

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY
AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL LIFE :

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF LEO STRAUSS

A colloquium sponsored by

THE HENRY SALVATORI CENTER
FOR THE STUDY OF INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM
IN THE MODERN WORLD

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Charles R. Kesler, Director

a research institute of

CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE
850 Columbia Avenue
Claremont, California 91711
(909)621-8201

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❧ PARTICIPANTS ❧

HADLEY ARKES
Edward Ney Professor of
Jurisprudence and American
Institutions
Amherst College

LARRY P. ARNN
President
The Claremont Institute

MARK BLITZ
Fletcher Jones Professor of
Political Philosophy
Claremont McKenna College

REV. FRANCIS CANAVAN
Professor Emeritus of Political
Science
Fordham University

EDWARD J. ERLER
Professor of Political Science
California State University,
San Bernardino

HILLEL FRADKIN
Vice President, Academic and
International Programs
The Bradley Foundation

HARRY V. JAFFA
Senior Research Fellow
The Henry Salvatori Center

CHARLES KESLER
Director
The Henry Salvatori Center

WILLIAM KRISTOL
Editor and Publisher
The Weekly Standard

PETER LAWLER
Professor of Political Science
Berry College

STEVE LENZNER
Rapporteur
Harvard University

DANIEL MAHONEY
Professor of Political Science
Assumption College

HARVEY C. MANSFIELD, JR.
William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor
of Government
Harvard University

JAMES H. NICHOLS
Professor of Government
Claremont McKenna College

MATTHEW SPALDING
Director, Lectures and
Educational Programs
The Heritage Foundation

NATHAN TARCOV
Professor of Political Science
University of Chicago

THOMAS G. WEST
Professor of Politics
University of Dallas

⌘ READINGS ⌘

In order of discussion

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Eulogy of Winston Churchill. Spontaneous remarks on hearing of the death of Churchill (In class, at the University of Chicago, January 25, 1965). Reprinted as Appendix B of this monograph.

Liberalism: Ancient and Modern [Including "On the Minos," not published elsewhere, and "Notes on Lucretius," of which only the first section had been published previously as "A Note on Lucretius"] (New York: Basic Books: 1968).

The City and Man [Enlarged version of the Page-Barbour lectures given at the University of Virginia, 1962] (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964).

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Leo Strauss
1899–1973

❧ INTRODUCTION ❧

It is a pleasure to inaugurate a new series of monographs by the Henry Salvatori Center for the Study of Individual Freedom at Claremont McKenna College.

Founded thirty years ago, the Salvatori Center (the first of the College's research institutes) investigates the conditions of freedom: those elements—economic, religious, moral, legal, and political—that help to make freedom salutary, stable and lasting. For though liberty is among the natural rights of mankind, securing it is not an easy or a natural thing: freedom requires a certain apprenticeship in the formation of principle, taste, and character. Accordingly, the Salvatori Center studies the institutions of freedom in both the ancient and modern sense of the term, i.e., both the education and mores that shape freedom, and the constitutional arrangements that secure and restrain its exercise.

It is altogether appropriate, then, that the first monograph in our new series should be devoted to a reconsideration of the work of Leo Strauss (1899-1973). Strauss was one of the handful of scholars who revived the serious study of political philosophy in the 20th century. For that reason alone he would command the Center's attention. But he also was a teacher—or the teacher of teachers—of several of the Center's resident scholars. And in fact, after his retirement from the

University of Chicago, Strauss in 1968 joined the faculty of Claremont McKenna College (then Claremont Men's College).

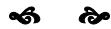
The monograph in your hands is a discursive account of the Center's colloquium, held in October 1997, devoted to the close discussion of some of Strauss's most important writings and to general reflection on his enduring significance. Steven J. Lenzner of Harvard University did a superb job of drafting this account, which captures the flow and drama and spontaneity of the original conversation, while protecting the confidentiality necessary to a truly candid discussion.

Additional copies of this pamphlet may be obtained by contacting the Henry Salvatori Center. A version of it may also be found on our website,

www.mckenna.edu/research/index.htm.

Finally, I should like to thank not only the colloquium's participants, but also the Center's Board of Governors and our two co-sponsoring organizations—the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy, and the Harry and Lynde Bradley Foundation. My thanks, too, to the Philip M. McKenna Foundation for its generous support of this new monograph series.

Charles R. Kesler
Director



∞ SESSION 1 ∞

THE REBIRTH OF CLASSICAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

*Reading: "On Classical Political Philosophy," Social
Research. February 1959*

The colloquium opened with a session devoted to Strauss's attempt to restore or to rediscover classical political philosophy, perhaps the most characteristic and most important aspect of his teaching. The reading for this session consisted of the original version of Strauss's essay "On Classical Political Philosophy," his first general statement on the subject. Because the version Strauss chose to republish in *What is Political Philosophy?* dropped the epigraph and the introductory section of the original, the session began with the question of what light this additional material could shed on Strauss's intent. First to be considