the path from Nietzsche is to insist that philosopher-creators be politically responsible and engaged. Whereas some see Strauss's elitism and open call to

⁷² Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 7.

“found a new aristocracy within democratic mass society”⁷³ aimed at tyranny by intellectuals, I argue that Strauss’s hierarchical and authoritarian worldview points in another direction. Strauss envisions future philosophers and gentlemen who achieve the greatest glory not as regime rulers but as regime creators. The dissertation begins with Strauss’s unwillingness to openly proclaim God’s death and ends with a vision of a monarch-in-motion, a theory rooted in a cyclical and apocalyptic concept of regime transformation that treats philosophers as godlike beings with the power and authority to create meaningful truth and order.

Chapter One offers a framework for understanding Strauss’s theory of freedom, which includes a concept of “noble freedom” that draws inspiration from Nietzsche’s vision of philosopher-creators. I will argue that Strauss transforms the distinction between negative and positive freedoms into a hierarchy of different kinds of freedom corresponding to a rank order of human beings according to their “nature.” “License” represents the lowest kind of freedom, which applies to people with no control over their animalistic urges. For Strauss, license leads to anarchy and degrades human potential; he rejects it completely. Strauss uses “Liberty” to refer to the kind of freedom that applies to people who accept the need to restrain and moderate human desires and behavior. Liberty is meant for people who obey moral authorities and aspire to be dutiful citizens pursuing common goals that transcend self-interest. This concept of liberty is the basis for civilized political order, according to Strauss, and he defends it but with important qualifications. “Noble freedom” is the highest kind of freedom, and the kind Strauss is most concerned with conceptualizing and promoting. Noble freedom applies only to philosophers who

⁷³ Leo Strauss, “What is Liberal Education?” *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 311.

have the intellectual courage to confront and the intellectual creativity to overcome the “fundamental human experience of meaninglessness.”⁷⁴ I will argue that Strauss’s theory that noble freedom is necessary to overcome nihilism is rooted in the Nietzschean notion that truth-creation is the highest form of the will to power, and it is the basis for Strauss’s redefinition of the philosophical enterprise.

Chapter two explores the relationship between philosophy and politics in Strauss’s work. I will argue that Strauss’s teaching is based on a redefinition of philosophy that fuses aspects of philosophy and politics in a manner that magnifies the tensions between what he presents as two distinct ways of life. This chapter will build on the work of those scholars who see in Strauss’s thought the influence of Schmitt’s concept of the political,⁷⁵ while also incorporating the argument that Strauss’s political philosophy is self-consciously opposed to Schmitt’s political theology.⁷⁶ My view is that Nietzsche’s rethinking of philosophy was more important in shaping Strauss’s outlook than Schmitt’s rethinking of the political, a modified version of which is concealed in Strauss’s political philosophy. I will make the case that Strauss’s political philosophy embraces what Mansfield calls “spiritual warfare” against enemy philosophies like “historicism” and “relativism,” that Strauss’s philosophers are taught to uphold civic and religious traditions for the protection of both the public and philosophy, and that Strauss

⁷⁴ Leo Strauss, “Relativism” In *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*. Thomas Pangle ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 19.

⁷⁵ See Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Nicholas Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue: Unveiling Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁷⁶ Leo Strauss, “Three Letters to Carl Schmitt,” Letter Two, September 4, 1932 in Heinrich Meire, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 124-125.

promotes a concept of natural right in which philosophers have the power and authority to create meaningful human worlds.

Chapter three develops Strauss's notion of philosophical education and shows how Strauss imagines a new class of aristocratic intellectuals whose devotion to philosophy is inspired by his oracular "call to greatness."⁷⁷ Chapter three explores why Strauss thinks that the pursuit of wisdom leads philosophers into schools he calls sects and why the truths they are forced to keep secret endanger the public, invite persecution, and compel them to engage in political activity like sophistry and sectarianism even as they argue that philosophical wisdom requires transcending politics. I will argue that ultimately Strauss sees philosophical education as the cultivation of intellectual elites who see themselves saving mankind from modern nihilism by becoming "more than perfect philosophers," by becoming prophetic lawgivers.⁷⁸ The possibility of superhuman perfection ostensibly modeled on the questing philosophers of old is actually guided by Strauss's reimagined and Nietzscheanized Socratic model such that future philosophers can succeed where past philosophers failed in actualizing philosophy's wisdom in this world, not in a perfected political regime but in perfected wise men whose transcendence is made possible through regime creation.

Chapter Four looks at the utopian and apocalyptic elements in Strauss's teaching as they emerge from his defense of noble imperialism and his critique of modern universalism, which he sees as a form of tyranny. The notion of temptation will be explored in the context of Strauss's concern with regime transformation as a rebellion

⁷⁷ Leo Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?" *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 315.

⁷⁸ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 199.

against modern tyranny. The chapter argues that Strauss's teaching is a temptation to move from constitutionalism to "post-constitutional Caesarism," but not because he sees benevolent absolutism or wise tyranny as the best regime. For Strauss, the tyrannical temptation is about creating the conditions for a "pre-constitutional situation" and keeping alive the movement that inspires future founders to create ever-new regimes. The final chapter argues that Strauss's ideas about ancient utopianism, regime transformation, and noble imperialism seek to preserve the cyclical movement that keeps alive a monarchy-in-motion. The aim of Strauss's political philosophy is not to establish a permanent framework for a stable, final, or best social order. The aim is to inspire never-ending movement toward the missing king. In this movement, new philosophers rise and old empires fall.

Chapter 1: Freedom, Out of Nihilism

Though Nietzsche's shadow hovers over debates surrounding the influence of Leo Strauss on American political thought, missing entirely from those debates is a consideration of how Strauss's ideas about freedom relate to Nietzsche's thought.¹ I am not the first to argue that Strauss's "philosopher" is an expression of Nietzsche's "superman," I support this claim, however, with a novel perspective on how Strauss translated Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power into a concept of freedom, which he imported to an American tradition. Thus was he able to reconcile Nietzsche's theory of the will to power and the eternal return with the reality of American political culture.

In developing his ideas about freedom, Strauss transforms the distinction between negative and positive freedom into a hierarchy of different kinds of freedom corresponding to a rank order of human beings according to their "nature." The lowest kind of freedom Strauss refers to as "License," which applies to those human beings with no control over their base animalistic urges. This freedom that means doing whatever one wants leads to anarchy, and Strauss rejects it completely. A higher kind of freedom that corresponds to those people who accept the need to restrain and moderate human desires and behavior Strauss refers to as "Liberty." This freedom that applies to people who obey the law and aspire to be dutiful citizens pursuing common goals is the basis of modern civilized order for Strauss, and he defends it but with important qualifications. "Noble

¹ see Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), Nicholas Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue: Unveiling Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2008). For sympathetic accounts discussing the influence of Nietzsche on Strauss see Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Gregory Bruce Smith "Athens and Washington: Leo Strauss and the American Regime," Kenneth Deutsch and John Murley eds., *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield 1999).

freedom” is the highest kind of freedom, and the kind Strauss is most concerned with conceptualizing and promoting. Noble freedom applies only to those of a certain “nature,” those with the intellectual courage to confront, and the intellectual creativity to overcome, nihilism, the “fundamental human experience of meaninglessness.”² Noble freedom is how, in Strauss’s reading of Nietzsche, “[m]an reaches his peak through and in the philosopher of the future,” who justifies not only man but also the rest of existence by consciously creating values on the basis of the will to power as the fundamental phenomena.³ Strauss’s theory that noble freedom is necessary to overcome nihilism is rooted in the Nietzschean notion that value-creation is the highest form of the will to power. For Strauss, noble freedom entails a release of creative energies leading to action that puts an end to the historical “rule of non-sense and chance” and consists in “prescribing to nature what or how it ought to be.”⁴ The highest kind of freedom is the source of natural law in Strauss’s work, and he channels this power toward his own notion of “natural right.”

But for Strauss the creative action of free thinking is threatened by lesser forms of thought leading to a situation where humanity is in danger of not having the kind of thinkers who can justify existence and make human life meaningful. Modernity, he declares repeatedly, is in crisis because philosophy has been transformed by scientific and historical approaches to understanding and explaining objective reality. These ways of thinking, referred to throughout his writings as positivism and historicism, lead to

² Leo Strauss, “Relativism” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, Thomas Pangle ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

³ Leo Strauss “Note on the Plan of Nietzsche’s Beyond Good and Evil,” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 189.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

relativism and nihilism because they are incapable of creating values: such forms of thought reveal rather than put an end to the non-sense and chance that has hitherto ruled humanity. Accelerating the descent into nihilism are those philosophies that speak in the name of what Strauss treats as lower forms of freedom. Theories of freedom committed to satisfying all human hopes and desires are “dehumanizing” and guarantee the coming of Nietzsche’s “last man.” Theories that seek to abolish suffering and inequality are even more problematic because, in Strauss’s reading of Nietzsche, “suffering and inequality are the prerequisites of human greatness.”⁵ Noble freedom as a defense of human excellence is the basis of a new social hierarchy guided by “natural right” and ruled by thinkers who believe and teach that chosen philosophers have the godlike power to save humanity.

This chapter will begin by highlighting Nietzsche’s formative influence on Strauss and then proceed to a detailed analysis of how Strauss translated Nietzsche’s “will to power” into a concept of “noble freedom,” which is the highest expression of the distinct kinds of freedom Strauss discusses. The final section will explore the possible intention and consequences of Strauss’s linking freedom to “natural right,” which will set the stage for the next chapter’s discussion of the relationship in Strauss’s work between philosophy and politics.

⁵ Ibid.

Nietzschean Foundations

It's no secret that the issue of Nietzsche's influence on Leo Strauss divides scholars.⁶ The starting point for the quarrel is Strauss's admission that "Nietzsche so dominated and charmed me between my 22nd and 30th years that I literally believed everything I understood of him."⁷ As Gregory Smith correctly points out, unlike Nietzsche who called attention to his autobiography in works like *Ecce Homo*, Strauss went out of his way to hide himself in his commentaries. This makes those rare instances when Strauss does draw the reader's attention to his personal life especially revealing.

From Strauss's admission that Nietzsche exercised a profound influence on him, we can glean a few observations. First, the fact that Nietzsche's ideas both "dominated and charmed" the young Strauss reveals that, for Strauss, ideas have the power to control human minds through "charm" and methods Strauss elsewhere discusses such as seduction. It is also important to note that Nietzsche's "domination" is exercised over intelligent, knowledgeable, philosophical minds: at 22 Strauss had already completed his doctoral thesis in philosophy under Ernst Cassirer and by the end of this period of Nietzsche-domination he had written his first book, an interpretation of Spinoza's critique of religion. Finally, for Strauss, the belief necessary to overcome nihilism flows from certain approaches to thinking, but not from others.

⁶ see Harry Jaffa, "Crisis of the Strauss Divided: The Legacy of Leo Strauss Reconsidered." *Social Research* 54, No.3, Bicentennial of the Constitution (Autumn 1987), pp. 579-603.

⁷ Gregory Bruce Smith "Athens and Washington: Leo Strauss and the American Regime" in Kenneth Deutsch and John Murley eds., *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), p. 105, quoting "Correspondence of Karl Lowith and Leo Strauss" trans. George Elliot Tucker, *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 5/6, 1988, pg. 183). See also Strauss correspondence with Karl Lowith in Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 5. See also Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 9.

Thinking is recast as transhistorical engagement with great minds through contemplation, interpretation and teaching that gives rise to a ruling elite in possession of the highest human wisdom. Robert Howse explains this as a response to the loss, under the conditions of post-Nietzschean modernity, of all authoritative horizons, a loss which creates an opportunity for “a new kind of philosophizing that constructs engagements between thinkers from different times in the past who speak to us anew about the fundamental questions through being made to speak to each other across the centuries.”⁸ Howse emphasizes that this new approach to philosophy emerges out of the confrontation with the abyss, but “instead of fear and trembling before the abyss, a new kind of intellectual community” arises prepared to manage the most serious human problems resulting from the loss of authoritative truths.⁹ Strauss’s new intellectual elite pursues philosophy as a way of life in the context of what some Strauss scholars call the “primacy of politics,” which protects them from falling victim to their own prideful passions by giving in to the tyrannical temptation, the fundamental error made by great thinkers like Heidegger who take seriously Nietzsche’s challenge.¹⁰ What guards Strauss’s philosophers in the all-important, defining moment is their awareness that “thinking as a way of life comes to sight not (as with Heidegger) in the still of the woods at night or while standing alone before the abyss, but in a given social world constituted by law, by politics, and by the “sacred” or its secular equivalents.”¹¹ Strauss’s much discussed autobiographical preface to the English edition of his Spinoza book makes great efforts to

⁸ Robert Howse, *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 54.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Steven B. Smith “‘Destruktion’ or Recovery?: Leo Strauss’s Critique of Heidegger,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol.51, No.2 (Dec., 1997), pp. 345-377. See also Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), pp. 130-136.

¹¹ Robert Howse, *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 54.

distinguish his understanding of philosophy from Heidegger's "new thinking," but those efforts only partially conceal the shared vision of transcending scientific and historical approaches to philosophical rationality and the higher purpose of restoring the human experience of sacredness. Strauss's turn to pre-scientific consciousness and pre-modern rationality is a consequence of this lifelong commitment, which began with his belief in Nietzsche's project as revealed by Nietzsche's invented prophet Zarathustra.

Strauss is very precise and deliberate with his word choice. This is true for his use of numbers, too. When he writes "between my 22nd and 30th year" he is directly saying something about what transpired during this period, but he is also signaling that something happened at the end of this time, in his 30th year. This is when he acted upon his "literal belief" and went his own way. Nietzsche begins *Thus Spake Zarathustra* with these words: "When Zarathustra was thirty years old, he left his home..." Between the ages of 22 and 30 Strauss simply believed Nietzsche's teachings. That does not mean that at 30 he stopped believing or that, as Steven Smith argues, Nietzsche's spell on Strauss was broken.¹² At 30, the year when Strauss left his native Germany and set out on a journey that took him through various Western states before settling in the U.S., he, like Zarathustra, left his home and set out in search of a new chosen people for a new teaching, keeping in mind Zarathustra's prophecy that only after his believers have departed and made their own way can the promised future come.

So in what manner did Strauss make his own way? Strauss took up Zarathustra's call to battle against "Giant Chance" and overcome history's "lack-of-sense."¹³

¹² Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 9.

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 90-91.

Strauss's notion that noble freedom is necessary to overcome the nihilism that leads to "dehumanization" and threatens "human excellence" is a reflection of how Nietzsche's "philosophers of the future" see themselves as warrior-knights engaged in great civilizational struggles that determine human fate and give existence meaning. Only philosophers can experience the noble freedom that justifies human existence and opens the door to their own "perfection."¹⁴ Where Strauss steps out of Nietzsche's shadow, and goes his own way, is his blending and blurring of philosophical traditions which serve to inspire thinkers to action based on the prospect of becoming lawgiving founders and prophets who are "more than perfect philosophers."¹⁵ Their will to power gives the law to mankind and to nature; their freedom ranks highest because only they can create a meaningful world out of existential nothingness.¹⁶

Translating the Will to Power into Freedom

In his early writings before he had developed the doctrine of the will to power, Nietzsche explored the need for a new kind of philosopher who would create values for a modern world lacking meaning and purpose. This philosopher-creator would use "knowledge in the service of the best life" by willing, not the truth, but illusion.¹⁷ Elements of Nietzsche's myth-making, law-giving, life-shaping thinker made their way into Strauss's ideas about the identity and function of philosophers. In his seminar on *Beyond Good and Evil*, Strauss focused on Nietzsche's concern with transforming "deadly truths" into "life-giving truths" by embracing myth as an expression of a creative

¹⁴ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 45, 130-135.

¹⁵ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 113, 199.

¹⁶ Leo Strauss, "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*," In *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 189-191.

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth* (New York: Humanity Books, 1999), pp. 12-13.

will that can nourish higher forms of human life.¹⁸ Even while explicitly distancing his own views on power from those of Nietzsche, Strauss's concern with philosophy and free-thinking can only be fully understood in light of what would become in Nietzsche's later work the doctrine of the will to power.

In developing his concept of the will to power, Nietzsche highlights the problems that he claims flow from a modern approach to philosophy that sees itself animated primarily by a search for truth unconnected to higher questions of meaning. One key problem for Nietzsche and for Strauss is that philosophy has become identical to science and therefore cannot speak to human values: philosophy, in Strauss's words, has been reduced to explaining only the "how" and has been rendered impotent in determining the "why" of existence.¹⁹ Strauss follows Nietzsche in thinking that the coming "philosophy of the future" will redefine the relationship between philosophy and religion.²⁰ Strauss understands Nietzsche's position as moving away from the opposition between knowledge and faith and toward a philosophy that sees the will to power as the source of *both* knowledge and faith.²¹ But where Nietzsche sees the will to power as the creative source and primary fact of existence, Strauss treats a certain kind of freedom as the foundational phenomena.²²

Strauss's lectures on Nietzsche reaffirm those themes presented in his published

¹⁸ see Leo Strauss seminar on Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* 1971-1972 (St. John's College, Annapolis). <http://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/nietzsche-beyond-good-and-evil-1971-72-st-john's-college-annapolis>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 295.

²¹ see Leo Strauss seminar on Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* 1971-1972, Lecture 1 Fall 1971 (St. John's College, Annapolis). <http://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/nietzsche-beyond-good-and-evil-1971-72-st-john's-college-annapolis>.

²² see Leo Strauss seminar on *Natural Right*. Lecture 1 Fall 1962 (University of Chicago). <http://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/natural-right-autumn-quarter-1962>.

Nietzsche writings. Focusing on “the philosophy of the future,” Strauss overtly draws attention to *Beyond Good and Evil* in the title of a seminar he taught and an essay he published on Nietzsche near the end of his life in which he consistently points to *Thus Spake Zarathustra* as an interpretive guide, and silently points away from *The Will to Power*. The first two are completed accounts describing the need for a new kind of philosophy able to overcome the modern crisis of nihilism; the last represents incomplete notes detailing the core theme of that new philosophy. Because *The Will to Power* was unfinished and corrupted by Nietzsche’s sister, Strauss has legitimate reasons to focus elsewhere. But the fact that he systematically incorporated the doctrine of the will to power without acknowledging it suggests that he had other reasons for redirecting the attention of his readers and students.

Strauss seems to accept Nietzsche’s rejection of the modern view that organic beings are primarily driven by the instinct for self-preservation but he refuses to stand with Nietzsche in declaring that “a living being wants above all to release its strength, life itself is the will to power.”²³ Strauss says that for Nietzsche, philosophers represent the highest expression of the will to power, its “most spiritual form,”²⁴ but when speaking in his own name Strauss says nothing of the will to power and emphasizes instead that philosophy is the highest expression of human freedom or the “highest activity of man.”²⁵

To see how Strauss gets to philosophy representing the pinnacle of a hierarchy of

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 1998), p. 15.

²⁴ see Leo Strauss seminar on Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* 1971-1972 (St. John’s College, Annapolis) <http://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/nietzsche-beyond-good-and-evil-1971-72-st-john's-college-annapolis>.

²⁵ Leo Strauss, “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing” In *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 221.

freedoms, we must first explore how Nietzsche saw himself correcting philosophy's errors which lead to nihilism, a problem Nietzsche identifies with mankind's loss of aim, unity, and truth.²⁶ He describes this profound absence as a loss of belief in rank, nobility, and hierarchy: pre-modern cosmology once nourished and supported complex belief systems that upheld social hierarchy and cultivated excellence. Without such mythologies, hierarchy is no longer believed natural and human greatness is threatened. The will to power was Nietzsche's reaction to this horror.

The "most grievous, protracted and dangerous" error, Nietzsche says, is that philosophy has understood its own purpose as the search for truth without recognizing that what animates that search is the will to power.²⁷ Philosophy is not the only form, of course, of the will to power, but it is its highest expression, and therefore the highest expression of life because for Nietzsche "life simply is the will to power," which means that life "in its essence means appropriating, injuring, overpowering those who are foreign and weaker; oppression, harshness, forcing one's own forms on others, incorporation, and at the very least, at the very mildest, exploitation."²⁸ A riddle: How is life a form of exploitation, but the highest life, philosophy, an expression of freedom? Strauss's ideas about freedom are assembled from this Nietzschean puzzle.

For Nietzsche, all beings seek to discharge inner forces, and all *human* beings long for freedom.²⁹ The yearning for freedom is tied to the unleashing of inner drives and to the overcoming of obstacles restricting those drives. The relationship between the

²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 13.

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 1998), p. 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

will to power and human freedom is never systematically developed in Nietzsche's writings but he posits a relationship between the metaphysical claim that all life is propelled by the will to power and the view that all human life desires freedom. "The greater the dominating power of a will," he explains, "the more freedom may the passions be allowed."³⁰ But this dynamic is more complex than simply identifying freedom as the space where the passions seek fulfillment, a consequence of the will's struggle for power.

The notion that the will to power is best understood through a metaphor of struggle suggests that, for Nietzsche, freedom is not just a release of the will's energies or the satisfaction of its desires. True, "the 'great man' is great owing to the free play and scope of his desires" Nietzsche explains, but also "to the yet greater power that knows how to press these magnificent monsters into service."³¹ The discharge of energy to satisfy human desires is only approvingly called freedom when the will masters its own passion-monsters by pressing them into noble service. Freedom requires a struggle against constraining forces. Absent constraint there can be no freedom. "A society that preserves a regard and delicatessen for freedom must feel itself to be an exception and must confront a power from which it distinguishes itself, toward which it is hostile, and on which it looks down."³² Absent lower elements from which distinction is achieved there can be no higher freedom. Nietzsche continues here by linking aristocratic greatness to a higher kind of freedom, a linkage that Strauss will develop further. "The presupposition inherent in an aristocratic society," Nietzsche says, "for preserving a high degree of freedom among its members is the extreme tension that arises from the

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 492.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 493

presence of an antagonistic drive in all its members: the will to dominate.”³³ Strauss will give this drive to domination a peculiar political twist by presenting its highest expression as the philosopher’s desire to rule the rulers. But the starting point for any higher expression of freedom is the nihilism that only philosophers can overcome.

The modern world is plagued by nihilism because modern philosophy mistakenly sees truth as its primary principle rather than power, but two related problems have emerged which Nietzsche hopes to reverse: modern morality strives for universal happiness, security, comfort, equal rights and the end of suffering,³⁴ and modern freedom is associated with what Nietzsche refers to as “laissez-aller,” or the absence of coercion.³⁵ Nietzsche’s attack on modern freedom finds parallels in Strauss’s critique of Isaiah Berlin’s negative freedom, which will be discussed later in the chapter. A superior morality that “desires to train men for the heights, not for comfort and mediocrity, a morality with the intention of training a ruling caste - the future masters of the earth - must, if it is to be taught, appear in association with the prevailing moral laws, in the guise of their terms and forms.”³⁶ This is why the idea of freedom is so important and why Nietzsche emphasizes the need for “a different kind of “free spirit” from those before us.”³⁷ Rethinking freedom is the key to reversing the values of modern morality and overcoming modern nihilism.

Nietzsche’s rethinking begins by transforming the relationship between freedom and coercion. Without coercion no moral code can properly develop: “Every moral code,

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 502

³⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 1998), p. 76.

³⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 492

³⁷ Ibid., p. 503.

in opposition to *laissez-aller*, is an example of tyranny against ‘nature’, and against ‘reason’ too: but that cannot be an objection to it.”³⁸ If freedom is to be the basis of a moral code, it must not be thought of in simple opposition to tyranny because the development of moral codes, which Nietzsche sees as an expression of the highest freedom, requires coercion.

The essential, invaluable thing about every moral code is that it is one long coercion: in order to understand Stoicism or Port-Royal or Puritanism, just think of the coercion that every language has employed up till now in achieving its strength and freedom - the coercion of metre, the tyranny of rhyme and rhythm. How much trouble the poets and orators of every people (not to exclude certain contemporary prose writers, in whose ear an unshakeable conscience resides) have put themselves to - ‘for the sake of folly’, as utilitarian fools say, thus fancying themselves clever; ‘in subservience to tyrannical laws’, as anarchists say, thus imagining themselves ‘free’, even freethinking.³⁹

Neither the utilitarians nor the anarchists understand Nietzsche’s concept of freedom, which he recognizes is premised on a strange fact: “everything on earth that exists or has existed by way of freedom, subtlety, daring, dance, and perfect sureness, whether it be in ideas, or in governance, or in oratory and rhetoric, in the arts as well as in manners, has developed only by virtue of the ‘tyranny of such despotic laws.’”⁴⁰

Nietzsche’s concept of “natural” freedom in opposition to the “excessive freedom of *laissez-aller*” emphasizes the creative inspiration of the artist whose “free ordering, arranging, deciding, shaping” occurs in obedience to “the thousandfold laws whose very exactness and rigour make a mockery of all conceptual formulations.”⁴¹ Reveling in the mockery and partaking in “Olympian laughter,” Nietzsche never sets out to systematically describe the relationship between the will to power and natural freedom.

³⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 1998), p. 76.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Strauss's response to Nietzsche's open laughter involves a commitment to seriousness, which will be discussed in Chapter 2 through his engagement with Carl Schmitt, which considering Schmitt's decision to join the Nazis, led Strauss to take Schmitt's notion of seriousness even more seriously. The political consequences of Nietzsche's ideas were not, for Strauss, something Olympians should laugh about. Strauss's efforts to make these ideas politically responsible involved furthering Nietzsche's own efforts at drawing together philosophical freedom and inspired creativity. Strauss's "founder," discussed at length in Chapter 3, is the political realization of Nietzsche's philosopher-creator. For Nietzsche, the imaginative will of the creator obeys higher laws which give rise to the ordering of human existence through law-giving:

Law-giving moralities are the principal means of fashioning man according to the pleasure of a creative and profound will, provided that such an artist's will of the first rank has the power in its hands and can make its creative will prevail through long periods of time, in the form of laws, religions, and customs. Such men of great creativity, the really great men according to my understanding, will be sought in vain today.⁴²

Everything on earth that makes life worth living, Nietzsche declares openly, is the result of a "protracted period of unidirectional obedience."⁴³ I understand Nietzsche to be rejecting one kind of freedom without turning against freedom as such. Explicit in his rejection of "excessive freedom" is the celebration of another kind of freedom, which is tied to creativity as expressed by "free ordering, arranging, deciding, shaping." Moreover, his all-consuming task of preparing the way for the philosophers of the future demands the leadership of "free minds" or "free spirits." As we shall see, appearing to "make his own way" from Nietzsche, Strauss downplays Nietzsche's commitment to freedom and emphasizes his views on power and compulsion, then esoterically articulates his own

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 501.

⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 1998), p. 77.

theory of freedom silently borrowing from Nietzsche precisely those ideas he explicitly distances himself from. Strauss's lawgiving morality aims to fashion an intellectual community of wise men who embody freedom in Nietzsche's higher sense.

Implicit in Nietzsche's account of the role coercion plays in the development of moral codes is a rank order of different kinds of freedom each with its own orientation to power. "Laisser-aller" is at the bottom, followed by "the means to discipline and cultivate" the spirit, and at the top is "ordering, arranging, deciding, shaping." Ignorant and timid, those desiring *laisser-aller* want only to be left alone, protected from the life-exploitations of stronger wills, wanting above all else to preserve their own weak existence. Nobler souls experience a higher freedom by courageously submitting to educative forces beyond their comprehension or control; obedience to higher powers strengthens the spirit and teaches discipline and cultivates self-mastery. The supreme expression of freedom in Nietzsche's writings, is the rhythmic dance of creative wills who impose their own meaningful order on other beings and on existence itself.

The precondition for Nietzsche's higher creative freedom is having a strong will that can overcome the impediments and contending forces obstructing the achievement of one's goals. Don Dombowski argues that Nietzsche's notion of freedom requires external impediments and the struggle against them, which Dombowski sees as a form of "positive freedom."⁴⁴ But more needs to be said, lest the impression be left that Nietzschean freedom is purely inner-directed, solely about self-transformation and self-mastery. Wills must struggle against something, and must move toward something, to

⁴⁴ Don Dombowski, *Nietzsche's Machiavellian Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 41

become free in Nietzsche's sense. Wills battle against an external world, which is also acting upon the will. For Nietzsche, only strong wills are capable of gaining control in that battle of forces, only strong wills can order, arrange, and shape the external world. For Nietzsche, strength and freedom blur into one another. The key is not just whether wills can be classified as free or unfree, the issue is also whether wills are strong or weak.

At times Nietzsche seems to fold into his doctrine of the will to power different conceptions of freedom. He describes the desire for freedom and independence as disguised forms of the will to power and contrasts the hermit's "spiritual freedom" with the lowest form of freedom, the drive to self-preservation.⁴⁵ But he also says that the will to power appears as the will to freedom for weak wills.⁴⁶ At times Nietzsche drives a wedge between freedom and power in order to denigrate the desires of "weak wills" and elevate the impulses of "noble souls." Suggesting that hunger for freedom is distinct from and inferior to the drive for power, he says that "One desires freedom so long as one does not possess power."⁴⁷ "The remainder of mankind," Nietzsche says condescendingly, "all that is not warlike by instinct, wants peace, wants concord, wants 'freedom,' wants 'equal rights': these are only different names and stages of the same thing."⁴⁸

Even as he denigrates one kind of freedom, he describes the philosopher's will to power as the supreme expression of freedom. When Nietzsche prizes the "freedom of creative natures"⁴⁹ he is referring to the artist-philosopher who forms human beings and

⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 406

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 412.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 487.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 470.

creates meaningful order out of existential chaos by giving the law to nature.⁵⁰ This creative-freedom is tied to the “freedom of the spirit,” an instinct for unbelief on the part of strong wills that guards them from convictions that blind them.⁵¹ But freedom from conviction, what he calls “intellectual probity,” is both necessary and problematic for Nietzsche. Such spiritual-intellectual independence is necessary for “creative natures” and “great men” but “independence in the absence of greatness causes mischief and ought not be allowed.”⁵² He is not simply saying that some should be free and some should not. He is saying that the all-important freedom of creative meaning-making and law-giving can only be experienced by “noble souls” and thus understanding freedom in terms of equal rights infringes on the power of creators and makes nihilism impossible to overcome. Implicit in his call to unleash the creator-philosophers is a hierarchy of human beings: ordinary people are subordinate to their leaders, who are themselves subordinate to the “highest men” who exist above and beyond the masses but also “beyond the rulers” for “in the rulers they have their instruments.”⁵³ When Nietzsche proclaims that new gods are still possible and admits that within him is active a religious god-forming instinct he has in mind a future where philosophers rule the rulers with their invisible creations.

Nietzsche’s noble souls are free spirits with a “god-forming instinct” that sets them above both the people and their rulers, who become the instruments of the “highest men.”⁵⁴ Intellectual-spiritual-moral self-assertion is, for Nietzsche and for Strauss, a sign of the future philosopher’s superiority. “There is an instinct for rank that more than

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 419.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 505-506.

⁵² Ibid., p. 514.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 519.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

anything else is itself the sign of high rank.”⁵⁵ The noble soul “knows that it is above.”⁵⁶ These free spirits “give themselves laws” and thereby “create themselves.”⁵⁷ Free spirits have the power of self-determination and freedom of will, they are experimenters who achieve self-mastery through self-discipline.⁵⁸ But they also discipline the external world. Lower types, commoners and their leaders, must be disciplined from without by these highest mens. Nietzsche’s free minds belong to those Strauss will refer to as noble souls, who exercise their power-privilege-duty, according to Strauss’s “natural right,” to freely order, arrange, and shape human existence.

Dombowski’s reading of Nietzsche’s free spirits as regime-changers who “prepare the ground for a new regime”⁵⁹ parallels my reading of how Strauss’s philosophers exhibit a higher freedom. These free thinkers represent a new breed of skeptic whose intellectual-spiritual strength empower them to do great things.⁶⁰ The next chapter will discuss Strauss’s “zetetic philosophy” which he overtly presents as an alternative mode of thinking designed to protect the mind’s higher freedom, but which he covertly uses to recruit the philosophically-inclined to “do great things,” which for Strauss requires becoming properly “political.” But in this, Strauss does not stray far from Nietzsche, whose free spirits are commanders and legislators who “feel the tug towards freedom as the strongest drive” of the spirit.⁶¹ For Strauss, as for Nietzsche, the free and wise man is equated with the strong man whose “higher responsibility”

⁵⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 1998), p. 160.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁵⁷ Don Dombowski, *Nietzsche’s Machiavellian Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 39.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

compared to those with weak wills is to discharge their power dutifully, responsibly via “great deeds.” This unleashing of the strong will’s power is discussed in terms of freedom-as-creativity and expressed in the future philosopher’s act of lawgiving.⁶²

Nietzsche’s “higher responsibility” is understood by Strauss as “philosophy’s cosmic responsibility” for the “salvation of mankind.”⁶³ Both Nietzsche and Strauss at times blur the distinctions between the concepts freedom, duty, privilege, right, and power: they imagine the noble souls will channel this concocted force toward establishing a new table of values or moral code. Failure leads to nihilism because if the philosophers do not create a value system worthy of belief, then mankind will have nothing of value to believe in. Whereas Nietzsche overtly fuses the concepts freedom, right, privilege, duty, power, Strauss accepts these complex inter-relations but downplays power and privilege, elevates duty and responsibility, gives the different kinds of freedom an explicit political flavor, and transposes these ideas on a reimagined concept of natural right. At the center of this power-freedom dialectic is their mutual concern with overcoming nihilism through a new kind of philosophy.

Nietzsche declares that the free spirits are in a permanent struggle against nihilism, which is overcome only in moments of creation.⁶⁴ Describing how the Olympian laughter of philosophers in the face of human suffering demonstrates superhuman strength,⁶⁵ Nietzsche portrays his free spirits as god-like beings who rule invisibly over a tragic human existence. Laughter turns the human tragedy into a comedy,

⁶² Ibid., p. 40.

⁶³ Leo Strauss, “Note on the Plan of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*,” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 188-189.

⁶⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 1998), p. 173.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 175.

but only for the Olympians. Strauss chooses to discuss human existence in terms of neither tragedy nor comedy, but through the prism of political “seriousness.” The new gods, for Strauss, are not characterized by their laughter, but by their exercise of “Olympian freedom” in confronting the real world “crisis of our time.”⁶⁶ But Strauss traces political crises back to philosophical problems, and like Nietzsche he believed philosophy itself had to be transformed in order to overcome “fundamental nihilism.”⁶⁷ For Strauss this entails transforming “deadly truths” into “life-giving truths,” and the greatest of these deadly truths is that “God is dead.” Strauss accepts Nietzsche’s view that nihilism is the consequence of “sacrificing God for sake of nothing.”⁶⁸ Strauss too believes that the death of God leaves an absence and until that absence is filled, nihilism will plague humanity. Strauss too believes that future philosophers can save mankind, but only by reorienting their thinking about truth-creation as the highest form of the will to power and seeing it as an expression of the highest kind of freedom.

Strauss’s Hierarchy of Freedom

Strauss’s process of translating the will to power into a theory of freedom is evident in the way he shifts Nietzsche’s focus on the relationship between will to power and nihilism to a focus on the relationship between freedom and nihilism. Strauss interprets Nietzsche as arguing that the will to power is the “fundamental human phenomena,”⁶⁹ but when Strauss discusses Nietzsche’s thought in the context of presenting his own ideas about natural right he emphasizes that freedom is the

⁶⁶ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 7.

⁶⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 536.

⁶⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 1998), pp. 55-57.

⁶⁹ Leo Strauss, “Note on the Plan of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*,” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 188.

fundamental human experience.⁷⁰ Nietzsche's influence on Strauss's thinking about freedom is often hidden behind a veil of critique, such that Strauss self-consciously distances himself from Nietzsche as he co-opts many of Nietzsche's core themes and translates them into a new idiom. Thus Nietzsche's influence is clearer when Strauss is not discussing Nietzsche.

The importance to Strauss of truth-creation as an expression of the will to power is submerged in his analysis of human nature, and his conclusion that human beings need worthy goals to struggle toward for life to have meaning and purpose. Believing that human nature is fixed and permanent allows Strauss to make arguments about things that human beings always need, the most important of which is a meaningful goal. He says that human "life is activity which is directed towards some goal."⁷¹ Strauss believes that humans are not only purposive beings, they are also struggling beings.⁷² If humans are not struggling and striving with purpose, then human vitality is lost and nihilism sets in. "Indifference to any goal" and "aimlessness" prevent humans from doing what our being is meant to do: by not having a goal or aim we are no longer alive in any meaningful human sense because the movement toward something we deem worthy makes our lives worthy. But this means that while having worthy goals is necessary, achieving those goals is problematic because the movement ends. If to have our goals satisfied is to lose the animating purpose that makes a human being worthy of life, then to establish as the

⁷⁰ see Leo Strauss, "Relativism," In *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*. Thomas Pangle ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 13-39. See also Leo Strauss seminar on Natural Right. Lecture 1 Fall 1962 (University of Chicago).

<http://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/natural-right-autumn-quarter-1962>.

⁷¹ Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 34.

⁷² Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 209.

goal of human history a kind of freedom that leads to the satisfaction of the needs and desires of all people is to aim at the ultimate dehumanization of mankind. Universal freedom leads to the end of human life. What some see as human progress Strauss sees, like Nietzsche, as the victory of nihilism. But where Nietzsche presents the will to power as the way to understand how truth-creation can overcome nihilism, Strauss offers a theory of freedom.

Strauss argues that freedom is the ultimate human aspiration, but he understands freedom in a hierarchical way.⁷³ And even though in his early book on Hobbes he rejects the state of nature as a conceptual mechanism because it serves to reinforce the view that a social contract is what legitimizes ruling power,⁷⁴ his work after settling in the U.S. treats the state of nature as the “ideal vehicle for freedom.”⁷⁵ But Strauss’s reason for accepting the linkage between nature and freedom is that nature represents hierarchy. In Strauss’s work the state of nature is transformed into a conceptual mechanism to justify, not a social contract based on universal freedom, but the notion that “freedom allows for the development of the best human type.”⁷⁶ Greatness can emerge in a regime devoted in principle to human freedom, but an intervention is required in how freedom is understood. Strauss’s theory of freedom allows him to critique some forms of freedom and to claim at the same time that other kinds represent or make possible the highest human goal: freedom opens up an “abyss of nothingness” and brings about nihilism, while at the same time holds out the possibility of moving beyond nihilism and restoring

⁷³ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 294.

⁷⁴ Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 101.

⁷⁵ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 294.

⁷⁶ Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” In *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 36.

the human experience of sacredness.

How can freedom represent both the highest human goal and a problem to be transcended? Strauss's answer is a hierarchy of different kinds of freedoms, the two he names in ascending order are "license" and "liberty," while the highest kind of freedom goes unnamed but will be referred to here as "noble freedom" because of the role played by the nobility theme in Strauss's adaptation of Nietzsche's thinking. Strauss's hierarchy of freedoms can only be fully understood in light of Nietzsche's view that truth-creation is highest form of the will to power and the way Strauss sees freedom in relation to different kinds of inner forces experienced by different kinds of people. Strauss reassembles Nietzsche's scattered fragments and coopts, covers, and critiques Nietzsche's way of thinking about freedom, restraint, power and creation.

Strauss's discussion of "license" shares much with Nietzsche's critique of "laissez aller," but instead of referring to it as "excessive freedom" Strauss calls it "ruinous permissiveness" and claims, like Nietzsche, that it leads to anarchy, dehumanization and nihilism.⁷⁷ Strauss presents the problem through a moral prism: "Freedom as a goal is ambiguous, because it is freedom for evil as well as for good."⁷⁸ But the ambiguity he acknowledges is essential for his theory of freedom because the problem of nihilism demands a recognition of the different kinds of freedom, and the different purposes served by ideas of good and evil. Because license can lead to evil, it requires education,

⁷⁷ Leo Strauss, "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil," in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 182. See also Leo Strauss Seminar on Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil, Lecture 11, May 4, 2017 at 23:00 (St. John's College, Annapolis). <http://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/nietzsche-beyond-good-and-evil-1971-72-st-john's-college-annapolis>.

⁷⁸ Leo Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?" In *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 36.

restraint, and obedience for it to be directed toward the good. License justifies a worldview in which all human desires seek to be satisfied, but for Strauss human desires are understood in terms of base urges which need to be controlled. Freedom is “accompanied by a sense that the full and unrestrained exercise of that freedom is not right. Man's freedom is accompanied by sacred awe, by a kind of divination that not everything is permitted.”⁷⁹ Freedom as license leads to an awareness that restraint is necessary. And restraint he claims, “must in many cases be forcible restraint in order to be effective...Man is so built that he cannot achieve the perfection of his humanity except by keeping down his lower impulses.”⁸⁰

Only a select few are able to master their bases impulses on their own, all others demand external powers to guide them toward the good. Strauss argues that “man’s natural evil” demands the establishment of dominion by those few capable of knowing what is right by nature.⁸¹ For Strauss, base human impulses must be controlled according to moral truths known by those few who can exercise self-control and achieve self-mastery. Others need to be restrained by the few who can restrain themselves: “what is true of self-restraint, self-coercion, and power over one’s self applies in principle to the restraint and coercion of others and to power over others.”⁸² This way of thinking demonstrates a tendency on Strauss’s part to relate inner freedom to how much control or power one has over the external world, including over others. Ultimately it becomes a political expression of Nietzsche’s “free ordering, shaping, arranging, deciding” in which

⁷⁹ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 130.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133.

⁸¹ Leo Strauss, “Notes on Carl Schmitt’s Concept of the Political,” In *Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political*, George Schwab ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 130.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 132.

Strauss concludes that “even despotic rule is not per se against nature.”⁸³

In thinking through the distinction between freedom and tyranny, Strauss insists that legitimate restraints are those experienced as sacred. Sacred or transcendent sources “permitted earlier men to make a tenable distinction between liberty and license. License consists in doing what one lists; liberty consists in doing in the right manner the good only; and our knowledge of the good must come from a higher principle, from above.”⁸⁴ To move beyond the ruinous permissiveness of freedom as license, people must look up with awe and reverence to those with knowledge of what is good and right. The key is that the restraints which come along with liberty are understood and experienced as sacred, but whereas sacredness was once identified with transcendence it is in Strauss’s work connected to higher *human* sources of wisdom and power.

Strauss’s understanding of “liberty” is based on the premise that some individuals possess gifts that allows them to access higher wisdom, which is the source of the knowledge of good and evil. This knowledge legitimizes the laws that people living under liberty must obey. Liberty represents a kind of freedom that exists in tension with obedience to higher powers and the compulsion of necessary moral laws.⁸⁵ When Strauss, following Nietzsche, says that compulsion is necessary, he is not defending coercive order as such in contradistinction to anarchy. He is defending the human experience of sacredness against dehumanization, which is the consequence of the loss of sacred

⁸³ Ibid., p. 133.

⁸⁴ Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” in *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 51.

⁸⁵ see Leo Strauss seminar on Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* 1971-1972. Lecture 11, May 4, 2917 at 23:00 (St. John’s College, Annapolis). <http://le Strausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/nietzsche-beyond-good-and-evil-1971-72-st-john’s-college-annapolis>.

authority and the resulting permissiveness that comes from the inability to distinguish worthy goals from base desires. Liberty understood as an ideal oriented to good action requires a knowledge from above, that is, from higher, authoritative sources. This liberty is not an inborn universal human right; it is an ideal in which ordinary people look above to their superiors for the knowledge that transforms them from naturally evil men into good, obedient citizens with worthy goals that makes their lives meaningful and fully human. Strauss's liberty not only involves keeping down lower impulses, but also setting worthy goals and ensuring permanent movement toward those goals. This process of creating purpose and meaning by deciding which goals are noble and which are base requires a special kind of knowledge and a special kind of individual. When he says that "real men" despise bodily pleasures and aspire to great things, he is pointing to a kind of aristocratic excellence he feels is threatened by wrongheaded approaches to freedom.⁸⁶

For Strauss, liberalism is based on a misguided conception of freedom, which treats the individuals as sacred and yet is unable to justify any notion of sacredness. Dismissing the theoretical basis of Isaiah Berlin's defense of negative liberty, Strauss emphasizes liberalism's inability to justify the sacredness of the "frontiers of freedom that nobody should be permitted to cross."⁸⁷ Strauss is not challenging the location of those frontiers, but their status as "sacred." He talks about the most effective restraints on human urges as having the status of sacredness, but the idea of preventing any external force, any authority, from interfering in the private sphere created by the liberal tradition's concept of freedom cannot be called sacred. When he says that the "sanctity of

⁸⁶ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 133.

⁸⁷ Leo Strauss, "Relativism" In *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*. Thomas Pangle ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 15-16.

the individual as individual, unredeemed and unjustified” is what freedom came to mean for the many, he is acknowledging that higher conceptions of freedom may be achievable, but not by “man as mere man”:

Every freedom which is freedom for something, every freedom which is justified by reference to something higher than the individual or than man as mere man, necessarily restricts freedom or, which is the same thing, establishes a tenable distinction between freedom and license. It makes freedom conditional on the purpose for which it is claimed.⁸⁸

Echoing Heidegger’s Nietzschean critique of negative liberty, Strauss argues that the highest kind of freedom is the lawgiving kind.⁸⁹ Steven Smith concedes that, like Heidegger, who claimed that “to give oneself the law is the highest freedom,” Strauss too believed that freedom that is only negative cannot be regarded as genuine.⁹⁰ But where Heidegger’s opposition to negative freedom “meant lack of concern, arbitrariness of intentions, lack of restraint in what was done and left undone” and led him to reject liberalism openly and completely, Strauss’s critique of negative freedom did not prevent him from appreciating the potential of Berlin’s liberal theory of freedom.⁹¹ Strauss recognized that it “would be shortsighted to deny that Berlin’s formula is very helpful for a political purpose - for the purpose of an anticommunist manifesto designed to rally all anticommunists.”⁹² Even as he rejected the philosophical justification behind Berlin’s concept of freedom, Strauss appreciated its political purpose. It was not Berlin’s philosophical argumentation that Strauss found persuasive; it was Berlin’s role as a

⁸⁸ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 294.

⁸⁹ Steven B. Smith “‘Destruction’ or Recovery?: Leo Strauss’s Critique of Heidegger,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol.51, No.2 (Dec., 1997), pp. 345-377

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* quoting Martin Heidegger, “The Self-Assertion of the German University,” Gunther Neske and Emil Kettering, eds., *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism: Questions and Answers* (New York: Paragon, 1990), pp. 5-13

⁹² Leo Strauss, “Relativism,” In *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*. Thomas Pangle ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 15-16.

philosopher using freedom to direct the political purpose of the West in a civilizational struggle. Strauss rejected how Berlin thought about negative and positive freedom, but Strauss seemed to identify an unnamed freedom in Berlin's effort to define how Western civilization should think about their own freedom and to persuade Western leaders to defend their ideal of freedom as superior to and endangered by other kinds of freedom.

Whereas Strauss's understanding of liberty, involves the process of fashioning good citizens out of naturally evil men, noble freedom transcends good and evil and is the source of the highest truths. Noble freedom is a kind of lawgiving power that decides, shapes, informs and directs how lower forms of liberty are thought of and experienced. Strauss presents "genuine freedom" in contradistinction to both license and liberty, and treats this kind of unnamed freedom as the "highest human aspiration" because its expression provides truth and purpose. Strauss's description of this noble kind freedom is only available to the law-giving few who aspire to the highest human excellence: "While some men are corrupted by wielding power, others are improved by it."⁹³ The highest kind of excellence comes from exercising the highest kind of power.

Noble freedom is expressed as creative, lawgiving power. The ideas that guide and determine human life are the "free human creations" that Nietzsche associates with his free spirited philosopher-artist and Strauss with his philosopher-founder.⁹⁴ Noble freedom aligns with Nietzsche's "free ordering, arranging, deciding, shaping;" it is in Strauss's view what allows human beings to live purposefully because it is the source of

⁹³ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 294.

⁹⁴ Leo Strauss, "Relativism," In *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*. Selected and Introduced by Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 18.

the highest power, which determines human values and give mankind meaning and purpose. Noble freedom emerges out of Nietzsche's "god-forming instinct" and is, for Strauss, the source of the law that proscribes to nature how it ought to be; it is the power that creates "the whole."⁹⁵ Life and thought are the result of an act of creation: "all human life and human thought ultimately rests on horizon-forming creations which are not susceptible of rational legitimization."⁹⁶ Without a God to attribute this creative power to, there is only "a mysterious absence that human logos cannot penetrate."⁹⁷ This absence is the reason why Strauss moves away from Nietzsche's tendency to identify intellectual freedom with probity: Strauss sees this ending in the abyss of nothingness.⁹⁸ Intellectual probity is "freedom from morality," which reveals the fundamental mystery of existence that human minds cannot make sense of without "horizon-forming creations."⁹⁹ Strauss goes beyond intellectual probity by teaching that the highest kind of freedom is not a freedom from morality but a freedom for the creation of morality.

Despite his polemics against them, Strauss credits the intellectual freedom of the historicists-turned-nihilists for reopening questions and problems long taken for granted. Problems that Enlightenment intellectuals thought were solved could again be seen as problems in need of new solutions because the historicists, who followed Nietzsche down a path Strauss could not openly take, recognized the need to go beyond the "fundamental

⁹⁵ See Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁹⁷ Gregory Bruce Smith "Athens and Washington: Leo Strauss and the American Regime" in Kenneth Deutsch and John Murley eds., *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield 1999), p. 110.

⁹⁸ Leo Strauss seminar on Natural Right. Lecture 3b at 23:00 Fall 1962 (University of Chicago). <http://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/natural-right-autumn-quarter-1962>.

⁹⁹ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 56-61.

mystery of existence.”¹⁰⁰ When Strauss declares “I am not a historicist but I give them credit for reopening these problems,” he is emphasizing how his alternative path from Nietzsche is a superior approach to overcoming the abyss of nihilism. This approach entails going beyond intellectual probity and embracing a noble freedom animated by the god-forming instinct.

Noble freedom provides both the way to overcome the abyss of nihilism and the way to human perfection in the form of the future philosopher or “wise man.” In Strauss’s work, the wise man takes the place of the dead God who was once “the most perfect being” but under the conditions of modernity the only perfection “mankind can know is human perfection in the form of the wise man.”¹⁰¹ And freedom understood in Strauss’s higher, noble sense, is the path to this perfection: “The wise man alone is free.”¹⁰² Strauss then adds to the essential humanness of the wise man who is the “highest human type” a superhuman element that transforms the wise man into a god-like ruler.¹⁰³ Superhuman perfection is achieved through a particular kind of political engagement, which will be explored in the next chapter. The key here is that Strauss understand noble freedom as the way to achieve perfection through the exertion of creative power over others. “Ruling over willing subjects is divine,” Strauss offers in a footnote about gentlemanly perfection.¹⁰⁴ The wise man knows that to achieve this divine rule the wise

¹⁰⁰ Leo Strauss seminar on Natural Right. Lecture 3b at 25:00 Fall 1962 (University of Chicago). <http://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/natural-right-autumn-quarter-1962>.

¹⁰¹ Leo Strauss, “The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy” *Independent Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 3 (1979), p. 117.

¹⁰² Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 84.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85 fn 32.

man must become “the ruler of rulers,”¹⁰⁵ which is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s view that the highest men use rulers as their instruments.¹⁰⁶

Strauss conflates his notion of noble freedom with an understanding of natural right that justifies the right of superior beings to rule over others. He admits that “some men are by nature superior to others and therefore, according to natural right, the rulers of others.”¹⁰⁷ What is less immediately apparent is that Strauss’s defense of aristocratic excellence demands not only a recognition of the natural right of superior individuals to rule over their inferiors, but that egalitarian conceptions of freedom threaten the highest human excellence and therefore inequality must be willed. Moreover, theories of freedom tied to satiating all human desires, theories that seek to end human suffering, also threaten excellence and therefore cruelty must be willed. In both his written exploration of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* and in the final lecture of his seminar on Nietzsche’s book, he explains his revulsion at the coming of the “realm of freedom,” an ideal in which all human suffering and inequality are abolished and all human beings see themselves as supermen.¹⁰⁸ Because suffering and inequality are the prerequisites for greatness, the pursuit of excellence demands that suffering and inequality be willed.¹⁰⁹ This does not mean that Strauss is an enemy of all kinds of freedom. He is opposed to the coming of the realm of freedom precisely because he cherishes the prospect of noble

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁰⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 519.

¹⁰⁷ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 133.

¹⁰⁸ Leo Strauss, “Note on the Plan of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*,” In *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 182. See also Leo Strauss seminar on Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* 1971-1972. Lecture 13, May 24, 2017 at 22:00 (St. John’s College, Annapolis). <http://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/nietzsche-beyond-good-and-evil-1971-72-st-john’s-college-annapolis>.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., at 26:00.

freedom for his philosophers.

Much of Strauss's discussion of freedom centers on Nietzsche's legacy. In the opening chapters of *Natural Right and History*, Strauss establishes the contours of his battle against the "radical historicists" who, like Heidegger, took the wrong path from Nietzsche. Strauss seeks to guard against the threat he claims they represent. "To avert the danger to human life," two options are available, either "insist on the strictly esoteric character of the theoretical analysis of life - that is, restore the Platonic notion of the noble delusion" or "deny the possibility of theory proper and so conceive of thought as essentially subservient to, or dependent on, life or fate."¹¹⁰ Strauss sees Nietzsche's misguided successors taking the second option. Strauss of course took the first and embraced esotericism and his own version of Plato's noble lies in which "Platonizing" entailed using philosophy to create meaningful truth and order.

In taking a different path from Nietzsche, Strauss criticizes other Nietzscheans for blurring the difference between intellectuals and true philosophers, but Strauss, like the Nietzscheans he rejects, accepts the view that our choice of worldviews "has no support but itself; it is not supported by any objective or theoretical certainty, it is separated from nothingness, the complete absence of meaning, by nothing but our choice of it."¹¹¹ Straussian esotericism means not openly acknowledging this, but seeking to overcome the nothingness through meaning-creation.¹¹² Assembling Strauss's various views on freedom into a hierarchical theory with meaning-creation as the pinnacle creates a key

¹¹⁰ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 26.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹¹² Leo Strauss, "Relativism" in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, Thomas Pangle ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 36.

that decodes the riddle he lays out early in his account of natural right. He presents a choice: “We are free in the sense that we are free either to choose in anguish the world view and the standards imposed on us by fate or else to lose ourselves in illusory security or in despair.”¹¹³ But these are not either/or options. Strauss creates options for the universal human “we” to choose from and at the same time chooses for his own selective “we” all three options. From within the abyss of nihilism, here referred to as despair, Strauss’s philosophers create security through illusory myths by reinterpreting particular traditions, the worldview imposed by fate. This is Strauss’s philosophical “loving reinterpretation of tradition,” a rethinking of the past that prepares the way for a new kind of future.¹¹⁴ Philosophers overcome nihilism and save humanity by attaching themselves to the traditions surrounding them and employing their creative powers by reinterpreting the shared past of a particular group in a loving manner so as to invite the peoples’ willing obedience, an expression of divine rule. More will be said in later chapters about Strauss’s rethinking of the relationship between philosophy, politics, and religion. But as it relates to his theory of freedom, we should note here that politics divides people according to those who accept tradition in a religious manner demonstrating obedient love from those whose commitment to philosophy offers them the freedom from religious belief and the freedom for creating that belief for others. This transforms philosophers into godlike beings ruling invisibly over a human world they create but do not inhabit.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Gregory Bruce Smith “Athens and Washington: Leo Strauss and the American Regime” in Kenneth Deutsch and John Murley eds., *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield 1999), p. 108.

Conclusion

Nietzsche has Zarathrustra tell his followers to be gift-givers, to let their knowledge become the meaning of the earth.¹¹⁵ As creators and fighters these men of ideas rebel against the “giant Chance,” which has ruled over human history thus far. This revolt against history’s intrinsic meaninglessness results in the creation of new meanings for mankind and does so without appeals to transcendent, otherworldly concepts. Zarathrustra then tells his followers to go their own way with this teaching. But his prophecy is not without guidance. He promises that out of these “seceding ones” a new chosen people will arise, and from them a Superman who will replace the God of old.

Those influenced by Leo Strauss see his teachings as a kind of gift. In his book on Zarathrustra, Stanley Rosen mentions Strauss only once, when Rosen explains what Strauss taught his students about “the Gift-giving Virtue” that concludes the first part of Nietzsche’s Zarathrustra. Rosen details how, for Strauss, this section parodied the Christian Trinity with the Father being Zarathrustra the gift-giver, the Son being the gift of the future, and the Holy Ghost being the solitude of one’s own spirit.¹¹⁶ When Rosen explains Zarathrustra’s gift, he is describing what Strauss taught about overcoming nihilism through the will to power reinterpreted through the prism of freedom: “The will to power manifests itself within individual creativity as the ability to shape the nihil of a free death into a table of values for the next epoch of human history.”¹¹⁷ Strauss’s theory of freedom operates on several levels at once: it opens up the abyss of nihilism and demands courage in the face of meaningless existence, but it also taps into the creativity

¹¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathrustra* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1928), p. 90.

¹¹⁶ Stanley Rosen, *The Mask of the Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 126.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

of the philosophers' will to power, which promises a new moral code for mankind. Steven Smith gives voice to Strauss's theory of freedom by acknowledging that freedom leads to nihilism, but that through a nihilistic negation, a higher freedom can be restored.¹¹⁸ Daniel Tanguay speaks of this in terms of the dialectical movement from Natural Law back to Natural Right, which he interprets, following Strauss, as a form of creative freedom to determine the laws that determine human values.¹¹⁹ Catherine and Michael Zuckert stress the centrality of the wise man,¹²⁰ but say little about the relationship between freedom and wisdom because in Strauss's view wisdom is predicated on special insight into matters traditionally governed by theology: "human knowledge of the nature of God is the forgotten basis of free thought."¹²¹ This special knowledge Strauss calls wisdom. His students discuss it by reference to freedom: by "forgetting" the knowledge of God, they reveal a void that their higher freedom can fill.

In what way did Strauss's noble freedom seek to address the problem of nihilism by retranslating Nietzsche's will to power? "I have in mind his interpretation of human creativity as a special form of the universal will to power," Strauss admits. But little is offered by way of explanation, especially in the currently published version of his critique of modern freedom, which ends with: "Existentialism is the attempt to free Nietzsche's alleged overcoming of relativism from the consequences of his relapse into metaphysics or of his recourse to nature."¹²² The existentialism he refers to here and

¹¹⁸ Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 152-155.

¹¹⁹ Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 104.

¹²⁰ Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

¹²¹ Leo Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy" *Independent Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 3 (1979), p. 116.

¹²² Leo Strauss, "Relativism" in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago, University of

elsewhere is the result of the misguided Nietzscheans whose path from Nietzsche Strauss tries to redirect. The no longer published version of that same essay omits the final two pages, a key section describing how freedom reveals both the problem of nihilism and the way to overcome it. His seminar on *Beyond Good and Evil* confirms that the two pages removed from later publications of the essay contain views that, while he taught them to his students until the end, were deliberately hidden from public view. The omitted section begins by announcing that existentialism starts as the reaction of serious men to their own recognition that all human choices are groundless, a view he attributed in *Natural Right and History* to misguided Nietzscheans. Strauss then declares that “the fundamental phenomenon, the only phenomenon that is not hypothetical, is the abyss of freedom: the fact that man is compelled to choose groundlessly; the fundamental experience, i.e., an experience more fundamental than every science, is the experience of the objective groundlessness of all principles of thought and action, the experience of nothingness.”¹²³ This is the key to understanding Strauss’s work. “Man and ultimately everything,” he proclaims, “must be understood in the light of this fundamental experience.”¹²⁴ Mankind and mankind alone is directly constituted by this fundamental nothingness. How? The abyss of freedom is synonymous with the experience of nothingness, but for some unique individuals this freedom-as-awareness of nothingness morphs into freedom-as-lawgiving and truth-creation, which offers a way out of nihilism. The only way out, Strauss makes very clear, is to “turn one’s back on the lessons of history and voluntarily choose life-

Chicago Press: 1989), p. 25.

¹²³ compare Leo Strauss, “Relativism” in Helmut Schoeck and James W. Wiggins eds. *Relativism and the Study of Man* (New York: Nostrand, 1961), p.155 and Leo Strauss, “Relativism” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 27-48.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

giving delusion instead of deadly truth.”¹²⁵ The solution is to “fabricate a myth” that supports “worthy” or “noble” human values. But this is impossible for men whose intellectual freedom leads them only to destroy belief systems, to be open and vehement atheists, for example, which is why Strauss struggled with Nietzsche’s insistence on intellectual probity, as if it were a self-destructive force opposing the wills spiritual yearnings.¹²⁶ Strauss sees an “atheistic *religiosity*” driving Nietzsche, and Strauss tries to reorient that religiosity through political philosophy. Stopping at intellectual probity is inadequate, which is why he says atheism is the penultimate stage.¹²⁷ Freedom entails both facing the abyss of nothingness, and then “ordering, arranging, deciding, shaping” the way out. But that is only for philosophers whose life and work Strauss redefines. The rest of mankind is saved by being kept in the dark and having a properly good show puppeted for them on the cave wall. How Strauss’s philosophers become godlike puppet-masters is the subject of the remaining chapters.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ see Leo Strauss, “Note on the Plan of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 1983).

¹²⁷ Ibid., pp. 175-176, 179, 182.

Chapter 2: The Political in Philosophy

A central theme in Strauss's writings is the relationship between philosophy and politics. Strauss's exploration of this multilayered relationship ultimately fuses aspects of philosophy and politics even as his teaching overtly magnifies the tensions between what he presents as two distinct ways of life. His understanding of philosophy is animated by a doctrine of the primacy of politics that emphasizes permanent combat against perceived threats to his notion of excellence, the necessity of upholding civic and religious traditions for the protection of both the public and philosophers, and the freedom of philosophers to create and recreate truth and order.

For Strauss, philosophers impose order on nature's meaningless chaos by founding or transforming "regimes," by which he means the totality of customs, laws, institutions and culture determining how people live.¹ His use of the term varies in scope such that it can refer to a political system (ie the Athenian regime) or a philosophical mode of thought (ie regimes of truth) or a civilization (ie Western civilization).² By creating and transforming regimes, philosophers transform human beings in the process: ordinary people can become dutiful citizens, politically-ambitious individuals can be made into virtuous leaders, and philosophers themselves can become founders and lawgivers. His analysis of the permanent tensions between philosophy and politics is an expression of his belief that human life requires meaningful truths that only philosophers can provide, and that modern approaches to philosophy threaten the philosophers' ability to do so. In claiming that philosophy must become properly political to defend itself

¹ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 134-137.

² Ibid.; Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 199; Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 11.

against various threats, Strauss redefines philosophy by redirecting it away from an inner quest to discover truth to an outward movement to produce truth and create new regimes, and he does this while ostensibly defending the traditional quest for truth and the preservation of existing regimes.

Strauss argues that for a renewed philosophy to fulfill the “cosmic responsibility” of justifying human existence, it must confront multiple dangers.³ On the philosophical plane the dangers have to do with the inability of certain kinds of knowledge to determine the most important human values, on the political plane the challenge is how to deal with dehumanizing ideologies and corrupt regimes. One level accounts for his battles against modern scientific and historical approaches to knowledge, specifically his polemic against “positivism” and “historicism,” which are said to hinder the quest for truth. The other level accounts for his overt attacks on modern liberalism in his early writings followed by support for “ancient liberalism” in his later work, his lifelong battle against egalitarianism and the principle of universal enlightenment, and his persistent judgment that modernity itself threatens the philosopher’s quest. The two planes overlap and intersect in complex ways, and, even when separable, it is never clear whether philosophy or politics is truly of greatest concern because ultimately they are inextricable for Strauss. Both are made to point toward a kind of almost-divine lawgiving emanating from a supreme power - the mind of the philosopher.

By defending “classical” against “modern” philosophy, Strauss is not only challenging the methods and sources of scientific and historical approaches to knowledge, he is also arguing for a kind of philosophy that can understand “the whole”

³ Leo Strauss, “Note on the Plan of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*,” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 189.

by self-consciously becoming political, in both its manner of public presentation and its awareness of and response to the threats to philosophy posed by modernity. While insisting that his version of classical philosophy is non-dogmatic and non-ideological, it reflects a distinct anti-scientific and anti-historical approach to philosophy that contains an anti-democratic political teaching, which redirects democracy away from universalism, equality, openness and peace toward exceptionalism, aristocracy, exclusivity and combativeness. Getting to that teaching requires untangling the relationship in Strauss's work between philosophy and politics, which begins with his admission that "the philosopher is always a political philosopher."⁴ What he means by this only becomes clear after exploring how his engagement with Carl Schmitt set the stage for his rethinking of philosophy. Ultimately Strauss developed an approach to philosophy that contains four interrelated aspects: the quest for truth, the awareness that fundamental problems are insoluble, the ascent from opinions to genuine knowledge, and the transformative process and strategic purpose of philosophical education. Though the Nietzschean elements color each aspect of his redefinition of philosophy, the concealed influence of Carl Schmitt persists throughout his writings.

Lasting Honors to the Political

Early in his career Strauss developed a distinct critique of Carl Schmitt's concept of "the political," which served as the basis for his later rethinking of the relationship between politics and philosophy. Strauss's critique of Schmitt reframes Schmitt's notion that the friend/enemy conflict is the core of the political. Strauss interprets Schmitt's definition of the political as an affirmation of man's dangerousness expressed as the

⁴ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 200.

willingness to fight.⁵ But fight for what? Without a higher purpose to guide this willingness to engage in combat, Strauss explains, Schmitt's notion of the political amounts to fighting for its own sake. Strauss insists that Schmitt's affirmation of the political cannot be appropriately expressed without a moral basis lest it be understood as a mere negation of liberalism's depoliticalization, which is why Strauss argues that Schmitt was unable to achieve a perspective beyond the horizon of liberalism.⁶

Strauss sought a perspective beyond Schmitt's critique of liberalism, and after settling in the U.S. he framed that search in terms of transcending modernity rather than liberalism. Nicholas Xenos captures the moment where Strauss's position departs from Schmitt's. Both Strauss and Schmitt acknowledge that "the political is entailed in the disagreements over "what is right," but because [Schmitt] understands morals only in the "humanitarian-pacifist sense," he couches his polemic against liberalism as a polemic against morals."⁷ Xenos explains that, in Strauss's view, this position leads Schmitt into a contradiction because his opposition to depoliticization is essentially moral, but it also shows how "endorsing the political in these terms leads to an affirmation of fighting (with friends and against enemies) without regard to "what is being fought for."⁸ For Strauss, this is a fundamentally liberal position, "albeit in inverted form: it is an expression of toleration toward all "serious" convictions that entail the real possibility of war."⁹ According to Strauss, a "more appropriate" affirmation of the political would have a moral basis in pre-political knowledge, which would resolve Schmitt's contradictions

⁵ Leo Strauss, "Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*" In Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, George Schwab ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 100-101.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Nicholas Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue: Unveiling Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 57.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

and strengthen the effort to transcend liberalism and modernity.

Strauss critiques Schmitt for claiming that “there is a primary tendency in human nature to form exclusive groups,” while at the same time presenting the political opposition between one’s own group and the enemy group as flowing from pre-existing group identity, which would mean that “the political is something subsequent or supplementary.”¹⁰ Schmitt does not give an account of why the other group is different and why the other should be seen as an enemy. For Strauss, it is insufficient to turn to theological tradition and simply accept that a higher power has revealed it to be so. Strauss wants to know the higher power’s reasons, and wants any proclaimed higher power to be able to give reasons, because through a rational justification of what determines friends and enemies, wisdom is demonstrated as the highest power with supreme authority over all political forces. For Schmitt and Strauss both, there must be something higher than and prior to political order. Whereas Schmitt sees that something in theological terms, Strauss sees it in philosophy, which can better provide a rational justification for supra- and pre- political powers.

Philosophy is, for Strauss, the constitutive force that provides identity and purpose, which must be understood first in moral terms by establishing right and wrong and then in political terms by establishing law and order. According to Strauss, philosophy is more at home with the political Right, which better understands human nature and why the political requires a moral basis. By turning to the idea of nature, philosophy can provide the foundation that Schmitt’s concept of the political requires:

¹⁰ Leo Strauss, “Three Letters to Carl Schmitt,” Letter Two, September 4, 1932 in Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 124-125.

The ultimate foundation of the Right is the principle of the natural evil of man; because man is by nature evil, he therefor needs dominion. But dominion can be established, that is, men can be unified, only in a unity against – against other men. Every association of men is necessarily a separation from other men. The tendency to separate (and therewith the grouping of humanity into friends and enemies) is given with human nature; it is in this sense destiny, period. But the political thus understood is not the constitutive principle of the state, of “order,” but only the condition of the state.¹¹

Strauss looks behind or beyond the state and finds that Schmitt’s political formations (friend/enemy groups) are the result of predetermined moral formulations. Schmitt’s account of the grouping of humanity into friends and enemies is unsatisfactory for Strauss because it does not explain the primary tendency. For Strauss, the primary political tendency is the need to establish dominion over naturally evil, that is, morally base, human beings who must be taught “what is right.” Moral knowledge precedes the political unity that is established against others. In Strauss’s telling, enemies are determined only after one’s own group is formed out of a moral framework that provides identity and purpose. Friends and enemies are created by lawgivers with special knowledge of human needs who recognize that ordinary people cannot rule themselves, that dominion must be imposed due to mankind’s natural condition. The special knowledge that is the basis of morality and thus the basis of political rule comes either from theological notions of a divine creator or philosophical expressions of “what is right.” Strauss of course opts for philosophy, which is not to say that the religious themes evident in Schmitt’s work are not contained in Strauss’s.

Whereas Schmitt’s concept of the political centers on a willingness to fight in groups whose apriori existence provides identity and purpose, Strauss’s concept of philosophy is concerned with contemplating fundamental questions which bring higher

¹¹ Ibid., p. 125.

moral truth to and therefore direct the political. For Strauss, philosophy protects the political sphere from losing its spirited belief in moral values and governmental laws, which strengthen and reinforce each other. But it is not only this power to sustain political life that leads Strauss to see philosophy higher than politics. Philosophy is the source for “everything which comes into being through human action.”¹² Philosophy is the source of the highest wisdom and power because it opens up the possibility of experiencing transcendence through creation. Without philosophy, the political tends toward destructiveness unaccompanied by creation.

Strauss’s engagement with Schmitt led him to rethink the relationship between politics and philosophy. Strauss sought a “more appropriate” affirmation the political than the affirmation of man’s dangerousness, which is how he understood Schmitt’s concept of the political. Strauss presented a better articulation of the political by emphasizing creative powers, namely “the power that forms states.”¹³ Strauss rejects Schmitt’s affirmation of the political as destructive because it focuses on a human deficiency, the need for dominion, rather than a human excellence, the creation of truth and order. Affirming the political on a higher, creative plane means affirming the excellence of those who correct human deficiencies by establishing dominion. But Strauss’s affirmation of the power that forms States is tied to his view that philosophy precedes and transcends the political. Philosophy looks beyond existing political formations to the creative sources and processes that form political entities and because for Strauss the unity necessary to establish dominion is imposed on groups against other

¹² Ibid., p. 327.

¹³ Leo Strauss, “Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*” In Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*,” George Schwab ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 97.

groups, his greatest concern is with the education and development of leaders who establish unity, create groups, and found new orders.

That Strauss defines his approach to political philosophy in opposition to Schmitt's political theology should not conceal his kinship with the German reactionaries, who Strauss explicitly and publicly rejected after settling in America.¹⁴ His critique even reveals aspects of not that kinship. Strauss chastised the "German nihilists" for their lack of imagination: the movement failed to recruit young thinkers as successfully as the communist movement it took aim against because the reactionaries lacked a vision of their own that could excite youthful passions. The reactionaries only countered the revolutionary's vision. They lacked their own inspiring theory of the future. The vision that appeared "to the communists as the fulfillment of the dream of mankind," was seen by "very intelligent and decent, if very young, Germans" as the "greatest debasement of humanity."¹⁵ Implicit in Strauss's critique is the belief that liberals are to blame alongside communists for modern dehumanization. "The prospect," he explains, "of a pacified planet, without rulers and ruled, of a planetary society devoted to production and consumption only" was horrifying to young reactionaries.¹⁶ What accounts for their horror? "What they hated," he says, "was the very prospect of a world in which everyone would be happy and satisfied, in which everyone would have his little pleasure by day and his little pleasure by night, a world without real, unmetaphoric, sacrifice, i.e. a world without blood, sweat, and tears."¹⁷

¹⁴ Leo Strauss, "German Nihilism," David Janssens and Daniel Tanguay eds., *Interpretation*, Spring 1999, Vol. 26, No.3, p. 360.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

In Strauss's telling, young thinkers, both intelligent and morally serious, sensed deeply that without struggle and sacrifice human greatness will be no more. But the partisans of greatness had no positive vision of their own. Their lack of imagination left them without guidance in their rebellion against modern ideals. Strauss explains that they "did not really know and thus they were unable to express in a tolerably clear language, what they desired to put in the place of the present world."¹⁸ They were only certain of one thing: "that the present world and all the potentialities of the present world as such, must be destroyed."¹⁹ Without a guiding vision, the movement descended into nihilistic destruction. For the reactionaries, anything was better than modernity: "literally anything, the nothing, the chaos, the jungle, the Wild West, the Hobbian (sic) state of nature, seemed to them infinitely better."²⁰ Strauss says that "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."²¹ Though their "yes" was yet to be articulated, their "no" was fertile for Strauss: "a new reality is in the making; it is transforming the whole world; in the meantime there is: nothing, but – a fertile nothing."²²

In the way he responds to Schmitt and the German reactionaries Strauss reveals traces of a likeness he conceals incompletely, especially when he imagines a hypothetical teacher who feels that "not everything was bad in that nihilism."²³ The likeness appears stronger when, speaking in his own voice, he says that the rebellion against modern Western values in the name of pre-modern warrior virtues is deserving of "lasting

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 363.

²³ Ibid., p. 361.

honors.”²⁴ After settling in the U.S., Strauss developed a concept of philosophy that could articulate alternatives to the modern world, which the young German reactionaries had rebelled against. The nothingness of the German nihilists had been fertile ground for Strauss’s redefinition of philosophy.

Redefining the Quest

Strauss’s uncontroversial starting point when defining philosophy is the quest for truth.²⁵ He emphasizes that “philosophy is essentially not possession of the truth, but quest for the truth” because the “distinctive trait of the philosopher is that ‘he knows that he knows nothing.’”²⁶ The philosopher, relentless in his quest despite knowing that there are limits to human understanding, refuses to disregard questions that cannot be answered and problems that cannot be solved. “It is impossible,” Strauss says, “to think about these problems without becoming inclined toward a solution.”²⁷ Then a contradiction seems to appear. On one hand Strauss argues that the philosopher ceases to be a philosopher and transforms into an ideologue or sectarian when the commitment to a solution becomes stronger than the awareness of the problematic character of that solution, while on the other hand the “danger of succumbing to the attraction of solutions is essential to philosophy which, without incurring this danger, would degenerate into playing with problems.”²⁸ Strauss’s way out of this contradiction is the key to his rethinking of the

²⁴ Ibid., p. 371.

²⁵ see Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?,” In *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 11; see also Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 72.

²⁶ Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?,” In *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 11.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

philosophical enterprise.

In pursuing its aims, philosophy must know how and when to give way to ideological thinking even as it seeks to transcend political life. Socrates, held up by Strauss as the model philosopher, accepts the danger but is not overcome by the temptation to sectarianism. Strauss explains that “the philosopher does not necessarily succumb to this danger, as is shown by Socrates, who never belonged to a sect and never founded one.”²⁹ The word *necessarily* is the key to making sense of what Strauss means. The philosopher *may* succumb to the temptation of providing answers, he *may* become a sectarian or a sophist, but to be consistent with what Strauss has said, the philosopher ceases being a philosopher only in those moments when it is necessary to do so. For Strauss, the thinker can be a philosopher while exploring the fundamental questions privately, and then play the part of sophist or sectarian when political life demands it or when threats to the philosopher’s way of life make it necessary. Strauss says nothing that prohibits the same individual from being in one instance a philosopher and in another a sectarian just like Maimondes can be seen as a theologian publicly and yet be understood as an atheist philosopher to students of Strauss who interpret a philosopher’s public proclamations of faith and the corresponding public teachings as expressions of “high-minded citizenship.”³⁰

When Strauss asserts that the philosopher must first be a political philosopher, he is emphasizing the need for the philosopher to defend himself while on his quest. The philosopher encounters threats on both philosophical and the political levels and must

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Alan Verskin, “Reading Strauss on Maimondes: A New Approach,” *Journal of Textual Reasoning* June 2014, Vol.3, No.1.

respond to each kind of threat in a different way. One threat comes from other philosophers whose own pursuit of truth is seen as threatening. The other danger comes from society itself, which is suspicious of the philosopher for good reason. Philosophy is inherently threatening to society because philosophy “is the attempt to dissolve the element in which society breathes, and thus it endangers society.”³¹ The philosopher must be aware of these dangers, which is why his quest leads to political engagement.

The philosopher’s quest thus leads to political activity, but his intention is not to seize political power or otherwise take control of political affairs. “Since the philosopher is the man who devotes his whole life to the quest for wisdom, he has no time for political activity of any kind” Strauss insists, “the philosopher cannot possibly desire to rule.”³² And yet the philosopher is compelled to engage in political activity, according to Strauss, because his quest leads him to seek out friends who will support him on his mission. “The philosopher needs friends,” Strauss says, “who in order to be of service to the philosopher in his philosophizing must themselves be actual or potential philosophers.”³³ The philosopher must go out to the marketplace and recruit friends, which arouses the hostility of the “political men” and forces the philosopher to speak and act politically. “The conflict,” he stresses, “with the political men cannot be avoided” and responding to this conflict is “a form of the philosopher’s required political action.”³⁴ This action expresses itself in different ways, which must be kept in mind when Strauss goes about defining and defending his concept of philosophy. The philosopher is political

³¹ Leo Strauss, “On A Forgotten Kind of Writing” in *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 221.

³² Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Eds. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 194.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

in the way he teaches and writes, but also in the way he thinks about the world and his place in it. The philosopher is made aware from the start of a world divided into the friends and enemies of philosophy. He must recruit friends. And he must combat his enemies.

The greatest enemies of philosophy are those who prevent philosophers from actualizing the highest truths, which for Strauss involves questions of value, meaning and purpose. And the most threatening of those enemies are those that take the form of philosophy itself. Among the enemies of philosophy Strauss is most concerned with are positivism and historicism. For Strauss, positivism is rooted in the claim that modern scientific approaches reveal objective truth about the natural world but have nothing to say about human values and historicism is the view that social values are historically contingent.³⁵ Positivism and historicism are said to undermine the quest for the highest truth and wisdom because they are unable to explain the “why” of human existence. Since the quest for truth and wisdom demands an account of the good and the right, the values Strauss claims are mankind’s deepest concern, scientific and historical methods are treated as threats to the philosophical endeavor. The philosopher’s quest therefore becomes combative because if philosophers are to justify their way of life, they must in principle be able to provide an account of why what they do is good and right, but scientific and historical thinkers employ methods that prevent such an account and therefore threaten the philosopher’s life purpose.

Philosophical combat is called for against enemy thinkers who stand in the way of

³⁵ Leo Strauss, Seminar titled “Introduction to Political Philosophy” lectures 2 and 3, Winter 1965 (St. John’s College, Annapolis). <https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/introduction-political-philosophy-winter-quarter-1965>.

the philosophers' movement toward truth and wisdom, but when confronted by the challenge of dealing with ordinary people a different kind of political action is necessary because philosophy is threatened by the masses in a different way. When Strauss says that philosophy must be politically responsible philosophy, he means it must be able to justify itself to the public. Philosophers need to answer the question "Why philosophy?" Why does human life need philosophy, why is it good, why is it right?"³⁶ This question immediately transforms into another. "Since human life," he says, "is living together or, more exactly, is political life, the question "Why philosophy?" means "Why does political life need philosophy?" This question calls philosophy before the tribunal of the political community: it makes philosophy politically responsible and it "forbids the philosophers any longer to disregard political life altogether."³⁷ Seeking to "justify philosophy before the tribunal of the political community," Strauss believes philosophy must make arguments which appeal to all citizens.³⁸ But not to lure ordinary people into philosophy. In fact, philosophy's public defense is meant to keep people at a safe distance, to protect people from philosophy's dangerous truths and protect philosophy from people's suspicions and their diluting effect. Philosophers keep the people away from philosophy by steering them toward their own civic and religious traditions, which are reinforced and given philosophical grounding. At the same time philosophy is used rhetorically to justify social traditions, it is used as a recruiting tool to seek out thinkers of a certain kind who see through the rhetoric, reject the traditions common people embrace, and see themselves as morally and intellectually superior. The philosopher's political

³⁶ Leo Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?," In *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 92.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

action is expressed through philosophical lies that are supposed to help ordinary people even as they ennoble the philosopher's quest. This is what Strauss means by noble lies.

Noble lies provide more than opium to the masses: they give meaning and purpose and thus humanize mankind because, for Strauss, people need goals to move toward in order to be truly and fully human.³⁹ Creative thinking of the sort Strauss promotes offers philosophers something more than ordinary people can achieve: their aims transcend the merely human. Not only do they provide ordinary people with truth and meaning, noble lies also serve to recruit potential philosophers and give them a means to express their superiority by creating truth and order. Strauss acknowledges that the "adjective 'political' in the expression 'political philosophy' designates not so much a subject matter as a manner of treatment: 'political philosophy' means primarily not philosophic treatment of politics, but the political, or popular, treatment of philosophy, or the political introduction to philosophy which seeks to lead qualified individuals to the philosophic life."⁴⁰ The quest involves a double movement through double speak: philosophers point ordinary people one way and potential recruits another. Strauss's political philosophy is thus defined as much by recruiting friends for an exalted mission as by combating the threats that stand in their way. But the reconceived quest can only be fully understood after reflecting on two other aspects of Strauss's *political* philosophy: the awareness it provides and the ascent it makes possible.

The Depths of Awareness

In search of wisdom, the philosopher comes to understand that "[p]hilosophy as such, is nothing but genuine awareness of the problems, i.e., of the fundamental and

³⁹ Ibid., p. 34.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 93-94.

comprehensive problems.”⁴¹ Philosophy, Strauss argues, provides a special sort of awareness and knowledge: “philosophy is knowledge that one does not know; that is to say, it is knowledge of what one does not know, or awareness of the fundamental problems and, therewith, of the fundamental alternatives regarding their solution that are coeval with human thought.”⁴² Awareness of the fundamental problems involves a recognition that fundamental problems have no solutions, which derives from “the fundamental phenomenon,” or “the fundamental experience,” the experience of the objective groundlessness of all principles of thought and action, the experience of nothingness.”⁴³ Strauss picks up after Nietzsche here. “If we may make a somewhat free use of an expression occurring in Nietzsche’s Second Meditation Out of Season, the truth is not attractive, lovable, life-giving, but deadly... The world in itself, the “thing-in-itself,” “nature” is wholly chaotic and meaningless. Hence all meaning, all order originates in man, in man’s creative acts, in his will to power.”⁴⁴ Seeming to depart from Nietzsche, he also claims that there are “simple experiences of right and wrong” which undergird the philosophic contention that there is a natural right.⁴⁵ How to reconcile these seemingly contradictory points of view? What is by nature right is for Strauss based on the assumption that people are intrinsically unequal, that there is a hierarchy of human beings, and that philosophers are the supreme beings. Only philosophers can escape the abyss of nothingness unaided and thus it is by nature right that they lead humanity in its

⁴¹ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 196.

⁴² Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 32.

⁴³ Leo Strauss, “Relativism” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 1989), pp. 27-48.

⁴⁴ Leo Strauss, “Note on the Plan of Nietzsche’s Beyond Good and Evil,” In *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 177-178.

⁴⁵ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 31-32, 105.

struggle against nihilism, in its effort to establish and interpret notions of right and wrong in the face of the fundamental experience of nothingness. Strauss begins with the assertion that ordinary people cannot handle the dark truth of nothingness and thus require illusions to protect them. The people need what only the philosophers can provide. What is left unstated but gestured at is that in providing the people what they need, philosophers not only perform their civic duty by providing people with useful truth and meaning, but in creating myths, inventing ennobling lies, sustaining or fabricating traditions, philosophers replace the role long played by God.⁴⁶

The philosopher's experience of nothingness combined with his understanding of human frailty and belief in his own superiority leads him to embrace the role of lawgiver and truth-creator. His political activity involves producing or reinventing moral and intellectual frameworks that undergird all regimes: these constructions are good for the people, who are guided away from the abyss, and for the philosophers, who are protected from a potentially dangerous public and provided with recruits and the space to demonstrate what makes them suprahuman. The truth does not set ordinary men free, but creating that truth does make philosophers free. Truth understood as the abyss of meaninglessness makes life unlivable for most people, who must be constrained and guided by a higher truth embedded in moral law. Philosophers give people that truth and law. Strauss rejects the view that equates moral law with positive law, instead treating moral law as a supreme unwritten law rooted in nature itself.⁴⁷ And for Strauss, there is something higher than natural law: it's the source of the law in the mind of the law-giving

⁴⁶ Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 224 fn 64.

⁴⁷ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 17-19, 99-102.

philosopher. Natural right, based in what Strauss sees as a human predisposition to belief that there is right and wrong, is equated with the power of the philosopher to satisfy that belief by imposing order on nature's chaos and creating the supreme law of right and wrong. By gifting this law to the people, philosophers create the conditions for establishing collective meaning and purpose which is necessary for people to become fully formed human beings. But for the creators of men and worlds to cultivate their lawgiving powers, they must surpass the efforts of past philosophers.

Strauss's redefinition of philosophy based on the classical model is rooted in a critique of the way philosophy has evolved under modern conditions. It has become impotent: under the influence of natural science philosophy cannot make value judgements, it is unable to "go beyond the stage of discussion" and "reach the stage of decision" especially regarding values questions, which are those that give people meaning.⁴⁸ Still, he emphasizes, philosophy as it now exists, is not futile because it provides *awareness*, a thorough understanding of the fundamental questions. This heightened awareness is not provided by positivism or historicism, which are seen as faulty paths philosophy has taken and which only lead to nihilism.

Nihilism also results from the existentialist reaction to modernity, which Strauss believes was unleashed by Nietzsche and reformulated by Heidegger. In a critique of "Heideggerian existentialism" aimed at distinguishing his own response to the crisis of modernity from Heidegger's, Strauss says, still in agreement with Heidegger at this point in the text, "All truth, all meaning, is seen in the last analysis to have no support except man's freedom. Objectively there is in the last analysis only meaninglessness,

⁴⁸ Leo Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?," In *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 11.

nothingness.”⁴⁹ What Strauss called the “abyss of freedom” in his 1962 seminar on Natural Right⁵⁰ can be experienced in anguish, but it also can open up new possibilities: “Man freely originates meaning; he originates the horizon, the absolute presupposition, the ideal, the project within which understanding and life are possible.”⁵¹ Existentialism opens the door to a different kind of freedom, an escape from the abyss available to those philosophers who seek to actualize wisdom by producing truth, meaning and purpose. This is the noble freedom discussed in Chapter One that turns philosophical truth-seekers into truth-creators.

But to fully realize their potential, according to Strauss, philosophers must recognize the centrality of politics. As Steven Smith explains, the reason Strauss rejects Heidegger’s ontological approach, which seeks a way beyond Nietzsche by returning to ancient greek thought and to questions about being, is because of Heidegger’s blindness to the primacy of politics, which Strauss recovers by also returning to greek philosophy but with a focusing on other fundamental questions.⁵² This criticism is explicitly leveled against Nietzsche as well, who Strauss sees as the source of Heidegger’s thinking. Heinrich Meier sums up this criticism well: “What Strauss has in view when he accuses Nietzsche of regarding politics as belonging from the outset to a lower plane than philosophy and religion is the requirement that one start more radically with politics, with

⁴⁹ Leo Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, Thomas Pangle ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 36.

⁵⁰ see Leo Strauss seminar on Natural Right. Lecture 1 at 1:20:00 Fall 1962 (University of Chicago). <https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/natural-right-autumn-quarter-1962>.

⁵¹ Leo Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, Thomas Pangle ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 36.

⁵² Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 119.

the commonwealth, with the foundations of its existence, with its vital element, the opinions and valuations of its citizens.”⁵³ Neither Nietzsche nor Heidegger were sufficiently attuned to this political element, which is why, Strauss claims, their teachings were so easily exploited for vulgar political purposes.

For Strauss, a greater appreciation for the differences between the truths that ordinary people need to believe and the truths that philosophers seek will protect philosophers on their path toward a transcendent wisdom. Strauss’s emphasis on political moderation is presented as a warning to philosophers to lower their expectations about what is achievable through politics in recognition of human limitedness.⁵⁴ But his teaching about political moderation conceals a philosophical radicalism. The warning is not meant to dissuade the philosopher from attaining the highest wisdom and transforming himself into a perfect “wise man,” the warning is “about how the wise man has to proceed in his undertaking.”⁵⁵ Strauss’s emphasis on the beliefs and opinions of citizens derives from his view that there are necessary limits on what is politically achievable because there are limits on what truths ordinary people can accept. The philosopher’s awareness of nothingness leads to an awareness of those limits, but it also frees the philosopher to transcend those limits.

Ascent from the Abyss

Strauss gives an overtly political twist to a notion of philosophic ascent taken from Nietzsche, which already contained political resonances. Speaking about the purpose of

⁵³ Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 9.

⁵⁴ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 187.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

society, Nietzsche says that the “fundamental belief must simply be that society cannot exist for its own sake, but rather only as a foundation and scaffolding to enable a select kind of creature to ascend to its higher task and in general to its higher existence.”⁵⁶

Strauss reframes this ascent as philosophical liberation from Plato’s cave of false opinion.

In Strauss’s reimagining of the metaphor, emancipation takes place through a twofold process whereby philosophy is used to authoritatively order people’s variable opinions while at the same time to ascend from those opinions:

Philosophizing means to ascend from the cave to the light of the sun, that is, to the truth. The cave is the world of opinion as opposed to knowledge. Opinion is essentially variable. Men cannot live, that is, they cannot live together, if opinions are not stabilized by social fiat. Opinion thus becomes authoritative opinion or public dogma or Weltanschauung. Philosophizing means, then, to ascend from public dogma to essentially private knowledge.⁵⁷

The ascent is made possible because people need to believe in public truths and because philosophers create those truths. The ascent is from awareness to creation, a movement from the recognition of existential meaninglessness to the production of meaning. In recognition of the social need to have public opinions cohere around something meaningful, the philosopher provides an authoritative truth. For people to live together, they must embrace shared values and meanings, which can only happen if public opinion is stabilized and made authoritative. The creative act of producing authoritative truth transforms philosophers into superhuman lawgivers.

The philosophic ascent entails keeping the many down in the cave while liberating the chosen few to pursue their own perfection. Strauss’s philosophers return to the cave after becoming aware of the dark and deadly truth beyond it. They return not to liberate the chained masses within, but to improve the puppet show displayed on the cave

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 11-12.

wall so the public remains content with the truths given them and even consents to the security of their chains. The better the show, the more secure the chains, and the greater the individual who escapes them. In search of supreme beings, the philosophers beautify and reinforce social truths which serves to keep the people down and create the conditions for the superior few to rise up.

How does the philosopher achieve his task when the quest for truth reveals only nothingness? Strauss says that “one might realize the insoluble character of the fundamental riddles and still continue to see in the understanding of these riddles the task of philosophy,” which only here he reveals should be understood “in the full and original sense of the term” as “the attempt to replace opinions about the whole by knowledge of the whole.”⁵⁸ If the whole truth is unknowable then philosophy “is not only incapable of reaching its goal,” it is absurd. His foundational premise is that philosophy, far from being absurd, is the highest human activity. The most influential attempts to escape from the existentialist trap of absurdity, he says, begin with the assumption that the whole is in fact knowable.⁵⁹ From the awareness of ignorance, he moves to the creation of the whole. In that creation, philosophy can move beyond the absurd and reach its goal which is transcendent without being otherworldly.

Strauss’s version of the philosophic ascent blurs into his discussion contrasting the “perishable things” and the “eternal order.” He says that the “philosopher’s attempt to grasp the eternal order is necessarily an ascent from the perishable things which as such reflect the eternal order.”⁶⁰ The ascent involves moving beyond the perishable

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 29-30.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 11-12.

⁶⁰ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 200.

toward the timeless things, but the eternal order the philosopher attempts to grasp turns out to be the philosopher's eternal act of order-creation in response to the dark truth of existential nothingness. In reaction to that darkness, the philosopher creates order out of nothingness and gifts that creation to a humanity in need of a meaningful world to inhabit. But this gift-giving and receiving takes place in a social context permeated by various institutions, groups and individuals with varying degrees of power. The philosopher's political task involves navigating this social complex and properly discriminating between the people, the ruling authorities, and other philosophers.

The ascent to wisdom is not a solitary affair, it turns out. The philosopher needs friends to aid him in his mission. The philosopher must remain "particularly sensitive to the difference among human souls" and remember that "he alone knows what a healthy or well-ordered soul is."⁶¹ The fact that he is "intensely pleased by the aspect of a healthy or well-ordered soul" and "intensely pained by the aspect of a diseased or chaotic soul" leads him to desire "to be together" with and educate those healthy and noble souls.⁶² His conclusion is that the philosopher "cannot help desiring, without any regard to his own needs or benefits, that those among the young whose souls are by nature fitted for it, acquire good order of their souls. But the good order of the soul is philosophizing. The philosopher therefore has the urge to educate potential philosophers simply because he cannot help loving well-ordered souls."⁶³ The next chapter will further explore how Strauss views the purpose of philosophical education, but the starting point is to separate healthy from diseased souls, to recruit a new nobility, and to ascend beyond the

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

perishable things.

Shadia Drury makes the interesting claim in comparing Strauss to Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor that "the Straussian position surpasses the Grand Inquisitor in its delusional elitism as well as in its misanthropy."⁶⁴ She recounts how the Inquisitor explains that ordinary people can only be happy if they surrender their freedom and bow to mystery and authority. Drawing parallels to Strauss's views on the abyss of nothingness, Drury underscores the Inquisitor's faithless position: "Beyond the grave, they will find nothing but death."⁶⁵ What follows is key. "But we shall keep the secret," the Inquisitor explains, "deception will be our suffering, for we shall be forced to lie."⁶⁶ And in the end, "they will marvel at us and look on us as gods."⁶⁷ Drury argues that Strauss's position is even more extreme:

The Grand Inquisitor presents his ruling elite as suffering under the burden of truth for the sake of humanity. So, despite his rejection of Christ, the Grand Inquisitor is modeled on the Christian conception of a suffering God who bears the burden of humanity. In contrast, Strauss represents his ruling elite as pagan gods who are full of laughter. Instead of being grim and mournful like the Grand Inquisitor, they are intoxicated, erotic and gay.⁶⁸

Drury underscores the Nietzschean influence: "Nietzsche thought that only when suffering is witnessed by gods did it become meaningful and heroic. Soaring high, Strauss discovered that there are no gods to witness human suffering; and finding the job vacant, he recruited his acolytes."

But it is important to see where Strauss departs from Nietzsche. Section 294 of the "What is Noble?" chapter in *Beyond Good and Evil* begins with the phrase "The

⁶⁴ Shadia Drury, "Leo Strauss and the Grand Inquisitor" *Free Inquiry Magazine*, Volume 24, Number 4, November 2004. <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article7395.htm>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Olympian vice” and goes on to highlight the importance to Nietzsche of laughter:

I would actually go so far as to rank philosophers according to the level of their laughter - right up to the ones who are capable of golden laughter. And assuming that gods, too, are able to philosophize, as various of my conclusions force me to believe, then I do not doubt that when they do so, they know how to laugh in a new and superhuman fashion - and at the expense of everything serious!⁶⁹

Strauss makes no reference to such Olympian laughter, though he does discuss the “Olympian freedom” that allows philosophers to study all ideologies without bias, that is, to see that none is inherent “superior in truth and justice to any other among the innumerable ideologies.”⁷⁰ The philosophical ascent from public dogma to private knowledge leads to this relativistic awareness. But just as the philosopher cannot stop at the abyss of nihilism, so too, for Strauss, must he transcend his own relativism in search of “the eternal order,” which can only be found in noble souls. The activity of discovering and perfecting those souls is serious business: it is the highest task of philosophy which must never descend into “playing with problems.”⁷¹ Play and laughter are not part of Strauss’s lexicon. If there is any laughter in Strauss’s worldview, it is hidden, muted, repressed. In this sense Drury is wrong to see Strauss through the lens of Nietzsche’s Olympian laughter. A healthy well-ordered soul, Strauss seems to suggest, is one that does not laugh, one that is focused intensely on all that is deadly serious.

The philosopher’s ascent involves responding politically to the awareness of existential nothingness by realizing that the deadly truth is unbearable for ordinary beings. The ascent entails concealing dangerous knowledge and producing counter-knowledge, life-giving knowledge, moral-political knowledge. The concealment and

⁶⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 175.

⁷⁰ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 7.

⁷¹ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 200.

creation of knowledge concerning what Strauss refers to as the “true issues” separates ordinary people from his political philosophers and makes possible their transformation in a new noble class of “wise men.” Strauss begins with the premise *that* philosophers are a noble class and *that* they take great pleasure in being with their own kind, but he does not attempt to explain *why*. This is particularly puzzling considering his critique of modern philosophy for being unable to deal with questions of *why*. Silently declaring that you can only know *why* we are nobles and *why* we cherish our own if you are one of us, he says, “We must leave it open why philosophers experience such profound pleasure when we observe signs of human nobility.”⁷² With that left open he abruptly shifts to a discussion about the passion for wisdom which is the basis of an approach to philosophical education that transforms potential philosophers into “perfect gentlemen.” How philosophical education completes Strauss’s redefinition of philosophy is the subject of the next chapter.

⁷² Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 200.

Ch.3 The Education of Wise Men

Strauss's conception of philosophical education aims high, so high that the goals of potential philosophers are presented as beyond reach, or nearly so. And yet Strauss describes his approach to education as a "training in the highest form of modesty."¹ While embracing the pre-modern view "that education in the highest sense is philosophy," Strauss's approach to philosophical education is premised on his belief that philosophers of the past invariably failed in their quest for wisdom: the philosopher who remains only a philosopher is by definition, "not simply wise."² The claim that "God alone is simply wise"³ serves as a temptation to future philosophers to become something more than the philosophers of the past.

A training in modesty begins with the self-evident truth that human beings are not gods, but Strauss's work points to this truism in such a manner that it conceals how his approach to education also points beyond it. This chapter describes the culmination of Strauss's reconception of philosophy in the education of political philosophers who are taught to look beyond modernity toward the "best regime" as they work toward their own perfection as the "highest human type."⁴ Supra-human perfection ostensibly modeled on the questing philosophers of old is actually guided by Strauss's reimagined Socratic model such that future philosophers can succeed where past philosophers failed in actualizing philosophy's wisdom through prophets and wise men.

¹ Leo Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 319.

² Ibid., p. 316.

³ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 85.

⁴ Ibid., p. 190.

Philosophical education involves training in modesty or moderation, but Strauss admits that it is “at the same time a training in boldness.”⁵ Strauss boldly looks beyond Plato’s conception of the philosopher’s mission and teaches would be philosophers that they can build on the work of their philosophical teachers to accomplish “something which the greatest minds were unable to do.”⁶ The aim for Strauss of philosophical education is the cultivation of an intellectual class of political teachers and advisors who work toward what “moderate” political improvement while striving for their own supra-political “perfection.” The explicit goal of improving political rule by applying the wisdom of moderation veils the more radical goal of transforming ruling regimes by reorienting philosophy toward a reimagined notion of transcendence tied to the embodiment of the highest wisdom in suprahuman form. “I am almost solely concerned,” Strauss says, “with the goal or end of education at its best or highest – of the education of the perfect prince” which is an “education to perfect gentlemanship.”⁷ Strauss imagines himself at the top of a chain of thinkers and teachers engaged in a common enterprise to transform potential philosophers into future wise men. But the pedagogical enterprise aims to create a class of intellectual gentlemen by revitalizing pre-modern notions of eternal glory and redirecting philosophy’s purpose by heroizing founders and tempting students with serpentine wisdom.

The previous chapter demonstrated how philosophy must become properly

⁵ Leo Strauss, “What is Liberal Education?,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 319.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

⁷ *Ibid.*

political so as to reassure people and rulers that the political community is not threatened by philosophers and to point potential philosophers toward higher ideals. This chapter builds on the notion that philosophical thought, speech and action follow this double movement of defending philosophy before the tribunal of the city by upholding civic truths and at the same time recruiting potential philosophers away from the city's public truths to pursue something greater. For Strauss, philosophy is a useful recruiting and sorting tool because of the way it can "reveal the truth to some while leading others to salutary opinions."⁸ This chapter focuses on the few to whom truth can be revealed, and how they can be tempted to implement the wisdom received from their teachers in a multi-generational act of lawgiving that begins in the imagined world and then comes to life in the actions of real world demigods. Philosophical education is meant to "arouse to thinking those who are by nature fit for it."⁹ This chapter explores the means of this arousal, and the reconceived models meant to seduce certain types. Philosophical education is a project to create a new intellectual class, which employs philosophical ideas to reestablish the moral foundations of the regimes they engage with. Behind the explicit concern with the erosion of moral authority under the conditions of modernity and concealed within the explicit teaching of political moderation, Strauss teaches his gentlemen to become teachers of and advisors to regime creators by tempting them with godlike wisdom which they are inspired to embody and reflect.

⁸ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 54.

⁹ Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 93.

Against Modernity, then Beyond

Seeking to surpass a modern approach to philosophy that leads to nihilism, Strauss sees in classical approaches a better justification for the use of philosophy as a means to create and educate new political elites. That justification begins by asking “Why does political life need philosophy?”¹⁰ The classical philosophers were better able than their modern counterparts to “supply a political justification for philosophy by showing that the well-being of the political community depends decisively on the study of philosophy.”¹¹ Philosophy justifies itself, according to Strauss, by the leaders it produces and the regimes they rule. Strauss’s political philosophy justifies itself through the formation through education of new intellectual elites concerned with the development of new ideologies and new regimes that could correct the failings of modernity.

The source of modern problems, according to Strauss, is rooted in the failings of modern philosophy, which is rooted in principles that prevent the few who are fit to rule from receiving a proper education. Modern philosophy abandoned classical assumptions about the permanence of human inequality and the need for social hierarchy when it turned to democratic and egalitarian principles, ultimately defending the ideal of unlimited technological progress and universal diffusion of philosophical and scientific knowledge. Philosophical education modeled on the classics begins by rejecting this modern bias as unnatural and destructive of humanity.¹² Strauss’s argument against modernity is framed in terms of the need for responsible moral authorities who can

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 178.

replace modern ruling elites driven above all by material self-interest. Throughout his writings, Strauss remained principally opposed to a modern project that aims at universal prosperity, perpetual peace, and the relief of man's estate through technological development because under such conditions "man loses his humanity."¹³ Under such conditions, modern ruling elites have no sense of noble values and modern society becomes corrupt. The prospect of a universal order in which science and technology are emancipated from moral and political supervision "would lead to disastrous consequences: the fusion of science and the arts together with the unlimited or uncontrolled progress of technology has made universal and perpetual tyranny a serious possibility."¹⁴ Strauss's view that modernity points toward such a tyranny is presented as a full blown crisis after he settles in America.¹⁵ The crisis is upon us because of improper supervision. Our moral and political authorities have lost control of science, art and technology. The ultimate reason for their failings? Modern elites fail because of the modern principles that inform their thinking and corrupts their values.

Strauss wrote against a modern project that, whether through liberalism or socialism, was converging on a universal and classless society.¹⁶ The source of the problem is a modern regime that

starts from the natural equality of all men, and it leads therefore to the assertion that sovereignty belongs to the people; yet it understands that sovereignty in such a way as to guarantee the natural rights of each; it achieves this result by distinguishing between the sovereign and the government and by demanding that the fundamental governmental powers be separated from one another. The spring of this regime was held to be the desire

¹³ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 208.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁵ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 65.

¹⁶ Leo Strauss, *Liberalism, Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p.vii.

of each to improve his material conditions.¹⁷

Strauss's embraces Nietzsche's vision of a "new nobility" to counteract the modern movement toward a universal society.¹⁸ The result of a modern regime that begins with the principle of human equality and aims at universal happiness is that commercial and industrial elites concerned above all with material prosperity predominate rather than intellectual elites inspired by higher political and philosophical values.¹⁹ The modernity founded by a Machiavelli who, according to Strauss, was ultimately concerned with the "intellectual liberation of an elite from a bad tradition"²⁰ produces unworthy elites and an analogously bad tradition.²¹

To liberate a new nobility from a bad modern regime, Strauss counters the teaching of natural equality and the concern for material happiness, which conspire to produce an "effete" and "unmanly" culture, by elevating pre-modern notions of social hierarchy based on the natural superiority of thinkers. Framing the problem as the "crisis of modernity" means that addressing the challenge entails going beyond normal courses of action and beyond the existing moral and political order. And because the regime concept means different things in different contexts, Strauss's crisis narrative can be used to focus corrective energies on "the way of life of a society" understood as the "form of government," as in the American constitutional regime, or the focus can be on regimes

¹⁷ Leo Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), pp. 330-331.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 81.

²¹ Leo Strauss, "The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon." *Social Research* 6 (1939), pp. 502-536.

understood as distinct cultures and civilizations, as in Western democratic culture or modern civilization.²²

Strauss's Machiavelli counsels future princes to look back to the classics to see passed an "effeminate" Christian tradition, which parallels the way Strauss teaches his future gentlemen to see in the classics a path beyond an effeminate modernity to a regime of "excellence."²³ The two kinds of excellence Strauss is concerned with are described in terms of two types of individuals: the "philosophical man" and the "political man."²⁴ These types of individuals are driven to different expressions of excellence by corresponding ambitions. The political types are driven by the desire to rule, which according to Strauss can improve certain individuals: "While some men are corrupted by wielding power, others are improved by it."²⁵ Framed this way, the desire for power is a noble ambition whereas the hunger for wealth is an inferior, animalistic urge that must be controlled because "[m]an is so built that he cannot achieve the perfection of his humanity except by keeping down his lower impulses."²⁶ Whereas political men seek an excellence associated with political power, the excellence associated with wisdom as pursued by philosophical types, makes possible the highest perfection.²⁷ Moving toward a regime of excellence means moving beyond modernity.

²² Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 136-138.

²³ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 80-83.

²⁴ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 82-87.

²⁵ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 133.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ See Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 197.

According to Strauss's classical approach, a regime that reflects the highest values is constituted by the highest types of individuals. A regime of excellence requires that individuals capable of philosophical and political excellence are dominant in society.²⁸ Not economic elites, but political and philosophical elites must be regarded as authoritative if the regime is to be oriented to excellence. Such authoritative human beings "must have the decisive say within the community in broad daylight: they must form the regime"²⁹ Strauss teaches both his political and philosophical men to become regime creators.

Strauss's first lesson in philosophical education is that not all people desire and deserve the same things. Modern philosophy comes into being when the end of philosophy is identified with the end which is capable of being actually pursued by all men."³⁰ Strauss rejects the modern conception of philosophy for its inability to distinguish and rank the desires that define and differentiate people, a deficiency he attributes to modern philosophy's fundamentally democratic character.³¹ "Democracy is rejected" by those who pursue wisdom "because it is as such the rule of the uneducated."³² The problem is not new to the modern world. Even ancient Athens, held up by Strauss as a model in other regards, was confronted by the problem of democracy

²⁸ Leo Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?" in *What is Political Philosophy and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 34.

²⁹ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 137.

³⁰ Leo Strauss, "Liberal Education and Responsibility," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 337.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 326.

and an educational system that leads to effeminacy.³³ But modernity makes matters worse.

To see how philosophic education for a new ruling class *is* Strauss's response to the crisis of modernity, we must understand his critique of the modern ideal of enlightenment, which was "destined to become universal enlightenment."³⁴ Modernity is premised on the belief that the widespread diffusion of knowledge benefits all. Modern progress is measured based on the belief that scientific discoveries and technological developments would ultimately bring happiness to all mankind. Even though the knowledge that produced these wonders comes from the minds of the few, the benefits are to be shared universally: "While invention or discovery continued to remain the preserve of the few, the results could be transmitted to all."³⁵ Invention and discovery are the results of contemplation, the highest expressions of which can be experienced only by superior minds. And therein lies a twofold problem for Strauss. Transmitting these results to people who could not have thought them alone is dangerous to the people themselves, and the philosopher's sublime experience of free contemplation is diminished and degraded.

As if the philosopher's full potential could only be actualized when people are kept away from the philosopher's activities, Strauss sees double danger in the philosopher's ascent to wisdom. "Unfolded at large," Perry Anderson says of Strauss's

³³ Leo Strauss, "The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon." *Social Research* 6 (1939), p. 507.

³⁴ Leo Strauss, "Liberal Education and Responsibility," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 338.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

perspective, the truths of philosophy “would destroy the protective atmosphere of any civilization and with it all stable conditions for the pursuit of philosophy itself.”³⁶ Philosophy’s posture toward the people must be *keep away for your own good*. Strauss treats modern philosophy as unnatural because it gives to common people a kind of knowledge that invalidates the sacred beliefs that sustain their basic humanity. One aspect of those sacred beliefs especially important to Strauss is that they impose restraints on most people: if philosophic attitudes and knowledge became widespread, the masses would behave as if everything were permitted.³⁷ “The deepest reason why philosophy is so enormously dangerous,” is that it reveals the groundlessness of natural morality, it shows that “natural morality is, strictly speaking, no morality at all.”³⁸ And yet philosophy also teaches that social order requires morality. Political laws ultimately have their foundation and derive their legitimacy from morality, which ultimately has its source in a higher power that people believe is authoritative. Only laws coming from an “omnipotent and omniscient God can make possible genuine morality.”³⁹ This points to the “ultimate reason why political life and philosophic life, even if compatible for almost all practical purposes, are incompatible in the last analysis: political life, if taken seriously, means belief in the gods of the city, and philosophy is the denial of the gods of the city.”⁴⁰ The ancients understood better than the moderns that the philosopher’s social

³⁶ Perry Anderson, *Spectrum: From Right to Left in the World of Ideas* (New York: Verso, 2007), p. 9.

³⁷ Stephen Holmes, “Strauss: Truths for Philosophers Alone,” in *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 66.

³⁸ Leo Strauss, “The Law of Reason in the Kuzari,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 140.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Leo Strauss, “The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon.” *Social Research* 6 (1939), p. 532.

duty was to remain silent or otherwise conceal such dangerous knowledge: “The philosopher who knows the truth, must be prepared to refrain from expressing it, not so much for reasons of convenience as for reasons of duty.”⁴¹ The open dissemination of knowledge as a philosophical ideal entails abandoning the philosopher’s social duty to protect people by upholding the moral order. But this conceals the higher reason why Strauss treats the diffusion of philosophical knowledge as destructive of humanity,⁴² which has to do with protecting the philosopher’s own exclusive experience of contemplation, which brings him closer to the omnipotence and omniscience required to make possible genuine morality.

The problem goes beyond the challenges of maintaining moral and political order when people’s sacred beliefs are undermined by the modern diffusion of philosophical knowledge. The deeper problem concerns the status of the philosopher’s knowledge, the exclusivity of the philosopher’s sacred experience of contemplation, and the prospects of actualizing the wisdom received in contemplation. Wisdom is unlike other kinds of knowledge in that it has the character of superiority; it is the highest type of knowledge and it is obtained only by the highest types of men. For Strauss, wisdom loses its exalted status when it is handed over to people unable to acquire or understand it alone because he equates the diffusion of knowledge with its dilution: “The diffusion among the unwise of genuine knowledge that was acquired by the wise would be of no help, for through its diffusion or dilution, knowledge inevitably transforms itself into opinion, prejudice, or

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 178.

mere belief.”⁴³ The nature of knowledge is determined by the quality of mind. Only superior minds can truly experience knowledge that has the character of wisdom, which is qualitatively different from the opinions, prejudices, and beliefs that permeate the minds of all people. Knowledge transmitted to inferior minds is diminished in status and takes on the character of opinion; it is degraded and becomes nothing more than belief, accepted but not understood, passively consumed but never actively and fully comprehended. For ideas to rise to the level of genuine knowledge in Strauss’s sense, for them to acquire the status of wisdom, they must spring from and be shared only with superior individuals, who alone are capable of understanding the highest knowledge and putting it to work in the pursuit of the highest perfection.

Wisdom as the source of the ultimate human perfection is only available to the “rare few who possess the best natural endowments and who are also fortunate to live under conditions in which the requisite virtues can be developed and noble activities performed.”⁴⁴ Philosophers alone can possess “knowledge of man’s ultimate perfection” whereas the “rest of men can only attain some degree of this perfection” through the gifts the philosopher makes possible.⁴⁵ Philosophical education teaches that only philosophers are fit to know the highest truth, to reach the peak of wisdom. But how should the thinker respond to the voice of wisdom, which he alone hears only after he summits the peak and stands atop the mountain as a perfected philosopher? For Strauss, the highest wisdom calls for the philosopher to transcend his own limitations and become “more than a

⁴³ Ibid., p. 193.

⁴⁴ Leo Strauss, “Alfarabi,” in *History of Political Philosophy*, Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 210.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

perfect philosopher.”⁴⁶

The Philosopher’s Mountain

The model for Strauss’s philosopher is a special kind of mountain climber. It may at first appear in pyramidal form. Strauss gestures with fragmented references at a pyramidal mountain whose missing peak shines brighter than the foundation it rests upon: this is a mountainous “structure which from a broad base of drabness rises to a narrow plateau of distinction and grace.”⁴⁷ Because only a philosopher can stand atop this mountain, and because Socrates represents for Strauss the model philosopher, it may be Socrates that Strauss wants us to imagine guiding the philosopher’s ascent to wisdom. Just like the philosopher who can attain “knowledge of ultimate perfection” but can only give “some degree of that perfection” to those below, Socrates can be seen as the illuminating peak that “gives some grace and some distinction” to the “broad base of drabness” represented by the masses of people who live in darkness and long for the philosopher’s light. But in gesturing at this vision, Strauss points beyond it as well.

Speaking of how Strauss’s followers view him and his teaching about natural right, Mark Lilla says “[t]hey treat him less like Socrates than like Moses, and *Natural Right and History* as tablets brought down from the mountain.”⁴⁸ The philosopher who reaches the peak of human potential becomes more than a philosopher: he becomes a prophet and lawgiver. By ascending the *Sinai* mountain a higher wisdom is revealed,

⁴⁶ Leo Strauss, “How to Study Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise,” In *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 200.

⁴⁷ Leo Strauss, “Liberal Education and Responsibility,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 325.

⁴⁸ Mark Lilla, *The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2016), p. 57.

but only to the philosopher-prophet who returns to the base to give that wisdom in the form of a new law to a distinct group chosen for a special mission. But in the lawgiving moment, the prophet can only give “some distinction” to his followers. Much work remains to be done if their mission is to succeed.

Strauss writes of Moses and his teachings to tempt future seekers of wisdom to become “more than perfect philosophers,” to go beyond the model of Socrates the perfect philosopher. “Moses taught,” Strauss says, “that uncreated “chaos” precedes in time the ordered universe which is the work of God.”⁴⁹ God is the supreme wisdom that creates moral order out of nature’s chaos, and this wisdom is communicated to human beings through prophets. When Strauss teaches that “the prophets were perfect philosophers and more than perfect philosophers”⁵⁰ he tempts future philosophers to look beyond the model of Socrates. Philosophers lack something artistic the prophets possess, which disqualifies the philosopher who is only a philosopher from being seen as a supreme being.⁵¹ The philosopher cannot reach full perfection “without the power of imagination of which the prophet is the most accomplished representative.”⁵² In contemplation, the philosopher who aspires to be something more engages with the prophet’s power of imagination and becomes a creative artist able to give form to nature’s chaos through lawgiving, or what Strauss calls giving an account of “the whole to which one belongs.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Leo Strauss, “How to Study Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 199.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 200.

⁵¹ Leo Strauss, “Alfarabi” in *History of Political Philosophy*, Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 216.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?,” in *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 24.

Employing the language of the prophets in order to teach future philosophers to see themselves as worthy of supreme distinction, Strauss says that Moses was deserving of the greatest admiration for being seen as worthy to speak with God.⁵⁴ That distinction is evident in the wisdom embedded in his artwork, which gave a small group a new identity and a mission that would transform the world.

In the pre-modern world, the creation of a comprehensive belief system that undergirded moral and political laws was the work of religious thinkers, not philosophers, who took for granted the need people have for a “true and final account of the whole”⁵⁵ and that a priestly class existed to provide it. “As long as the belief in the possibility and necessity of a final account of the whole prevailed,” then the attempt to provide such an account “did not form an integral part of the philosophic effort.”⁵⁶ Philosophers left this work to theologians. Strauss teaches that under the conditions of modernity, philosophers are forced to rethink this division of labor because the commitment to the diffusion of scientific and philosophical knowledge undermines people’s beliefs in existing religious accounts, which opens new space for the philosopher-artist to become the philosopher-prophet.

Strauss sees in classical philosophy a way to revitalize religious ways of thinking as a means to inform and guide the rebellion against modernity. Concepts like transcendence serve this purpose, but only when stripped of theological underpinnings and given philosophical grounding. Strauss’s approach parallels the efforts of the Platonic

⁵⁴ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 189.

⁵⁵ Leo Strauss, “The Law of Reason in the Kuzari,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 157.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

political philosophers of the Middle Ages who grounded philosophy in efforts to justify religious laws philosophically.⁵⁷ Under modern conditions, Strauss teaches, it is left to political philosophy to provide an authoritative justification for moral values embedded in political laws.⁵⁸ For this reason Strauss says political philosophy has become almost synonymous with ideology.⁵⁹ The philosophical ascent propelled by ceaseless questions leads to a wisdom that Strauss calls “comprehensive knowledge of the whole.”⁶⁰

Mark Lilla explains that for Strauss “all societies require an authoritative account of ultimate matters – morality and mortality, essentially – if they are to legitimate their political institutions and educate citizens.”⁶¹ While theology traditionally accomplished this by convincing people to obey laws that are believed to have sacred origins, the philosophical alternative epitomized by Socrates is a “life of perpetual questioning beholden to no theological or political authority.”⁶² Such philosophical questioning necessarily undermines the authoritative elements that legitimize political institutions and educate citizens. Without these authoritative accounts, “no society can hold itself together.”⁶³ Philosophical freedom serves a double purpose: while continuing to question existing theological and political accounts of morality, philosophers articulate their own authoritative accounts of the traditions that hold regimes together, but they express those

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Leo Strauss, “An Epilogue” in *Liberalism, Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 220; see also Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 2.

⁵⁹ Leo Strauss, “An Epilogue” in *Liberalism, Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 159.

⁶⁰ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 29-30.

⁶¹ Mark Lilla, *The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2016), p. 47.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

accounts in a manner that recruits future philosophers to create new regimes and become lawgivers.

Strauss's philosopher-lawgivers establish "the permanent framework within which the right handling of changing situations by excellent politicians and statesmen can take place."⁶⁴ Judging the decisions of political leaders "depends ultimately on the value of the cause in whose service" the politician or statesman acts "and that cause is not his work but the work of him or those who made the laws and institutions of his community."⁶⁵ The cause that determines how to judge the value of a leader's actions is given by founding lawgivers, who establish moral-political order by justifying a set of values or preferences philosophically, that is, through ideology.⁶⁶ Ideology is the basis for the moral framework leaders need in order to demonstrate excellence in the handling of ever-changing political situations. Creating ideology is the supreme expression of the legislative art, which Strauss calls "architectonic," and which he claims is a teachable political skill.⁶⁷ Strauss teaches that philosophical lawgiving is superior in dignity to the decisions taken "here and now by a legislator acting on behalf of this or that political community."⁶⁸

The wisdom of the philosopher is the source of the higher law that he gives to

⁶⁴ Leo Strauss, "On Classical Political Philosophy," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 65.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Leo Strauss, "An Epilogue," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 151.

⁶⁷ Leo Strauss, "On Classical Political Philosophy," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 65.

⁶⁸ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 28-29.

political leaders in the form of ideological principles that guide decision-making. The political philosopher is both a philosopher-lawgiver and a teacher of legislators:

Every legislator is primarily concerned with the individual community for which he legislates, but he has to raise certain questions which regard all legislation. These most fundamental and most universal political questions are naturally fit to be made the subject of the most “architectonic,” the truly “architectonic” political knowledge: of that political science which is the goal of the political philosopher. This political science is the knowledge which would enable a man to teach legislators. The political philosopher who has reached his goal is the teacher of legislators.⁶⁹

The ideological principles that Strauss refers to as an “authoritative account of the whole” and which his political philosophers teach to would be legislators, is not based on philosophy understood as a body of doctrines but as a way of thinking about political problems. Steven Smith claims that “[a]lthough he bequeathed no formal system or doctrine, he did leave a very characteristic way of posing problems.”⁷⁰ Strauss instructs students to begin with the most urgent question: what kind of laws and institutions would be most favorable to “the rule of the best?”⁷¹ “It is primarily by answering this question,” he says, “by thus elaborating a “blueprint” of the best polity, that the political philosopher becomes the teacher of legislators.”⁷² Smith says that Strauss himself “did not write to produce an ideology, that is, a body of doctrine intended to serve as a blueprint for political action.”⁷³ Strauss did not produce an ideology, but his way of posing problems does inspire those influenced by him to seek alternative ways of thinking that can

⁶⁹ Leo Strauss, “On Classical Political Philosophy,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 66.

⁷⁰ Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 156.

⁷¹ Leo Strauss, “On Classical Political Philosophy,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 69.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 178-179.

transform modern regimes. Daniel Tanguay agrees that Strauss's overall objective "is not to present a completed doctrine" but to "arouse an awareness of the fundamentally problematic character" of modernity.⁷⁴ His teaching arouses the desire and provides the tools to create alternative ideologies. What Smith refers to as Strauss's way of posing problems, Tanguay explains is an aspect of Strauss's "desire to present alternatives rather than solutions."⁷⁵ By presenting alternatives to the established way of thinking, "Strauss also wishes to transmit politically healthy opinions."⁷⁶ Strauss does not himself present a completed doctrine, but his teaching *is* meant to arouse in students a desire to improve the health of ailing regimes or to take more drastic action to address the failures of a corrupt regime. Strauss did not leave behind a blueprint, but he did indicate that future legislators need a blueprint. "Strauss was not a legislator," Smith explains, because "[h]e did not propose any wholesale vision" for reform.⁷⁷ Not himself a legislator, but something more, he was the teacher of future legislators and a teacher of their teachers. He provides the prophetic vision that guides future founders who provide their own blueprints that guide the intellectuals who provide the advice that guides political leaders.

The philosopher-founder provides a kind of comprehensive knowledge that recognizes certain philosophical limits. The philosopher-founder develops an "understanding of the whole" based on, according to Strauss, "the political art in the

⁷⁴ Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 123.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124.

⁷⁷ Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 178.

highest sense” which “is not knowledge of *the* whole.”⁷⁸ Comprehensive philosophical knowledge is impossible to possess because “of the mysterious character of the whole.”⁷⁹ But for Strauss comprehensive political knowledge of a particular community *is* possible: “the city is the only whole within the whole or the only part of the whole whose essence can be wholly known.”⁸⁰ Such total knowledge is akin to what Daniel Bell referred to as total ideology, “an all-inclusive system of comprehensive reality, a set of beliefs, infused with passion and seeks to transform the whole of a way of life. This commitment to ideology—the yearning for a ‘cause,’ or the satisfaction of deep moral feelings—is not necessarily the reflection of interests in the shape of ideas. Ideology, in this sense, and in the sense that we use it here, is a secular religion.”⁸¹ Strauss teaches that thinkers need, as all humans do, a cause or mission that gives life a higher moral purpose. As representatives of the highest human type, their cause is so deeply tied to moral feelings he explicitly stresses the importance of selecting for and cultivating an intellectual class with a “passionate interest in genuine morality.”⁸² He also seeks to transform the philosopher’s way of life. The distinct way of posing political problems, a variation on the idea of the philosopher’s ceaseless questioning, is part of the reconception of philosophy described earlier. And his efforts to revitalize religious ways of thinking serves the purpose of a secular religion with political philosophers as a priestly class. In

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 29.

⁸¹ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 399-400.

⁸² Leo Strauss, “The Law of Reason in the Kuzari,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 140.

spirit if not in form, Strauss provides an ideology or a meta-ideology to future legislators and their teachers: the mission is not for intellectuals to implement a final ideology or regime, but to ensure that intellectuals have the freedom to create and recreate the truths embodied in ideologies and regimes.

Scholars who see Strauss's political philosophy as an ideology for indirect rule by intellectual elites overlook the way Strauss's teaching is oriented to the creation and transformation of regimes. Perry Anderson argues that Strauss's work takes the "form of an oracular retrospect of the history of philosophy from Socrates to Nietzsche," which is "in effect a systematic political doctrine."⁸³ Anderson correctly says that for Strauss the best political order will be hierarchical to mirror nature's inherent inequality and so the "best regime will therefore reflect differences in human excellence, and be led by an appropriate elite. But although the highest virtue is philosophical contemplation of the truth, this does not mean – contrary to a superficial reading of the Republic – that the just city will be ruled by philosophers."⁸⁴ Anderson captures the image of an intellectual class of gentlemen rulers who are not themselves philosophers, but are the product of philosophers. But this picture does not reveal the transformational spirit of Strauss's gentlemen who, according to Anderson, are "instructed in rule – but not raised to truth – by philosophers" who teach them to "uphold a rational order of political stability against leveling temptations."⁸⁵ Anderson is right to call Strauss's work is "oracular" because it inspires through enigmatic writings a "passionate interest in genuine morality" while

⁸³ Perry Anderson, *Spectrum: From Right to Left in the World of Ideas* (New York: Verso, 2007), p. 9.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

invoking the idea that only an “omnipotent and omniscient God can make possible genuine morality.”⁸⁶ But Anderson is not right to interpret the passion of Strauss’s gentlemen in terms of guarding against leveling temptations by aiming at hierarchical stability. Their passion is not to stabilize but to create and recreate hierarchical regimes. The passion for creation is what brings the philosopher-founder as close as humanly possible to God. Strauss’s apparent concern for social stability expressed in arguments against licentiousness are only the surface explanation for why a “passion for genuine morality” must be “an integral part of the philosophic effort.”⁸⁷ More important is the aspiration to godliness through contemplation, which gets reflected in the philosopher-founder’s aspirations: philosophizing begins “for us” by seeking understanding through wisdom but then leads beyond mere understanding to a higher “awareness of our understanding” and culminates in the need to “exert our understanding,” an experience regarded as “so high, so pure, so noble” that a classical philosopher “could ascribe it to God.”⁸⁸

With Strauss’s “classical philosopher” describing contemplation as “assimilation to God,” we again are forced to reconsider the manner in which Socrates is presented by Strauss as his model philosopher. If the prophet Moses received the highest wisdom from God before giving a new moral law to his chosen people, then future philosophers who see themselves as prophetic lawgivers will interpret the messages they receive from

⁸⁶ Leo Strauss, “The Law of Reason in the Kuzari,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 140.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁸⁸ Leo Strauss, “What is Liberal Education?,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 319.

the highest sources of wisdom as divine truth, which will be interpreted politically and made the basis of new laws. Strauss's gentlemen-founder is not actually a philosopher, but he is a teacher of legislators who "presents himself as an interpreter of, or as a messenger from, the philosophers rather than as a philosopher."⁸⁹ Especially relevant in this regard is Strauss's sole admission, given in a lecture about education to an audience of educators, that "we cannot be philosophers" which he repeats, but which is not meant to diminish how his non-philosophers should see themselves. After announcing twice that the future gentlemen he has in mind *cannot* be philosophers, he claims that "we" *can* do what even the "greatest minds were unable to."⁹⁰

Strauss's explicit call to greatness is preceded by a depiction of the "Socratic" model that his gentlemen are to follow. "We do well to take as our model," he says, "that one among the greatest minds who because of his common sense is *the* mediator between us and the greatest minds. Socrates never wrote a book, but he read books. Let me quote a statement of Socrates which says almost everything that has to be said on our subject."⁹¹ Without citation or attribution, Strauss quotes directly an unnamed man who reports: "Just as others are pleased by a good horse or dog or bird, I myself am pleased to an even higher degree by good friends."⁹² Strauss continues, "And the treasures of the wise men of old which they left behind by writing them in books, I unfold and go through them

⁸⁹ Leo Strauss, "The Law of Reason in the Kuzari," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 113.

⁹⁰ Leo Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 317.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 316.

together with my friends, and if we see something good, we pick it out and regard it as a great gain if we thus become useful to one another.”⁹³ This is how Strauss depicts the relationship between the philosopher-teacher and his gentlemen-friends and students. The teacher is the messenger of a higher wisdom that transforms his gentlemen students into perfect gentlemen. “The man who reports this utterance,” Strauss explains, “adds the remark: “When I heard this, it seemed to me both that Socrates was blessed and that he was leading those listening to him toward perfect gentlemanship.””⁹⁴ The unnamed reporter, we learn elsewhere, is Xenophon. “There is only one occasion on which Xenophon calls Socrates “blessed”: when he speaks of how Socrates acquired his friends or rather his *good* friends – he acquired them by studying with them the writings of the wise men of old and by selecting together with them the good things they found in them.”⁹⁵ He acquired friends through his teaching of philosophy and through that teaching he and his perfect gentleman aimed to do what even the philosophers of old were unable to.

Strauss’s teaching redirects the mission of the Socratic philosopher and the students inspired by him. “The philosopher” Strauss teaches, “must assume the perspective of the revolutionary founder.”⁹⁶ Strauss’s glorification of founders points beyond “reverence for the single founder,” which is based on a “blindness to the fact that in every flourishing society foundation is so to speak continuous.”⁹⁷ Robert Howse calls

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Leo Strauss, “The Problem of Socrates,” *Interpretation*, Spring 1995, Vol.22, No.3, p. 333.

⁹⁶ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 67-68.

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 287-288.

this Strauss's effort to recover the "perspective of the founder" as part of a "spiritual movement" and a multi-generational project.⁹⁸ Those living this project are guided by the model of a Socrates who lived "like a god among human beings."⁹⁹ This remodeled Socrates is presented as "higher than Romulus in the case of Rome or Lycurgus in the case of Sparta or Moses in the case of the Jews."¹⁰⁰ He is the godlike source of the highest wisdom and though he never founded a political society, he was the teacher of future founders and a teacher of their teachers.¹⁰¹

The Spirit of the Sect

In a key passage where Strauss sets out to complete his redefinition of philosophy by describing the importance of education, he returns again to the theme of the philosopher's political activity. He defines what a philosopher is and does by first warning against what he calls "Epicurian detachment," a view of the philosopher as a solitary, apolitical thinker. The argument begins with a depiction of an apolitical philosopher but then proceeds by showing why the philosopher's failures, weaknesses, and uncertainties demand the creation of philosophical schools he calls sects. Strauss presents the Epicurian view this way:

⁹⁸ Robert Howse, *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 95-96.

⁹⁹ Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socrates: On the Apology* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2004), p. 132.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Howse, *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 96, see footnote 15.

¹⁰¹ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 168.

Since the philosopher is the man who devotes his whole life to the quest for wisdom, he has no time for political activity of any kind: the philosopher cannot possibly desire to rule. His only demand on the political men is that they leave him alone. He justifies his demand by honestly declaring that his pursuit is purely theoretical and does not interfere in any way with the business of the political men. This simple solution presents itself at first glance as the strict consequence from the definition of the philosopher.¹⁰²

Referring to the definition of a philosopher as a solitary thinker who demands very little of political men, Strauss says “it suffers from a fatal weakness.”¹⁰³

The weakness of the apolitical pursuit of wisdom is initially presented in terms of the madman problem: the solitary thinker has no way to know whether his thoughts are a sign of madness or genius unless he communicates his ideas to other thinkers. “The philosopher cannot lead an absolutely solitary life,” Strauss says, “because the legitimate desire for “subjective certainty” and the certainty of the lunatic are indistinguishable, and so genuine certainty must be “inter-subjective.”¹⁰⁴ The quest for truth, which has already been redirected toward the creation of truth, is here pushed in another direction as a result of the philosopher’s need for certainty and other limits exposed by a philosophy practiced in solitude. Strauss claims that these limits were recognized by classical philosophers, who addressed the challenge by pursuing their aims in schools, with philosophical friends engaged in a common enterprise. “The classics were fully aware,” Strauss explains, “of the essential weakness of the mind of the individual. Hence their teaching about the philosophic life is a teaching about friendship: the philosopher is as philosopher in need of friends.”¹⁰⁵ After asserting the centrality of friendship, Strauss shifts away from inter-

¹⁰² Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 194.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

subjectivity as a guard against the philosopher's potential madness to inter-subjectivity as group-oriented action in service to the philosopher's mission:

To be of service to the philosopher in his philosophizing, the friends must be competent men: they must themselves be actual or potential philosophers, i.e., members of the natural "elite." Friendship presupposes a measure of conscious agreement. The things regarding which the philosophic friends must agree cannot be known or evident truths. For philosophy is not wisdom but quest for wisdom. The things regarding which the philosophic friends agree will then be opinions or prejudices. But there is necessarily a variety of opinions or prejudices. Hence there will be a variety of groups of philosophic friends: philosophy, as distinguished from wisdom, necessarily appears in the form of philosophic schools or of sects.¹⁰⁶

Strauss then concedes that "friendship as the classics understood it offers no solution to the problem of "subjective certainty.""¹⁰⁷ Friends are not needed to test the philosopher's possible madness. The issue of subjective certainty is raised by Strauss to distract from the real reason for turning to group-centric philosophizing.

The shift to group-oriented contemplation is really about pursuing and seeking to actualize a kind of philosophical wisdom that is achievable only by transcending modern modes of thought. A core lesson of Strauss's philosophical education is that the highest human wisdom is unattainable through modern, Western philosophy. As perpetual seekers of wisdom, the philosophers of old never reached their goal, they never became wise men in Strauss's sense. Strauss's debates with Alexander Kojève reveal how both philosophers, despite their ideologically opposed political orientations, believed that the emergence of truly wise men demanded a rethinking of the Western approach to philosophy. Mark Lilla explains that their public exchange proceeded "from their shared conviction that Western philosophy had reached a terminus and had to be thoroughly

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

reconceived.”¹⁰⁸ Strauss, like Kojève, begins with the premise that past philosophers have failed in their quest to actualize wisdom. They are in agreement that “at least up to now there have been no wise men but at best men who strove for wisdom, i.e., philosophers.”¹⁰⁹

Strauss aims to correct the failures of past philosophers by reimagining how the interplay between philosophy, politics and education can create a new class of wise men. Howse explains that for Strauss the “failure of the ideal of the single thinker possessing complete intellectual perfection, of the fantasy of the ruling mind, presages a new beginning for philosophizing.”¹¹⁰ Philosophy is recast as the dynamic relationship forged through theoretical contemplation and political knowledge as expressed through the greatest thinkers bound together across time and space in a conversation about the most important human matters. This conversation is the source of the highest human wisdom and can only be actualized by schools of thinkers themselves bound together by shared ideals and commitments. This conception of philosophy entails bringing the views of past philosophers into alignment on the most important issues by setting them in dialogue and listening for the underlying wisdom hidden beneath the surface disagreements. It may appear as if the “greatest philosophic minds of the past were in fundamental disagreement” regarding the most important human matters, but their disagreements can be presented as a conversation that conveys wisdom to those who know how to hear it.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), pp. 130-131.

¹⁰⁹ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 208.

¹¹⁰ Robert Howse, *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 17.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

Strauss admits that under the conditions of modernity those devoted to actualizing the wisdom of philosophy, cannot themselves be philosophers: “We cannot be philosophers, but we can love philosophy; we can try to philosophize. This philosophizing consists at any rate primarily and in a way chiefly in listening to the conversation between the great philosophers.”¹¹² But Strauss does not view philosophical contemplation as the passive reception of wisdom that comes from hearing the conversation between the greatest minds. “But here,” he adds, “we are confronted with the overwhelming difficulty that this conversation does not take place without our help – that in fact we must bring about that conversation. The greatest minds utter monologues. We must transform their monologues into a dialogue.”¹¹³ The highest wisdom can only be heard if the conversation between the greatest minds is produced by philosopher-teachers who see themselves as prophetic messengers and lawgivers.

Strauss is vague about how philosophizing can produce actual wisdom by engaging with and surpassing the greatest minds of the past, but Kojève reveals a crucial parallel in their respective notions of philosophical progress toward wisdom, which Strauss does not refute or even qualify. Strauss’s silent acceptance of Kojève’s approach to wisdom speaks loudly. Kojève explains that “if the Statesmen did not eventually actualize the philosophically based “advice” by their day-to-day political action, there would be no philosophical progress.”¹¹⁴ The culmination of philosophical progress is the

¹¹² Leo Strauss, “What is Liberal Education?,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 317.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Alexander Kojève “Tyranny and Wisdom,” in Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 175.

production of “*the* book of (“Bible”) Wisdom that could definitively replace the book by that title which we have had for nearly two thousand years.”¹¹⁵ Here Kojève indicates a division of labor between “philosophers” and “intellectuals” that could make such progress possible. The philosopher is right, he says, “when he refrains from elaborating his theories to the point where they speak directly to the questions raised by current political affairs: if he did, he would have no time left for philosophy, we would cease to be a philosopher and hence would cease to have any claim to giving the tyrant politico-philosophical advice.”¹¹⁶ The philosopher needs friends to accomplish his goals, to actualize the highest wisdom. “The philosopher is right,” he repeats before finally giving a name to the friends he has in mind, “to leave the responsibility for bringing about a convergence on the theoretical plane between his philosophical ideas and political reality to a constellation of intellectuals.”¹¹⁷ Whereas Kojève speaks openly of replacing the Bible with a philosophical book of wisdom, Strauss speaks elusively about creating a philosophical dialogue that serves as a source of wisdom. Whereas Kojève distinguishes the philosopher from the intellectuals who work to actualize philosophical wisdom, Strauss blurs that distinction and declares that the politicization of philosophy has made “the essential difference between intellectuals and philosophers” difficult to discern.¹¹⁸

Strauss explains that

the politicization of philosophy consists precisely in this, that the difference between intellectuals and philosophers, a difference formerly known as the difference between gentlemen and philosophers, on the one hand, and the difference between sophists or rhetoricians and philosophers on the other,

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Leo Strauss, “Natural Right and the Historical Approach,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 124.

becomes blurred and finally disappears.¹¹⁹

Elsewhere, further blurring these distinctions while removing the philosopher entirely and substituting the wise man, Strauss insists that sophists can be mistaken for wise men because “[b]oth the wise man and the sophist are in a sense possessors of wisdom. But whereas the sophist prostitutes wisdom for base purposes, and especially for money, the wise man makes the most noble or moral use of wisdom.”¹²⁰ The sophist, comparable to modern elites, is called servile for his materialistic motivations. But the sophist is treated as a gentleman and wise man when his words and deeds are put to moral-ideological use. Highlighting further how his gentlemen are closer in spirit to Kojève’s intellectuals than to philosophers and suggesting how they can surpass the philosophers of the past by actualizing wisdom, Strauss explains in a then-unpublished letter to Kojève that, as a corrective to the failures of past philosophers, the “philosopher-sophist-statesman” must be treated as One.¹²¹ As mentioned above, Strauss admits only once, in his singular essay explicitly devoted to education, delivered to an audience of educators, that *we cannot be philosophers* and yet he employs the term throughout his writings to describe the gentlemen he endeavors to groom into wise men.

Strauss’s early work contain hints of irony, which speak to his lifelong effort to rethink how philosophy can actualize the highest kinds of wisdom. In his early Hobbes book he referred to *The Book of the Courtier* and recommended taking “Castiglione’s

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Eds. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 42.

¹²¹ Ibid. p. 293.

guide to the courtier's life as an ironical guide to the philosopher's."¹²² That irony can be understood in a passage Strauss highlights where the companions of Plato and Aristotle are depicted embracing the name "philosopher" despite their pursuit of political power. Dionysius, pupil of Plato, and Callisthenes, pupil of Aristotle, failed to achieve wisdom, in Castiglione's telling, because of their tyrannical natures.¹²³ The irony Strauss alludes to is not simply that tyrants called themselves philosophers despite being undeserving of the label. Nor is the irony that Aristotle, according to Castiglione, is said to have succeeded in transforming Alexander, another pupil, into a "true moral philosopher."¹²⁴ The irony is that Strauss employs the same "methods of a good courtier" to pursue wisdom and nobility by counteracting those deeds Castiglione calls wise and noble:

besides directing Alexander to the noble objective of wishing to make the whole world into one single country, in which men would live as one people, in friendship and peace among themselves under one government and one law shining equally on all like the light of the sun, Aristotle educated him so well in the natural sciences and in virtue the he became extremely wise.¹²⁵

Strauss's wise men rebel against this vision, which is presented by Strauss as distinctly modern even though he recognizes its origins in classical philosophy. Another irony.

Strauss's teaching stresses the importance of sects because he aims to arouse a passionate interest in a moral vision that counteracts the modern ideal. Kojeve is right to critique Strauss's anti-modern version of philosophy because it cultivates gentlemen-friends with a cloistered mind: "if he never leaves the intentionally narrow circle of a deliberately recruited "elite" or of carefully chosen "friends," he runs the risk of

¹²² Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Origin and Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 46

¹²³ Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 321-322.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

considering “worthy” those and only those who approve of him or admire him.”¹²⁶ Strauss concedes that philosophical “[f]riendship is bound to lead to, or to consist in, the cultivation and perpetuation of common prejudices by a closely knit group of kindred spirits. It is therefore incompatible with the idea of philosophy.”¹²⁷ The modern approach to philosophy, Strauss admits “indeed lacks the narrowness of the sect: it embraces men of all philosophic persuasions. But precisely for this reason,” he explains, it “stipulates that no philosophic persuasion must be taken too seriously or that every philosophic persuasion must be treated with as much respect as any other.”¹²⁸ Strauss is concerned with inspiring passionate interest in the creation of moral truth, not agreement for its own sake. He continues: “Whereas the sect is narrow because it is passionately concerned with the true issues,” the modern substitute “is comprehensive because it is indifferent to the true issues: it prefers agreement to truth or to the quest for truth.”¹²⁹ He concludes: “If we have to choose between the sect” and the modern approach, “we must choose the sect.”¹³⁰

Opting for the sect as a way to rebel against modernity is a corrective to the lack of noble passion on the part of modern ruling elites. The problem stems from the fact that modernity “embraces men of all philosophic persuasions” and thus infringes on the philosopher’s ability to inspire full commitment to his ideas: the principles of modern toleration and inclusiveness mean that “no philosophic persuasion must be taken too

¹²⁶ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 195-201.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

seriously.”¹³¹ Unlike Strauss’s version of classical philosophy which is “passionately concerned with the true issues,” the modern alternative is “indifferent to the true issues: it prefers agreement” and the result is that “every philosophic persuasion must be treated with as much respect as any other.”¹³² Mutual respect and toleration aimed at fostering universal agreement comes at the cost of dehumanization: “Agreement at all costs is possible only as agreement at the cost of the meaning of human life: for agreement at all costs is possible only if man has relinquished asking the question of what is right; and if man relinquishes that question, he relinquishes being a man.”¹³³ To be fully human is to pursue noble goals based on a moral framework. To be more than fully human is to create that framework.

What is presented as the Socratic mission of classical philosophy is also framed in religious terms. Straussian education seduces philosophers into playing the role of prophets, a role Eugene Sheppard explains, “is appropriate only for a philosophic elite who can properly respond to the challenge of knowing that providence does not guide the unfolding of history.”¹³⁴ Straussian seduction is self-consciously serpentine. The possession of moral knowledge is explicitly tied to godlike powers exemplified by the setting and breaking of sacred prohibitions. “The serpent begins its seduction,” Strauss explains, “by suggesting that God might have forbidden man and woman to eat of any

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Leo Strauss, “Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*,” in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*,” George Schwab ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 103.

¹³⁴ Eugene Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher*” (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2004), p. 119.

tree in the garden.”¹³⁵ The focus is on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the blame is the woman’s more than the serpent’s. In Strauss’s retelling, the woman “makes the prohibition more stringent than it was: “we may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden; it is only about the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: you shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.””¹³⁶ This more stringent prohibition, Strauss suggests, is appropriate to the woman, not because of her gender per se but because here she represents ordinary humanity in its lack of full understanding and its need for strict moral prohibitions. The sentence immediately following the woman’s misunderstanding of the serpent is directed to man qua representative of what is highest in humanity, the man to whom the prohibition was *not* directed: “God did not forbid the man to touch the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.”¹³⁷ Strauss corrects the woman’s misunderstanding of the serpent by explaining that actually the “serpent assures her that they will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”¹³⁸ “The serpent,” Strauss continues, “tacitly questions God’s veracity.”¹³⁹ The proper response to what Sheppard describes as the problem of knowing that providence does not guide humanity, is to follow the man who eats of the tree of knowledge and becomes the godlike creator of good and evil. Strauss incorporates religious themes into his political philosophy not just to inspire the creation of moral order based on suprahuman wisdom. When regimes are so corrupt that

¹³⁵ Leo Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens,” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 156.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

no moral teaching can improve them, then, according to Strauss's reading of the Bible, religious wisdom teaches wise men to prepare for a flood.

Strauss's telling of the biblical story of Babel is meant to guide future wise men, through "the purgation of the earth through Flood" and the ensuing "restoration of mankind."¹⁴⁰ Strauss's chosen wise men are, contrary to accounts that focus on the empire-building aspects, oriented to the cyclical movement of regime creation, corruption, and destruction. The highest wisdom has taught them when regimes should be founded, when regimes should expand and transform, and when corrupt empires deserve to fall. Though Nimrod's power was expressed in the expansiveness of his kingdom, Strauss draws the reader's attention to the fact that "his kingdom included Babel."¹⁴¹ Placing a corrupt Babel at the center of the kingdom, according to Strauss, justifies its destruction and the scattering of humanity:

God scattered them by confounding their speech, by bringing about the division of mankind into groups speaking different languages, groups that cannot understand one another: into nations, i.e., groups united not only by descent but by language as well. The division of mankind into nations may be described as a milder alternative to the Flood.¹⁴²

In this context, Strauss restates that the division of mankind, a purgation that prepares the way for a restoration, elevates one chosen group above all others. Not a nation of course, but philosophers do represent, for Strauss, "a different species of human being," and a group which does and must speak in a different way than all other human groups.

According to Strauss's reconception of the relationship between philosophy, politics and education, which seeks to revitalize religious modes of thought, philosophers

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 159.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid., pp. 159-160.

must see themselves as a chosen group on a special “Socratic” mission. As if guarding against the notion that his political philosophy conceals a kinship with the nihilistic reactionaries discussed in Chapter Two, Strauss alludes, in his last published book, to the charge that his teaching is animated by a spirit of “destruction for its own sake,” a charge he himself leveled against the German nihilists in his first public lecture after emigrating to the U.S. Against this view, Strauss invokes the Jewish prophets and points to the *creative* side of destruction: “I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.”¹⁴³ The next page opens the chapter on Nietzsche, the final essay Strauss ever wrote, in which he describes a “super-Socrates” who is godlike.¹⁴⁴

The next and final chapter of this dissertation explores how Strauss’s ideas about cyclical movement and regime transformation conceal an apocalyptic vision that serves his reconceived Socratic mission.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 169.

¹⁴⁴ Leo Strauss, “Notes on the Plan of Nietzsche’s Beyond Good and Evil,” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 175.

Ch.4 Toward the Missing King

“The highest subject of political philosophy is the philosophic life: philosophy - not as a teaching or as a body of knowledge, but as a way of life - offers, as it were, the solution to the problem that keeps political life in motion.”¹

The quote above suggests that what Strauss calls “the philosophic life” offers a way to deal with the problems that animate political life and keep it in permanent motion. There is a sense in which Strauss sees philosophy aiming beyond political life, but the higher goals of philosophy are not achieved by establishing a stable and permanent order that puts an end to political motion because Strauss sees political movement as a condition for the kind of excellence he promotes. The problem is that under the conditions of modernity excellence understood as monarchical greatness is in danger.

This chapter argues that Strauss seeks to preserve the never-ending cycles of political movement as a means to keep alive a monarchy-in-motion rather than establish a permanent framework for a stable order. Accordingly, the quote above actually means that political philosophers devote themselves to the study of philosophy, their highest subject, to ensure that the never-ending cyclical movement of political life has a higher purpose. The concern is not that politics is forever in flux. The concern is that without the flux there is no space to pursue the highest excellence and without truth-creators the flux is aimless. This final chapter explores how Strauss’s ideas about ancient utopianism, regime cycles, and noble imperialism guide political and philosophical movement toward a monarchical principle in a manner that opens space for future founders and lawgivers to demonstrate their own monarchical greatness.

One aspect of the movement Strauss is concerned with has to do with the

¹ Leo Strauss, “On Classical Political Philosophy?” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 75.

possibility that modern political regimes can move toward an expression of monarchy through the coordinated actions of intellectual elites. A reason Strauss argues that modernity is in crisis is that its core principles cultivate a ruling elite unable to properly exercise its latent “regal power.”² Strauss’s monarchy-in-motion points to a kind of kingship that is possible in all kinds of regimes, which do and should cycle through political change in response to the corruption of the ruling class. The “late corruption” of modernity presents an opportunity for movement toward a “postconstitutional” regime, which in turns paves the way for a “preconstitutional situation,” the lawgiving moment Strauss points to repeatedly in which philosophers and gentlemen come together as founders. By guiding regimes through these political cycles, Strauss’s philosopher-founders make human life meaningful and demonstrate their kingly excellence.

Another aspect of the movement Strauss seeks to preserve is the supposedly natural tendency of all political societies toward imperialism. All regimes, according to Strauss, unless constrained by internal weakness or external force, tend toward expansion, but not all kinds of imperialism are driven by worthy passions nor directed toward noble goals.³ Despite his consistent defense of expansionism, there is a kind of imperialism Strauss rejects entirely: a modern imperialism animated by the search for profits, the establishment of universal norms and “the fusion of science and the arts together with the unlimited or uncontrolled progress of technology.”⁴ That imperialism “has made universal and perpetual tyranny a serious possibility.”⁵ His engagement with

² Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 178.

³ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 209.

⁴ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Schmitt revealed his early concerns over modern depoliticization and the coming of a pacified world populated by the last man.⁶ Those concerns find mature voice in his rejection of a modern universalism that points to a “world state,”⁷ which he believes justifies “nihilistic negation” because of its dehumanizing effect on mankind.⁸ But “nihilistic revolution” is not the only way to counter the political universalism that Strauss projects onto an Athenian imperialism that betrayed its noble origins.⁹ He sees in Spartan “moderation” both a rebellion against Athenian universalism and an imperial ethos that would preserve the political motion vital for the cultivation of monarchical excellence. But even as he imagines a fusion of Spartan and Athenian imperialism animated by the pursuit of “great and noble deeds,” he admits that such a project may be “doomed to failure.”¹⁰ And therein lies the apocalyptic aspect of the movement toward kingship.

Strauss’s ideas about regime cycles and noble imperialism are presented in his readings and commentaries on actual civilizational conflicts. In the great wars of the past Strauss sees meaningful parallels to present day issues. His most detailed analysis of the Pelopenessian War, where he decribes the differences between the Athenian and Spartan regimes, begins with an introduction that reveals the contemporary significance of his ideas about imperialism. Speaking of the crisis of modernity as a Western crisis, he admits that the West’s lack of purpose is a greater concern to him than the prospect of defeat or destruction in the cold war: “the defeat, even the destruction of the West would

⁶ Leo Strauss, “Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*” In Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*,” George Schwab ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 100-101.

⁷ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 23.

⁸ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 209.

⁹ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 213.

¹⁰ *On Tyranny*, p.209.

not necessarily prove that the West is in a crisis: the West could go down in honor, certain of its purpose.”¹¹ “The crisis of the West,” he explains, “consists in the West’s having become uncertain of its purpose.”¹² Referring to the previous world wars as a time when “the West was once certain of its purpose,” he frames the cold war as a battle against Communism to determine whose vision will guide the “future of mankind.”¹³ He declares his opposition to the vision of a “universal state” and sees in the cold war an opportunity for the West to embrace the “Olympian freedom” through which “it overcomes the crisis of our time.”¹⁴ Chapter 1 describes this as the freedom of philosophers to create truth and meaning. Here freedom is tied to imperialism: “mankind’s greatest objectives, freedom and empire” are pursued on the battlefield of political thought, “the field on which human excellence can show itself in its full growth.”¹⁵ For the highest human excellence to flourish, for ruling elites to be seen as wise kings, imperialism too must be driven by a noble purpose. A guiding theme of this chapter is how Strauss’s critique of tyranny is the basis for a noble vision of imperial rule. By exploring his views on regal power and noble imperialism, this chapter analyzes what Strauss means when he argues that “genuine Caesarism is not tyranny,”¹⁶ and how the cyclical movement from constitutionalism to post- and then pre-constitutionalism prepares the way for new forms of lawgiving guided by future philosophers and gentlemen who together represent a monarchical expression of excellence.

¹¹ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 3.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 178.

Strauss's reading of Xenophon's story of the queen bee shows how Strauss tempts his gentlemen-in-training to seek kingship. Strauss's version of the story begins with a young Socrates depicted by Xenophon learning from and how to become a "perfect gentleman."¹⁷ The young philosopher is taught by the gentleman Iscomachus how to wisely rule one's own household. In Strauss's telling, the gentleman's wife is at the center of the story, which is presented theatrically as a performance where each character, Xenophon included, plays the part Strauss assigns. Strauss emphasizes that Ischomachus was "speaking like a teacher" to his wife, who Strauss claims Xenophon is using as a stand in for Socrates himself. This episode reinforces Strauss's premise, argued throughout his book length commentary, that Xenophon uses his perfect gentleman to teach young philosophers how to become kingly-rulers. Though Xenophon presents the mature Socrates recounting the story of the queen bee to Kritobolus, a gentleman-student of the mature philosopher, Strauss insists that Xenophon's true intention is to depict the young Socrates, the immature philosopher in training, as the true addressee, a mirror of the wife who is taught to think of herself as a queen. "We might even think," Strauss says, "that Ischomachus is addressing Socrates, when comparing his wife to a queen bee."¹⁸ In Strauss's presentation, the student is shown as a potential queen, the teacher as the queen's kingly master, and the author of the story, he who determines what the teacher teaches, is the ultimate authority. From that perspective, Strauss sees the story of the queen bee paralleling the mission of Socrates and his gentleman-students: "the queen bee controls the upbringing of the progeny, and when the young ones are fit to work, she

¹⁷ Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse: An Interpretation of the "Oeconomicus"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 136-137.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

sends them out under a leader to found a colony.”¹⁹

There is one important problem with Xenophon’s queen bee metaphor that Strauss seeks to correct. “Above all,” Strauss explains, “the comparison of the wife with the queen bee suffers from the fact that it does not provide a proper place for the husband and master.”²⁰ Nothing is said about a king. The story ends by drawing attention to an absent king. Strauss corrects for this failing by gesturing back to the beginning of the story where Xenophon’s “perfect gentleman” is depicted as the teacher of a young Socrates, who is presented later in the story as mature, after having learned the ways of kingly rule. This is what Strauss has in mind when, in a speech to an audience of teachers “concerned with human excellence,” he declares that the Socratic philosopher is the “one true king.”²¹ But he also says that the perfect gentleman is “the closest approximation to kingship that is compatible with citizenship in a republic.”²² Strauss’s teaching aims at a kingship exemplified by “Socratic philosophers” and “perfect gentlemen,” but that does not mean he aims at a perfect kingly regime.

Utopian Kingship

There is an ever-present tension in Strauss’s writings about whether the actualization of the best regime is the true aim of the “philosophic way of life.”²³ He says that “the best regime, as the classics understand it, is not only most desirable; it is also meant to be feasible or possible.”²⁴ But to say that the best regime is possible is not the same thing as

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Leo Strauss, “Liberal Education and Responsibility,” in Hilail Gildin ed., *An Introduction to Political Philosophy, Ten Essays by Leo Strauss* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 344.

²² Leo Strauss, *Xenophon’s Socratic Discourse: An Interpretation of the “Oeconomicus”* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 208.

²³ Leo Strauss, “On Classical Political Philosophy?,” in Hilail Gildin ed., *Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 75.

²⁴ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 139.

saying explicitly that it should be actualized. “It is of its essence,” he says, “to exist in speech as distinguished from deed.”²⁵ On that basis, he refers to the most thoughtful articulations of the best regime as utopias.²⁶ The best regime is a creation in speech based on what is humanly possible, a creation needed to inspire human thought and action, but a creation that sets limits on what is achievable. Utopia inspires hope, but it also set limits.

Among the utopian visions Strauss find instructive is Xenophon’s depiction of the poet Simonides’s efforts to improve the tyrant Hiero, efforts that Strauss claims “the wise man” knew could not succeed, and yet had to show being attempted. It is precisely because the wise man “himself did not believe in the viability of his improved tyranny” that Strauss regards the depiction as a utopia.²⁷ It is a vision that tempts future efforts by those who believe they can succeed where Simonides fails, and at the same time it is a vision that sets limits on what is actually possible: the best regime to aim at is an improvement on tyranny through the advice of wise men. But, for Strauss, the modern idea that tyranny can be abolished and that universal happiness established is an unrealistic fantasy unworthy of the label utopia.

Strauss makes a distinction between classical and modern approaches to utopia: classical thinkers were wiser in their imaginings and therefore never envisioned universal happiness as a noble goal. Whereas the “modern solution is utopian in the sense that its actualization is impossible” and thus not worthy of being pursued seriously, the “classical

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 187.

solution is utopian in the sense that its actualization is improbable,”²⁸ but possible. The difference between what is impossible and what is improbable is one thing that makes the classical approach so important for Strauss. “The classical solution supplies a stable standard by which to judge of any actual order,” he explains, but the “modern solution eventually destroys the very idea of a standard that is independent of actual situations.”²⁹ Utopias are about imagining a standard by which to judge existing regimes, and inspire movement toward improvement. What Strauss calls classical utopianism is a vision that inspires the few to achieve the highest possible happiness, and precisely because its realization is difficult but possible, it animates movement by those who see themselves as great and those who are prepared to demonstrate their superior worth and ability. Superiority is the standard of judgment. Modern utopias destroy that standard by holding up the prospect that all human beings can achieve the highest happiness. This is definitionally impossible for Strauss because the highest human happiness can only be achieved by the highest humans beings, so any notion of happiness that can be achieved by all is by definition not the highest kind because it does not distinguish the happiness of higher and lower beings.

Strauss sees in classical utopianism a way to separate those who believe in and accept the existing social order from those who believe they can distinguish themselves by pursuing and becoming something better. Classical utopias understood as expressions of the best social order are valuable in Strauss’s political philosophy because they idealize existing political life in a way that gives people meaning and purpose while setting limits on the expectations that ordinary people have from their existing rulers. At

²⁸ Ibid., p. 210.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 210-211.

the same time these idealizations inspire heroic action on the part of the few driven by the call to greatness. Utopia as the “perfect city in speech” is an idealization that exists only in speech.³⁰ Strauss treats utopia as a speech-act that should be understood as a kind of writing, and the “proper work of a writing is truly to talk, or to reveal the truth, to some while leading others to salutary opinions; the proper work of a writing is to arouse to thinking those who are by nature fit for it.”³¹ Utopian idealizations reinforce the beliefs of ordinary people in a way that keeps their hopes high even as it keeps their place low, while inspiring the noble few to transform the existing order and realize their own higher potential.³²

Philosophy’s concern, according to Strauss, with utopian idealizations begins with the existing political order but then moves beyond it. The starting point is the political sphere of public opinion.³³ On this level, the utopian idealization “appeals not to philosophers as such, but to citizens as such” engaged in political life.³⁴ But utopias contain a higher call to greatness that culminates in “the attempt to lead the qualified citizens, or rather their qualified sons, from the political life to the philosophic life.”³⁵ Utopias appear to idealize the social order while recruiting those who seek to transcend it. In this sense Strauss refers to utopias as disguised satires.³⁶ The initial idealization in which citizens are described as belonging entirely to the city is an articulation based on the philosopher’s professed commitment to political life, but that idealization contains a

³⁰ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 44.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³³ Leo Strauss, “On Classical Political Philosophy?,” in ed. Hilail Gildin, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 76.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁶ Leo Strauss, “The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon.” *Social Research* 6 (1939), p. 531.

“ruthless philosophical attack” on the city and the beliefs of its citizens.³⁷ This higher level attack is presented as an ascent from the beliefs of common men, whose allegiance to the city's gods and civic traditions is required by political life but unworthy of the philosopher, to the higher plane where philosophers become the godlike sources of those beliefs and traditions.³⁸

Even as Strauss admits that the actualization of the best regime, understood as the establishment of perfect happiness, is impossible, he insists that realizing the “highest excellence” is possible in the form of the reimagined philosopher, an “imagined being” who reflects humanity’s greatest excellence by elevating political life through and towards philosophy.³⁹ Strauss’s own utopian vision is realized in and through the philosophers and gentlemen who come together as philosopher-founders. While the “best regime simply” is a kingship that is impossible under modern conditions, he tempts those inspired by his call to greatness to change those conditions and pursue their aims under modern constraints: “under certain conditions,” he insists, kingship “of its essence” is possible in modern regimes through the coordinated efforts of philosophers and gentlemen who understand how to exercise “regal power.”⁴⁰ A modern regime ruled by perfect gentleman is “the closest approximation to kingship that is compatible with citizenship in a republic.”⁴¹

Strauss’s utopianism paves the way for an idealization of modernity that inspires self-confidence in democratic citizens, while also imposing limits on their expectations

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 532-533.

³⁹ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 243-244.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 254, 272.

⁴¹ Leo Strauss, *Xenophon’s Socratic Discourse: An Interpretation of the “Oeconomicus”* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 208.

by reinforcing the belief that the existing liberal-democratic order is the best political order and there is no good reason to hope for anything else. At the same time, such an idealization can be presented in a manner that contains a ruthless attack on the existing democratic order, which is detectable by those who are dissatisfied with modern “effeminacy” and tempted by the call to “excellence.”⁴² This is the context in which Strauss compares “the excellence of Spartan education” that “leads to virtue” with an Athenian education “which leads to effeminacy.” The conclusion of this chapter will explore how this distinction relates to their respective approaches to imperialism, but here the issue is how Strauss idealizes the movement from democratic effeminacy toward monarchical excellence.

Strauss looks beyond the Athenian regime and even beyond Greek civilization in search of an alternative model of kingship. Strauss finds in Xenophon’s portrayal of Cyrus a literary device for teaching another model of monarchical excellence.⁴³ Strauss is less concerned with the historical Cyrus, and more concerned with an “imagined being”⁴⁴ who represents kingship as lawgiving by a supreme individual who creates a new regime. After introducing “Cyrus” in the context of exploring how to move from Greek effeminacy to supreme lawgivers, Strauss returns to the Greeks and offers the idea that founder-kings like Lycurgus claimed to be descendants of demigods.⁴⁵ But here too, the historical Lycurgus is not Strauss’s focus. “We are then led to the conclusion that,” Strauss says about the way philosophers recreate historical figures and vest them with

⁴² Leo Strauss, “The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon.” *Social Research* 6 (1939), p. 507.

⁴³ Leo Strauss, *Xenophon’s Socratic Discourse: An Interpretation of the “Oeconomicus”* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 144.

⁴⁴ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 244.

⁴⁵ Leo Strauss, “The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon.” *Social Research* 6 (1939), pp. 526-527.

godlike powers, “according to Xenophon, Lycurgus did not exist at all, or that ‘Lycurgus’ was a mere name covering something much less solemn than an almost divine lawgiver.”⁴⁶ Strauss turns to Xenophon’s portrayal of Lycurgus as an “almost divine lawgiver” to depict his own concept of kingship.⁴⁷ Strauss’s king need not be an individual: “‘Lycurgus’ is, then, a name designating authority or the men in authority.”⁴⁸

“Lycurgus” and “Cyrus” are names that designate a concept of kingship realizable by “men in authority” who articulate a vision that idealizes the status quo even as they attack and seek to transform it. And that transformative movement can be achieved, Strauss explains, by restoring classical political philosophy. Such a restoration is presented as utopian in the twofold sense that it is meant to reassure ordinary people that their own is the best regime and that no fundamental change should be hoped for, but also to inspire hope among the few with noble dreams and a kingly imagination.⁴⁹ These are the few who are instructed by classical teachers to see in utopian idealizations of freedom and democracy a regime that is “so preposterous they turned their imagination in entirely different directions.”⁵⁰ One direction they turn is to “Cyrus,” the founder of a new empire, another is to “Caesar,” the godlike king who transformed an empire.

In his exchange with Kojève, which was discussed in chapter three to highlight Strauss’s ideas about the relationship between the philosopher and his perfect gentlemen, Strauss distinguishes between difference kinds of Caesars: “there are tyrannical as well as royal Caesars.”⁵¹ “One has only to read,” he continues, “Coluccio Salutati’s defense of

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 527.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, eds. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 177.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 178.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 179.

Caesar against the charge that he was a tyrant - a defense which in all essential points is conceived in the spirit of the classics - in order to see that the distinction between Caesarism and tyranny fits perfectly into the classical framework.”⁵² Strauss adapts Caesarism to a modern framework. Pointing to Salutati is revealing because he was the chancellor of the Florentine *signorie*, who, like the ephors of Sparta who Strauss approvingly describes as having tyrannical power, were elected lords who ruled as despots.⁵³ Salutati was in effect the head of a small class of elites who exercised despotic power under his intellectual guidance: his elites looked back to the classical past in order to imagine a different future. “I have always believed,” Salutati explains, “I must imitate antiquity not simply to reproduce it, but in order to produce something new.”⁵⁴ Strauss too looked to antiquity to inspire future creation.

When Strauss declares that “wisdom requires unhesitating loyalty to a decent constitution and even to the cause of constitutionalism,”⁵⁵ he is embedding pre-modern ideals into a modern constitutional framework and steering it toward his own concept of monarchical greatness embodied by philosophical elites. These new elites look beyond constitutionalism to “Cyrus” and “Lycurgus” as supreme lawgivers and regime-creators, and to “Caesar” as a regime-transformer and godlike savior. What Strauss says of Machiavelli’s use of “princes” applies to Strauss’s own use of “philosophers”: “[w]e suspect that Machiavelli sometimes uses “princes” in order to designate superhuman powers.”⁵⁶ Strauss’s “utopian” defense of constitutionalism contains a philosophical

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Encyclopedia Britannica available at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Coluccio-Salutati>

⁵⁴ Lauro Martines, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists, 1390-1460* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 25.

⁵⁵ Leo Strauss, “Liberal Education and Responsibility,” in Hilail Gildin ed. *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays By Leo Strauss* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 345.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 130.

attack meant to inspire those with superhuman powers to move beyond it.

Cycling Around Constitutionalism

Strauss's explicit defense of constitutionalism and accompanying arguments for aristocratic excellence are expressions of his vision of philosophical elites who see themselves as superhuman beings overseeing the cyclical movement of regimes. Hovering above Caesars, above constitutions, and above chaos itself, are thinkers who create and recreate regimes that provide meaningful truth and order. Strauss's whole discussion of constitutionalism looks beyond it to "post-constitutional Caesarism" and beyond that, to the "pre-constitutional situation." In that sense, his is not an argument in favor of tyrants, or even kings, because higher than the "royal Caesar" he defends, are the godlike forces of wisdom that propel constitutional regimes toward Caesarism, and then prepare the way for the post-Caesarian space he refers to as pre-constitutional, a space that demands new truths, new laws, and new founders.

In the context of analyzing whether beneficent tyranny can live up to the highest standard of excellence as presented in Socrates' definition of the good ruler, Strauss argues explicitly against tyranny. He says that "the aim of the good ruler is much more likely to be achieved by means of laws than by means of absolute rule."⁵⁷ But in terms of philosophical principles, Strauss admits that good government does not require rule of law: "as a matter of principle, rule of laws is not essential for good government."⁵⁸ Rule of law is crucial to Strauss as a matter of political expediency. Considerations of law and legitimacy are dealt with through the prism of political usefulness and strategic necessity,

⁵⁷ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 72.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

but those arguments give way to philosophical justifications for “regal power” contrasted to “criminal tyranny.”⁵⁹ Laws, as a practical matter, help the “good ruler” achieve his true aims, but, on principled grounds, are not essential for “good government.” This draws the reader’s attention to the idea that the highest aim of the good ruler is something other than or higher than the law, and to the question of how laws are used to achieve those higher aims, which here Strauss equates with justice. Strauss speaks through Alcibiades to address the question “What is law?” and to distinguish the concept “justice” from its identification with the law. Later, in the discussion of imperialism, Alcibiades is the vehicle Strauss uses to question whether the Athenian empire could have been redirected to serve a higher cause if the Sicilian expedition had not been betrayed by ignoble elites. Strauss uses Alcibiades to point beyond the law, to noble concepts of justice. At one level, the separation between law and justice is meant to distinguish between just and unjust laws. “But,” Strauss explains, “apart from the consideration that the identification of ‘just’ and ‘legal’ would make impossible the evidently necessary distinction between just and unjust laws, there are elements of justice which necessarily transcend the dimension of the legal.”⁶⁰ Strauss points to a higher realm beyond the law, where wisdom serves as the source of justice. And from that higher perspective, he looks beyond existing regimes as if to say that wisdom demands permanent movement beyond the here and now.

The distinction between law and justice is presented as a complex tension, which Strauss magnifies by contrasting constitutionalism with a “tyrannical teaching” that he

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 272.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 74.

introduces and initially defends.⁶¹ He ultimately argues against tyranny not because it is unconstitutional but because it, by definition, is unkingly: “being a tyrant, being called a tyrant not a king, means having been unable to transform tyranny into kingship, or to transform a title which is generally considered defective into a title which is generally considered valid.”⁶² Strauss ultimate defense of constitutionalism takes as its starting point the standard of justice defined by kingship. It begins with an idealization of “beneficent tyranny,” then seeks to improve and transform that tyranny according to a higher source of justice. But unable to make tyranny appear as anything other than “rule without laws,” unable to provide it with a “title which is generally considered valid,” Strauss shifts to a defense of constitutionalism as opposition to “criminal tyranny.” His defense of constitutionalism is subordinate to and made compatible with the aim of monarchical rule by wise elites.

The case for a benevolent tyranny of wise men could never be accepted by a “legitivist or constitutionalist,” Strauss explains, because that case is premised on the idea “that there is only one sufficient title to rule: only knowledge, and not force or fraud or election, or we may add, inheritance, makes a man a king or ruler.”⁶³ The case for wise absolutism, which Strauss makes and then backs away from, states that constitutional rule and “rule derived from elections in particular, is not essentially more legitimate than tyrannical rule, rule derived from force or fraud.”⁶⁴ Wisdom is the source of justice and legitimacy. He says that tyrannical rule as well as constitutional rule will be legitimate to the extent to which the tyrant or the constitutional rulers will listen to the advice of wise

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 75.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 74.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 74-75.

men.⁶⁵ But Strauss backs away from the utopian case for wise absolutism and joins the camp of the “legitimists and constitutionalists” because kingship expressed through wise absolutism is not achievable. Speaking through Xenophon, Strauss says that “[w]hile Xenophon seems to have believed that beneficent tyranny or the rule of a tyrant who listens to the counsels of the wise is, as a matter of principle, preferable to the rule of laws or to the rule of elected magistrates as such, he seems to have thought that tyranny at its best could hardly, if ever, be realized.”⁶⁶ “Reasons such as these,” Strauss says about his turn against the tyrannical teaching, “explain why Xenophon, or his Socrates, preferred, for all practical purposes, at least as far as Greeks were concerned, the rules of laws to tyranny, and why they identified, for all practical purposes, the just with the legal.”⁶⁷ Following “his Socrates,” Strauss then offers a defense of constitutionalism, from the perspective of a “good citizen” living under a constitutional regime.

Philosophers have a duty, Strauss says, to reassure political authorities that they are neither “subversives” nor “irresponsible adventurers” but are “good citizens and even the best of citizens.”⁶⁸ If philosophers must be seen as good citizens then those living under a constitutional regime are forbidden from making the case for tyranny of the wise. Strauss summarizes the reasoning for adopting the constitutionalist position by reminding political philosophers of the importance of being seen as good citizens:

The “tyrannical” teaching -- the teaching which expounds the view that a case can be made for beneficent tyranny, and even for a beneficent tyranny which was originally established by force or fraud - has then a purely theoretical meaning. It is not more than a most forceful expression of the problem of law and legitimacy. When Socrates was charged with teaching pupils to be “tyrannical,” this doubtless was due to the popular misunderstanding of a theoretical thesis as a practical proposal. Yet the theoretical thesis by itself necessarily prevented its holders from being unqualifiedly loyal to Athenian

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 206.

democracy, e.g. for it prevented them from believing that democracy is simply the best political order. It prevented them from being “good citizens” under a democracy.⁶⁹

Strauss returns to the tyrannical teaching in a later section, which, in light of the preceding, acknowledges that his own teaching prevents his pupils from having unqualified loyalty to democracy. “We have stated,” he says in language that draws attention to his own interpretation of the tyrannical teaching, “that according to that teaching beneficent tyranny is theoretically superior and practically inferior to the rule of laws and legitimate government.”⁷⁰ This admission in the context of his shift toward defending constitutionalism reminds readers that the “tyrannical teaching” is not meant as a practical proposal for establishing the best regime but is a pedagogical device: it “serves the purpose, not of solving the problem of the best political order, but of bringing to light the nature of political things.”⁷¹ A theoretical teaching is not meant as a practical proposal, and should not be seen publicly that way: “It is one thing to accept the theoretical thesis concerning tyranny; it is another thing to expound it publicly.”⁷² Publicly, Strauss teaches that philosophers living under a constitutional regime must defend the cause of constitutionalism. But the teaching is utopian in Strauss’s sense because accompanying the practical defense there is a theoretically superior view that attacks constitutionalism and seeks to transform and transcend it.

Strauss even articulates this attack openly when he discusses those situations when it is publicly defensible and legitimate to subvert the constitutional order.⁷³ Only when a constitutional regime is in a “state of decay” is it legitimate to subvert the regime.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 99.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., p. 76.

⁷³ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 48.

If decadence rises to the level that wise men declare the regime corrupt, then efforts to transform it are necessary. Strauss refers to the kind of corruption that justifies the movement toward Caesarism as “late rottenness” and contrasts it to the “initial corruption” of a people without law or government.⁷⁴ A new form of rule is necessary when people need to be made good. In the context of explaining that “it is only government, laws and other institutions which make men good,” Strauss says that “through the application of regal power for a considerable time” people in a corrupt regime can “become good or incorrupt.”⁷⁵ Founders like Romulus, who confront a situation of initial, lawless corruption, understand how to use “regal power” to establish an order that, in Strauss’s words, will “make men good.” Caesars operate in the context of late rottenness, which justifies their use of royal power to transform existing regimes.

Apart from lawlessness, Strauss describes

another kind of corruption, namely, late rottenness, the corruption of Rome at the time not of Romulus but of Caesar. Initial corruption, we may say, is the state of mind which necessarily follows from the absence of law and government; late corruption is the state of mind which necessarily follows from gross inequality in respect to power and wealth among members temporal and spiritual of a society. The former kind of corruption allows of a republican future; the latter kind of corruption precludes a republican future.⁷⁶

His discussion of both initial and late corruption is based on a future-oriented concern with the creation and transformation of corrupt regimes by wise men who understand when and how to use regal power. These wise men know when the circumstances call for the establishment of republican or constitutional regimes and when the situation demands something else.

Both alternatives require wise elites able to guide the actions of transformational

⁷⁴ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 267.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

leaders and regime founders. Strauss explains that even the “founders of republics must be princes” who can only achieve their highest aims if they are “guided by intelligence and sustained by strength of will or temper, sufficient to make a prince a good prince.”⁷⁷ The wise men must, in the context of lawlessness or initial corruption, know how to advise founders to establish a good regime. But in the context of late corruption, the wise men must seek out and create a good Caesar. Speaking of the post-republican path, Strauss explains that Caesarism emerges only in the context of late corruption in what he elsewhere describes as the breakdown of constitutional order.⁷⁸ In this context, Strauss claims that genuine Caesarism is not tyranny: it is a wise response to the condition of corruption and seeks to reestablish a good regime.⁷⁹ Strauss’s justification for “royal Caesars” in contradistinction to “criminal tyrants” is not rooted simply in political necessity determined by the breakdown of political order and the need to establish stability: he justifies Caesarism as an expression of excellence, which improves and heals a decaying body politic. Caesarism makes something corrupt and sick into something “noble and good.”⁸⁰ The highest expression of regal power is a wisdom that aims not to preserve a corrupt and sickly social order, but to heal it, to make it good. Royal Caesars are the antidote to a sickly, rotten regime.

Strauss sees corruption as a process of decay that is inevitable and therefore regimes move in cycles. The movement within legal-constitutional orders from initial rottenness through late corruption prepares the way for the movement to “post-

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 267-269.

⁷⁸ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 178-180.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 180.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 179.

constitutional Caesarism,” which ultimately prepares the way for a movement back to the “pre-constitutional situation.”⁸¹ When Strauss says that Caesarism prepares the way for the golden era he points at and then beyond the era of godlike emperors, but also says that “eternal glory” is not for the rulers themselves, but for the invisible demigods whose wisdom guides them.⁸² And when Strauss argues that Caesarism points back to “early Kingship,” he is referring to how Caesars prepare the way for a pre-constitutional lawlessness that demands new foundations. Caesarism invites rebellion, which creates the conditions where new laws are needed. Caesarism is thus both a response to corruption and an expression of it. There is no golden age of Caesars in Strauss’s teaching, but there are golden moments when societies transform and wise men become creators and founders. The cyclical movement Strauss seeks to preserve aims at excellence through the founding and refounding of regimes, and while this movement offers no certainty that excellence will emerge, it does provide inspiration to future founders.

With the ancient idea of regime cycles as the backdrop, Strauss’s “survey of the movement” takes Machiavelli’s reading of Polybius as a model, but Strauss’s version is updated for modern readers. Strauss makes elusive reference to Hobbes, the liberal critique of Hobbes, and Schmitt’s antiliberal rereading of Hobbes suggesting that the regime Strauss is most concerned with cycling beyond is modernity itself. Transforming that foundation transforms the modern regime. This distinctly Straussian presentation of regime transformation points ultimately to the importance of movement itself, which creates ongoing opportunities for wise men to found “the best regime.” Here, and only here, Strauss acknowledges from the outset that the best regime can be any regime that

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 180.

⁸² Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 268.

“fulfills the natural function of political society.”⁸³ Though here the best regime is presented as a republic, the key is that the founding moment creates space for the highest kind of excellence: it provides freedom for those who can create something noble and good. When regal power decays and becomes criminal tyranny, then wise men guide the movement back to the beginnings in pursuit of new foundations:

The republic of the character exemplified by the early Roman republic is the best regime because it fulfills the natural function of political society. Men who originally live like beasts establish government in order to escape insecurity; the function of political society is to make men secure. Security, equally desired by all potential members of a political society, can be achieved only by the union of them all, it is a common good since it must be shared in order to be enjoyed. Political society fulfills its function through political power, and political power is apt to threaten the very security for the sake of which it was established. To avoid this danger, the majority must have a share, commensurate with its capacity, in public power. But men cannot be sure of their security without having acquired superiority to their potential enemies. Besides, they are necessarily dissatisfied with security as soon as they possess it; they no longer appreciate it; they subordinate it to superiority to others in wealth and honor. Constant vigilance and periodic return to the beginnings, i.e. periodic terror, do not suffice. Society cannot be kept united if it is not threatened by war, and this threat will soon lose its salutary character if it is not followed from time to time by war itself. War at any rate leads to oppression of the vanquished, even if oppression should not have occurred with the society on account of the desire of some of its members to lord it over their fellows. Oppression, or injustice, is then coeval with political society. Criminal tyranny is the state which is characterized by extreme oppression. There is then in the decisive respect only a difference of degree between the best republic and the worst tyranny.⁸⁴

All regimes fall somewhere within this movement, somewhere between the best regime, exemplified by the founding of a political society by superior beings who establish and maintain the kind of security that can transform beast-like humans into good and even noble men, and the worst tyranny, exemplified by extreme oppression resulting from the assertion of superiority by those who exploit their power unguided by wisdom. The assertion of superiority by wise men is the key to the movement Strauss aims to preserve. When the political society that emerges from the lawgiving moment fails to establish enduring institutions that make people and their leaders good, then wise men proclaim those efforts illegitimate and tyrannical. But when the accumulation and discharge of

⁸³ Ibid., p. 278.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

power is guided by wisdom, then the assertion of superiority is synonymous with the pursuit of noble freedom and monarchical excellence.

The freedom and excellence Strauss is concerned with can emerge out of any regime. What he says of Machiavelli applies to Strauss himself: “he teaches citizens how to seek glory and reputation” in all regimes.⁸⁵ Any political regime can present opportunities for noble freedom and excellence because all regimes emerge from the minds and actions of lawgivers who create truth and order by ruling over others. This underlies Strauss’s view that “mankind’s greatest objectives, freedom and empire” are pursued on a political field upon which “human excellence can show itself in its full growth.”⁸⁶ Strauss believes that what begins as a general commitment by all regimes to the common good entails the pursuit of “glory and empire.”⁸⁷ But he does not advocate imperialism for its own sake nor does he treat all expressions of imperialism as equally deserving of glory. He argues for an “intelligent imperialism” that can earn its leaders “eternal glory befitting the gods.”⁸⁸

Imperial Aims

Imperialism remained a consistent theme throughout Strauss’s writings. From his early years, when he claimed in personal letters that the Nazis could only be defeated through the “principles of the Right: fascism, authoritarianism, imperialism,”⁸⁹ to his American

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 276.

⁸⁶ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 133.

⁸⁷ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 256.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 261.

⁸⁹ Leo Strauss, Letter to Karl Lowith May 19, 1933, in Heinrich Meire, “Editorial Note,” in *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 130-132.

writings, when he articulated an aristocratic concept of excellence tied to the pursuit of “freedom and empire,”⁹⁰ he saw imperialism creating space for the expression of noble values. But the idea of imperialism too has been corrupted, in Strauss’s view, by ruling elites driven by material self-interest and modern ideals like universal peace rather than pre-modern notions of honor and glory. Strauss promoted an alternative, noble approach to imperialism that restores the monarchical ideal of greatness and counters the modern movement toward universalism.

An indication of the kind of noble imperialism that Strauss believed could cure late modern corruption is provided in his comparison of Sparta and Athens in the context of their civilizational war. His analysis of the differences between Spartan and Athenian imperialism highlights distinct elements of their respective regimes that demonstrate Strauss’s own views about the restoration of the monarchical ideal. Strauss defends Athenian imperialism for its “spirit of initiative, daring and inventiveness” which produces “superior ideals and superior human beings.”⁹¹ The key is the way Strauss links adventurous creativity and superiority. But he also celebrates Spartan imperialism for its “moderation” and “restraint,” by which he means the Spartan spirit of rebellion against Athenian universal values.⁹²

All cities seek to expand, according to Strauss, but not all deserve the eternal glory bestowed on great empires. The regimes who “deserve to rule an empire” are those driven by “not merely fear and profit but also something noble, honor.”⁹³ The Athenian regime that Strauss endorses as being “worthy of imperial rule,” is the Athens that was

⁹⁰ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 133.

⁹¹ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 206.

⁹² Leo Strauss, “The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon.” *Social Research* 6 (1939), p. 513.

⁹³ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 211.

driven to empire not from a base concern for profit or the unmanly concern for peace: “the ultimate justification of the Athenian empire is less compulsion, fear or profit than everlasting glory - a goal to the pursuit of which the Athenians are not compelled, or with which they are not obsessed, but to which they have freely and fully dedicated themselves.”⁹⁴ The noblest expressions of imperialism, Strauss says, are animated by the pursuit of eternal glory. Robert Howse correctly explains that, in Strauss’s usage, glory is achieved when political action is guided by wisdom, and eternity is understood in this-worldly terms as the distant future.⁹⁵ Eternal glory is possible for Strauss when noble and wise elites guide multi-generational political projects. That pursuit should be guided by the noblest and wisest of men, by “philosopher-founders” whose unique knowledge gives them “the true title to eternal glory.”⁹⁶ Howse explains that for Strauss, “one essential part of this very knowledge is the awareness that the actual achievement of eternal glory cannot be guaranteed simply by virtue of knowledge or understanding; the actual achievement of eternal glory depends on the eventual real-world foundation of a new political order.”⁹⁷ Imperialism provides space for the highest human types to demonstrate the highest kind of excellence by creating new regimes.

In his defense of Athenian imperialism, Strauss draws the reader’s attention to a noble kind of freedom that he links to generosity, which imbues the philosopher-founder’s mission with a gift-giving spirit. Noble imperialism is freely undertaken and driven by a multitudinous generosity: “generosity without pettiness or calculation, freedom, generous gaiety and ease, courage in war which stems not from compulsion,

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Robert Howse, *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 101.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 103.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

dictation and harsh discipline but from generosity, in brief, a well-tempered love of the noble and the beautiful.”⁹⁸ The repetition of the term generosity here alludes to the pre-modern aristocratic notion of noblesse oblige, and freedom to courage in the pursuit of something noble and beautiful. Aristocratic gift-giving is not the only thing noble in this depiction, “freedom is also something noble.”⁹⁹ Noble freedom as the free-creation of truth and meaning through philosophy comes to mean regime-creation when freedom is aligned with the noble expression of imperialism.

When Strauss discusses noble freedom in the context of the imperial pursuit of eternal glory, the philosopher-founder is said to be in possession of the highest truth, which is akin to possession of the “true divine law.”¹⁰⁰ Imperialism allows for this divine knowledge to be actualized in the here and now. Strauss equates this divine law with a concept of natural right that treats the assertion of superiority as a universal truth: “The Athenian assertion of what one may call the natural right of the stronger as a right which the stronger exercises by natural necessity is not a doctrine of Athenian imperialism; it is a universal doctrine.”¹⁰¹ This universal doctrine of superiority applies in all times, to all regimes and is referred to by Strauss as “the true divine law, the law of the interplay of motion and rest, of compulsion and right, compulsion obtaining among unequals and right obtaining among cities of more less equal power.”¹⁰² Superior powers are compelled by the logic of expansion: “unless it is kept back by weakness of one kind or another, every city is itself compelled to expand.”¹⁰³ But political expansionism is only

⁹⁸ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 211.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

treated as a noble expression of imperialism when it is guided by the philosopher's noble and beautiful truths. Strauss explains that "the natural right of the stronger does not lead in all cases to expansionism" because wise men know when to impose limits.¹⁰⁴ Here he makes an important distinction between a wise and restrained pursuit of noble imperialism and the unwise, ignoble pursuit of political universalism.

Strauss's defense of noble Athenian imperialism, which represents a "special kind of democracy"¹⁰⁵ and which reflects superior philosophical ideals and "produces superior thinkers and leaders,"¹⁰⁶ is tempered by his rejection of an imperialism that aims at a universal state and system of values. As it relates to the prospect of creating a universal system that would end the struggle for superiority, Strauss turns against the Athenians and sides with the Spartan approach to imperialism, which he calls moderate and restrained. Howse sees Strauss arguing that a "strong power's natural impulse to rule can know some limits or bounds."¹⁰⁷ But what is presented as a defense of moderation is at a deeper level an attack on universal ideals and an argument for permanent power struggles among groups who see their own wisdom as supreme.

Knowledge of the "divine law" vests the philosopher with authority that Strauss sees transcending the political laws that determine the power-seeking behavior of states. The philosopher who has become a wise man understands that he must provide an authoritative account of the political laws that govern state behavior, but that account must set limits on political expectations while preserving the freedom of the philosopher to remain the highest authority on what is right and good. As it applies to the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 191.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 169.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 211, 212, 219.

¹⁰⁷ Robert Howse, *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 136.

philosopher's need to guide the pursuit of empire, Howse explains that Strauss treats the philosopher's wisdom as a supra-political law: "[a]cceptance of the compulsion to empire or domination by the powerful as a universal rule of state behavior does not lead to the conclusion that such behavior cannot or should not be held in check by law."¹⁰⁸

Philosophers must hold in check the imperial drive by ensuring that it aims at noble pursuits rather than limitless expansionism rooted in a universal ideal. Philosophers who see themselves as the highest source wisdom and truth and who want to eternally remain that source, will see the actualization of universal political laws as a threat to their authority.

For the authority of wise men to forever transcend that of universal laws, any efforts to create a universal empire or political system must be countered. One way to counter that movement is to defend what Strauss calls moderate or restrained imperialism, that is, imperialism that aims at domination by superior powers without seeking to foreclose future displays of superiority by ending the struggle for power itself, which makes possible "great and noble deeds."¹⁰⁹ Howse claims that Strauss sides with "Spartan moderation" because it was held in check by "fear of the gods and reverence for law."¹¹⁰ Accordingly, Howse sees Strauss rejecting the radical turn the Athenian empire took. "The radical nature of the Athenian imperial ideology," Howse explains, "lies not so much in the principle of imperial expansion as a natural compulsion of the strong (which, as Strauss notes, applies to Sparta as much as to Athens) but rather in the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 144.

¹⁰⁹ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero*, eds. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 209.

¹¹⁰ Robert Howse, *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 145.

commitment to the Athenian ideology to insatiable, limitless expansionism.”¹¹¹ But Strauss’s turn here to Spartan imperialism against Athenian universalism is not really about restraint and moderation. Spartan imperialism represents a land-based approach to establishing dominion that demands and fosters the “warrior virtues” Strauss praised the German militarists for demonstrating in their rebellion against English imperialism.¹¹² His praise for Spartan imperialism is silent about this warrior ethos, but this silence speaks loudly. The martial spirit of the Spartan regime is reframed as moderate and restrained because it is not oriented toward universal expansion and makes no effort to create a universal system. This is what Strauss means when he teaches the wisdom of moderation and the importance of recognizing the limits of politics.

Strauss only turns against Athenian imperialism when it “points towards universal rule.”¹¹³ That critique does not take away from his praise for the way Athenian leaders like Pericles demonstrated their own superiority and that of their regime by justifying imperial policies using philosophical principles.¹¹⁴ Athens stands for two kinds of universalisms that Strauss wants to disentangle. Philosophical or “true universalism” as represented by wisdom is “beautiful” and must be separated from “radical political universalism” represented by efforts to establish universal rules that can be enforced equally on all.¹¹⁵ Modernity, Strauss argues, is on such a path and it ends in what he alternately calls the “world state”¹¹⁶ or the “universal and homogeneous state.”¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Leo Strauss, “German Nihilism,” David Janssens and Daniel Tanguay eds., *Interpretation*, Spring 1999, Vol. 26, No.3 p. 361.

¹¹³ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 219.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 228.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 230.

¹¹⁶ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 23.

¹¹⁷ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero*, eds. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 211.

Proponents of aristocratic excellence should rebel against such a universal state because universal values treat all people equally: by not recognizing the fundamental difference between those who are capable of great and noble deeds and all others, universal political laws diminish human potential. Strauss's writings speak to those who see the movement toward a universal state threatening human excellence and thus diminishing or even destroying humanity's potential. "There will always be men," he says, "who will revolt against a state which is destructive of humanity or in which there is no longer a possibility of noble action and of great deeds."¹¹⁸ The Spartan rebellion against Athens provides one model for how to deal with the problem of an emerging universal system.

Another answer Strauss provides to aristocratic rebels is both nihilistic and apocalyptic. "They may be forced," he says about the philosophers who will lead the rebellion, "into a mere negation of the universal and homogeneous state, into a negation not enlightened by any positive goal, into a nihilistic negation."¹¹⁹ The fact that such a counter-movement may lead to ruin does not deter Strauss from inspiring this kind of heroic rebellion. "While perhaps doomed to failure," Strauss says, "that nihilistic revolution may be the only action on behalf of man's humanity, the only great and noble deed that is possible once the universal and homogeneous state has become inevitable."¹²⁰ Strauss anticipates and reframes the argument of those who see such great and noble deeds leading to ruin. He justifies the nihilistic revolution this way:

Someone may object that the successful revolt against the universal and homogeneous process which has led from the primitive horde to the final state will be repeated. But would such a repetition of the process - a new lease of life for man's humanity - not be preferable to the indefinite continuation of the inhuman end? Do we not enjoy every spring although we know the cycle of

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 209.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

seasons, although we know that winter will come again?¹²¹

This spirit of revolt based on a cyclical vision of winter's end and spring's renewal should be understood as apocalyptic. Advocating the nihilistic negation of an emerging universal system embraces catastrophic destruction in the name of an imagined renewal. Strauss's defense of Spartan imperialism against Athenian universalism in the context of a civilizational conflict was, in his view, a noble expression of rebellion, which in the end destroyed an empire which had been corrupted by decadent elites. The death of Athenian radical universalism also made possible the eternal glory of Greek philosophy, and its rebirth in ever-new guises in ever-new regimes.

The rebellion against Athens should also be seen, in Strauss's teaching, as part of a never-ending movement toward kingship. Strauss turns against the Athenians when, at a key historical moment, they embraced a "version of imperialism not ennobled by any thought of everlasting glory."¹²² Whereas Alcibiades represents political greatness ennobled by philosophical wisdom, those who turned against him abandoned "any thought of generous compassion or any pleasure deriving from speeches" and embraced a war policy Strauss derides as "sobriety itself," a policy whereby "the war serves no other purpose than to preserve the empire."¹²³ The Athenians who cautioned against following Alcibiades betrayed a leader who, in Strauss's estimation, reflects the greatest human potential. In turning against Alcibiades, Athens betrayed a noble cause and thus deserved its fate. Strauss stands most stridently with Athens at the crucial moment when Alcibiades convinces the empire to set sail for Sicily. Though history views that

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 213.

¹²³ Ibid.

expedition as a disaster that led the empire to ruin, Strauss insists that the expedition represents a worthy cause, which “would have succeeded if the Athenian demos had trusted Alcibiades.”¹²⁴ He reiterates this belief several times and implies that if an analogous historical moment presents itself, a future Alcibiades should be ready to set sail again, even if it would lead his empire to ruin. Strauss recognizes that in the long run, imperialism destroys freedom and ultimately destroys itself.¹²⁵ And yet he promotes a ruinous imperialism in the name of something higher: the “grandest imperial enterprise ever undertaken by any Greek city” could have made Alcibiades “the arbiter of all powers and which might have made him the monarch of Athens and not only Athens.”¹²⁶ Imperialism is not an end in itself. Imperialism is but a means to keep alive the unending movement toward kingship.

Strauss’s concept of monarchical greatness is kept in motion by three overlapping themes: a utopianism that presents improbable but possible goals and which sets limits on ordinary people as it tempts “philosopher-founders” to prove their superiority, a defense of constitutionalism premised on permanent regime cycles which looks beyond legal frameworks toward a higher notion of justice created by wise lawgivers, and a form of noble imperialism which rebels against political universalism and sees destruction as a path to renewal. By combining these elements with those discussed in previous chapters - a concept of noble freedom that sees the creation of truth and meaning as the highest philosophical task, a theoretical framework that redefines the fusion of politics and philosophy while seeking to revitalize religious modes of thought, and an approach to

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 199.

¹²⁵ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 261.

¹²⁶ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 199.

philosophical education that reimagines how teachers, thinkers and leaders create and rule regimes - Strauss presents himself as something “more than a philosopher,” he turns himself into a prophet who points toward the arrival of a missing king.

Conclusion

This dissertation has argued that Leo Strauss's understanding of the relationship between freedom and nihilism is a crucial but neglected theme at the center of his political philosophy. Although renewed attention was drawn to Strauss's work in the debates surrounding US post-9/11 foreign policy, scholars who researched Strauss's influence on neoconservative thought by exploring his defense of imperialism and his writings about regime transformation did not connect these themes to his theory of freedom. And the scholars who have rightly argued that Strauss's political philosophy conceals its Nietzschean elements, have misunderstood how Nietzsche's ideas shaped Strauss's thinking about freedom and philosophy. This dissertation has argued that the scholarly literature, which has long focused on Strauss's Platonic and Machiavellian sides, has paid insufficient attention to how Nietzsche influenced Strauss's redefinition of the philosopher as a prophetic lawgiver, regime changer, and truth-creator.

The dissertation began as an investigation into how Strauss thought about freedom, and how his ideas could have influenced neoconservative intellectuals who promoted an American imperial agenda. The results of that investigation made clear that Strauss's teaching about freedom looks beyond America and beyond empire. This dissertation has argued that his political philosophy does not point to democracy-promotion through imperial expansion, but does aim to transform democratic regimes by combining aristocratic and authoritarian principles with an apocalyptic vision. The argument I have made is that Strauss's teaching is Nietzschean at its core, and that his worldview is utopian in the sense that it is based on a vision in which the cyclical movement of regime creation, corruption and renewal is overseen by a new class of

intellectual elites that see themselves as founders and lawgivers. This dissertation has explored how Strauss's ideas about freedom and imperialism are tied to a rebellion against modernity itself, which Strauss sees evolving toward a universal state.¹ Freedom and imperialism come together in Strauss's work not to propel the movement toward a universal empire, but as a countermovement to prevent the emergence of an intellectual or political system not conducive to Strauss's notion of monarchical greatness.

There is an unexpected story that emerges from Strauss's response to modern nihilism. In that story, Strauss picks up where Nietzsche's left off by connecting the failures of modernity to the void left by God's death, but whereas Nietzsche publicly proclaims the death of God and celebrates the space it opens for future creators, Strauss responds by concealing from public view the allegedly dark truths that endanger ordinary people and free philosophers to become "more than perfect philosophers."² True freedom, for Strauss, begins intellectually with an awareness of the absence of God and moves to conceal the consequent meaninglessness of human existence. The highest expression of this philosophical freedom is the achievement of wisdom, which transcends the existential abyss of nothingness by moving from concealment of dark truth to the production of meaningful truth.

Strauss thematizes the irreconcilable tension between reason and revelation, the two alternative approaches in the Western tradition that thinkers can pursue and must choose between when confronting the question of how to actualize wisdom. But I have argued that Strauss blurs the differences and teaches his philosophers a fusion of the two

¹ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 208.

² Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 199.

approaches. Strauss uses “Athens” and “Jerusalem” as symbols that refer to the two poles around which the greatest human minds sought answers to the greatest human questions, but the argument I have been making is that while Strauss claims that truth seekers must choose one or the other path, his teaching actually combines elements from both paths in an effort to overcome the failures of modernity by having philosophers play a godlike role. This dissertation has argued that for Strauss “Athens” and “Jerusalem” represent the two poles of ancient wisdom that *together* should guide political leaders and the intellectuals who guide them. “Athens” represents ancient wisdom as expressed by philosophers capable of a noble freedom that transforms them into higher beings. “Jerusalem” represents the source of sacred texts that inspire a chosen few to keep alive belief in the higher power of creators. In response to the way modern nihilism threatens the noble freedom of regime founers and the wise men who instruct them, Strauss turns to “Athens” to teach future philosophers to see themselves as the chosen few and he turns to “Jerusalem” to teach those chosen few to restore mankind’s highest potential by setting in motion the conditions for future creation. But as in the biblical story of Babel, new creation follows after cataclysm: “the purgation of the earth through Flood,” Strauss says, prepares the world for new creation.³ This dissertation tells the story of how Athens and Jerusalem come together in Strauss’s mind to prepare the ground for future creators.

Each chapter of this dissertation presented different aspects of Strauss’s vision, which points to the possibility of “systemic renewal” within a modern democratic regime.⁴ The first three chapters explored Strauss’s critique of modernity through his

³ Leo Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens,” In *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 159.

⁴ Charles Kessler, “Iraq and the Neoconservatives,” *Claremont Review of Books*, Vol.III No.3 Summer 2007.

understanding freedom, his redefinition of philosophy and his approach to education. By focusing on the Nietzschean elements in Strauss's work, the dissertation has built on the work of scholars who see Strauss's mature teaching as a reformulated extension of his youthful, acknowledged commitment to "the principles of the Right: fascism, authoritarianism, and imperialism."⁵ Looking at Strauss's authoritarian and aristocratic concept of excellence and his defense of noble imperialism, the dissertation has argued that there is an atheistic religiosity animating Strauss's idea of philosophers as prophetic lawgivers. That religiosity has Nietzschean origins which are concealed in Strauss's treatment of Platonic and Machiavellian themes.

All the chapters explored how Strauss's philosophical and political commitments grow out of an elitism that not only opposes the principle of modern egalitarianism but rejects the Enlightenment notion that the discovery and dissemination of truth is the path to human freedom, justice and happiness. My starting point was Strauss's distinct elitism, which has been described by his students in terms of his attitude toward truth: "[w]hat distinguishes Strauss's elite is not wealth, status, political, military, or economic power, but recognition of "the truth." This truth is hard to face: there is no God, and there is no divine or natural support for justice."⁶ The dissertation has argued that Strauss followed Nietzsche in teaching that the truth leads to an abyss of nothingness from which only creative minds can save humanity by filling the void left by God's absence. But Strauss does not follow Nietzsche in shouting this from rooftops. The dissertation started off by exploring Strauss's response to Nietzsche's willingness to openly proclaim God's

⁵ Alan Gilbert, "Strauss's Vision of a Great Anti-Modern Tyrant and its Bizarre American Consequences," *Democratic Individuality* June 2, 2009.

⁶ Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 7.

death and how Strauss's theory of philosophical freedom is shaped by an esotericism that incorporates and conceals Nietzsche's idea that truth-creation is the highest expression of the will-to-power. The dissertation ends by arguing that Strauss's Nietzschean affirmation of the real world points to a vision of a monarch-in-motion, which is based on a cyclical concept of regime transformation and a defense of noble imperialism in rebellion against modern universalism. But this vision which inspires future philosophers to see themselves as prophetic lawgivers with the power and duty to create meaningful truth and order entails an unending cyclical movement that invites destruction as the condition for future creation.

Chapter One presented a framework for understanding Strauss's theory of freedom, which included a concept of "noble freedom" that draws inspiration from Nietzsche's vision of philosopher-creators. I made the argument that Strauss transforms the distinction between negative and positive freedom into a hierarchy of different kinds of freedom corresponding to a rank order of human types. Strauss refers to the lowest kind of freedom as "License," which applies to people with no control over their base urges. Strauss claims that license leads to anarchy and diminishes human potential, which is why he rejects it completely. Strauss uses "Liberty" to refer to a higher kind of freedom that applies to people who accept that human desires require restraint and human lives require purpose. Liberty is meant for people who obey laws given to them by higher moral authorities; for people who aspire to be dutiful citizens pursuing higher goals than those determined by material self-interest. For Strauss, this notion of liberty undergirds civilized political order and he defends it but with important qualifications. The highest kind of freedom, in Strauss's view, is "noble freedom," which is the kind he is most

concerned with conceptualizing and promoting. Noble freedom applies only to philosophers who have the intellectual courage and creativity to overcome the fundamental human experience of meaninglessness.⁷ Chapter one argued that Strauss's concept of noble freedom as an antidote to modern nihilism is rooted in the Nietzschean notion that the most meaningful truths are created by philosophers.

Chapter two argued that Strauss's political philosophy fuses aspects of philosophy and politics in a manner that redefines how philosophers seek to actualize wisdom. This chapter expanded on the work of scholars who argue that Strauss's thought contains elements of Carl Schmitt's concept of the political. My argument is that these scholars have misunderstood how the Nietzschean elements in Strauss's work shaped even the political aspects of his concept of philosophy. This chapter argued that Strauss's redefinition of philosophy is animated by a doctrine of the primacy of politics that emphasizes combat against "historicism" and "relativism," which are treated as enemy ideologies that threaten philosophers on their quest to become godlike creators of truth, meaning, and purpose. Chapter Two also explored Strauss's view that philosophers must pursue their higher aims in a politically responsible manner. For Strauss that means philosophers must conceal dangerous truths and outwardly uphold civic and religious traditions so that ordinary people are protected from the deeper truths that only philosophers can handle, and philosophers are protected from the people whose resentment would endanger the philosopher's quest if they knew that philosophers believed it was their natural right to create and recreate human worlds.

⁷ Leo Strauss, "Relativism" in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, Thomas Pangle ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 27.

Chapter three argued that Strauss's notion of philosophical education seeks to cultivate a new class of aristocratic intellectuals whose devotion to philosophy can only be understood through his oracular "call to greatness."⁸ Chapter three explored why Strauss thinks that the pursuit of wisdom leads philosophers into schools he calls sects and why the truths they are forced to keep secret endanger the public, invite persecution, and compel them to engage in sophistry and sectarianism while seeking a philosophical wisdom that transcends politics. I made the case that ultimately Strauss sees philosophical education as the cultivation of philosophers and gentlemen who work together as founders, lawgivers, and regime changers called to fill the void left by an absent God. The search for wisdom which opens the possibility of superhuman perfection is explicitly modeled on the questing philosophers of the ancient world, but is actually guided by Strauss's Nietzscheanized "Socratic" model of future philosophers who can succeed where past philosophers failed in actualizing the highest wisdom in this world through "wise men."

Chapter Four looked at the utopian and apocalyptic elements in Strauss's teaching as they emerge from his defense of noble imperialism and his critique of modern universalism, which Strauss saw as a form of tyranny. The notion of temptation was explored in the context of Strauss's concern with regime transformation animated by a rebellion against modern regimes. Chapter four argued that Strauss's teaching is a temptation to move from constitutionalism to "post-constitutional Caesarism," but not because he sees a benevolent or wise tyranny as the best regime.⁹ For Strauss, the

⁸ Leo Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?" *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 315.

⁹ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 208.

tyrannical temptation is about inspiring thinkers to create the conditions for a “pre-constitutional situation” and energize the movement toward aristocratic excellence and monarchical greatness. The final chapter argued that Strauss’s ideas about utopianism, regime cycles, and imperialism seek to preserve the never-ending cycles of political and philosophical movement that keep alive a monarchy-in-motion. The aim is not to establish a permanent framework for a stable, final or best social order. The aim is to inspire permanent movement toward the missing king.

My dissertation presents several interesting possibilities for future research into the meaning and impact of Strauss’s ideas. My interpretation of the core themes in Strauss’s work will allow scholars to better understand the words and actions of Straussian intellectuals and the political leaders who follow their advice. Even though Straussian thought has often been associated with neoconservatism, some Straussian intellectuals have embraced a Trump-led conservative-populist movement seemingly at odds with the neoconservative commitment to American greatness via an imperialistic freedom agenda.¹⁰ Other Straussians continue to advocate neoconservative ideals and steadfastly oppose populism.¹¹ My discussion of how Strauss’s approach to education focuses on the cultivation of schools can help explain how different Straussian “sects” can support different policies and different leaders even as they remain devoted to the same overarching theory. Moreover, my reading of Strauss’s views about cyclical movement and regime transformation offer insight into how, policy differences to the contrary, neoconservatism and conservative populism both serve as vehicles for Straussians to lead an ideological movement that ties visions of future greatness to the

¹⁰ Kelefeh Sanneh, “Intellectuals for Trump,” *The New Yorker* January 9, 2017.

¹¹ William Kristol “#NeverTrump: A Final Word,” *The Weekly Standard* November 7, 2016.

recreation of a mythical past. Despite Strauss's promotion of intellectual elitism, it is perfectly consistent with Straussianism to support an anti-intellectual leader like Donald Trump, and not just because he can be seen as an empty ideological vessel for Straussians to fill with their own ideas about greatness. Trumpism offers Straussians a way to rebel against existing elites and existing ideologies: it prepares the ground, in the manner I have discussed, for future creation by rejecting the elites, policies, institutions and norms, which have led to the kind of corruption that, according to Strauss, justifies post-constitutional Caesarism and paves the way for the "pre-constitutional situation" that opens space for future founders and lawgivers.

Donald Trump's appointment of Michael Anton to the National Security Council is an interesting case because Anton demonstrates how a self-described Straussian can embrace an anti-elitist, populist movement while remaining committed to a Strauss-inspired elitist vision of greatness.¹² Anton's critique of neoconservative imperialism dovetails with ideas associated with the populist-nationalist movement and epitomizes the work of a new generation of West Coast Straussians. "I think Michael is one of the most significant intellects in this nationalist movement," Steve Bannon said when he was still Trump's chief strategist.¹³ Two essays penned by Anton are especially instructive in terms of how Straussian aims can be pursued through Trumpism. The first essay, written during the election, triggered much debate among conservative intellectuals for its rebellious extremism. The second essay, written after Anton was appointed Deputy

¹² Rosie Gray, "The Populist Nationalist on Trump's National Security Council," *The Atlantic* March 24, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/03/does-trumps-resident-intellectual-speak-for-his-boss/520683/>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Assistant to the President for Strategic Communication, demonstrates how a moderate sounding critique of existing institutions conceals a radical spirit of destructiveness.

“The Flight 93 Election” was written by Anton for the website *American Greatness*, which was started by Straussian scholars and became a crucial intellectual resource for Trumpism.¹⁴ Anton’s essay demonstrated a rebellious attitude toward American institutions, a condemnation of the existing ruling class, an apocalyptic worldview, and a heroic call to sacrifice in the name of higher ideals, all of which are consistent with my reading of Strauss.¹⁵ He also framed the rise Trumpism in the context of describing the American republic as a corrupt and dying regime, which parallels how Strauss justifies the rise of Caesarism. My discussion of the movement in Strauss’s argument from “post-constitutional Caesarism” to the “pre-constitutional situation” can help explain why some Straussian intellectuals have rallied to Trump’s call to greatness: they see opportunities for future founders and lawgivers. Anton’s essay has little to say in terms of policy proposals, but it does articulate the Straussian desire for “civic renewal,” which for Anton requires that conservative intellectuals rethink how they pursue “creative destruction.” Anton’s call to break away from “Conservatism, Inc.” and pursue higher aims in the “political arena” parallels Strauss’s critique of modern elites and his promotion of a new nobility.

Soon after joining the Trump administration, Anton wrote an essay that demonstrated several themes I have argued are central to Strauss’s political philosophy. In “America and the International Liberal Order,” Anton rejects neoconservative democracy-promotion and defends a foreign policy of “moderation,” which captures the

¹⁴ See Sanneh.

¹⁵ Michael Anton, “The Flight 93 Election,” *The Claremont Review of Books* September 5, 2016

way Strauss's argument for restrained and moderate imperialism conceals his promotion of noble imperialism.¹⁶ Anton's version of America-first nationalism combined with his anti-liberal posture, his delegitimization of the existing international order, and his condemnation of modern intellectual elites epitomize how Strauss's teaching aims at the renewal of the American regime, the transformation of the international order, and the emergence of new kinds of "wise men" able to provide people with a purpose that is "greater than themselves."¹⁷ These themes are present in the writings of Straussian intellectuals who have broken with neoconservatism and seek to redefine the conservative movement led by Trump through scholarly journals and publications like *the Claremont Review of Books*, *the Journal of American Greatness*, and *American Affairs*. A fruitful line of research would be to explore how this scholarship is influenced by Strauss's concept of "nihilist negation," an effort to overcome nihilism by inverting it, or combatting one expression of nihilism with another so as to negate and overcome modernity itself.

Other Strauss scholars who once advocated neoconservative policies have found in Trump's populism a way to articulate Strauss's defense-cum-transformation of Western civilization.¹⁸ In my view, what Straussians like Peter Berkowitz see in Trumpism is an opportunity to rethink how Western principles fit together to constitute the American regime and the international order. Trump offers a way for Straussians to reassemble the pieces and recreate the regime. According to Berkowitz, Trump reminds us that there are "serious tensions within Western civilization. Freedom, limited

¹⁶ Michael Anton, "American and the International Liberal Order," *American Affairs* February 2017.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Peter Berkowitz, "What Left and Right Missed in Trump's Warsaw Speech," *Real Clear Politics* July 31, 2017.

government, faith, family, and nation are, as Trump asserted in Warsaw, pillars of the West. How they fit together, however, has never been more of a puzzle - for conservatism and for the West.”¹⁹ Berkowitz sees in Trumpism a way to challenge the rule of existing intellectual elites, who are treated as the central problem because they do not understand the significance of the West’s roots in “Athens and Jerusalem.” The problem for Berkowitz comes directly from Strauss’s teaching: modern intellectuals promote a concept of freedom that is tied to equality and they fail to understand how family, religion, and schools that “cultivate moral and intellectual virtues” can “prevent liberty from deteriorating into license and equality from mutating into the demand that everybody think alike.” New intellectual elites are needed because existing intellectuals “foster an indiscriminate disdain for authority.”

My arguments about Strauss’s approach to education show how Straussian elites seeks to rectify the problem of the loss of higher moral authority. But more work is needed to show how Straussian support for populism in scholarly publications and news outlets has less to do with defending authoritarianism and more to do with delegitimizing and replacing existing intellectual authorities as part of a broader effort to transform the modern understanding and form of democratic regimes along the lines I’ve discussed throughout the dissertation. It would also be interesting to explore the arguments made by Straussians in opposition to foreign authoritarian movements in order to distinguish the conservative authoritarianism of perceived enemy regimes from the conservative authoritarianism I have argued that Strauss teaches.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Finally, it would be interesting to explore how freedom is conceptualized in the Straussian critiques of leftists and liberals and how that critique differs from libertarian conservatives. Based on my understanding of Strauss's theory of freedom and my argument about his efforts to revitalize religious modes of thought, I expect that Straussians will continue to forge alliances with conservative populists and religious conservatives, and move away from libertarians and market-oriented conservatives whose liberal conception of freedom is dehumanizing according to Strauss.

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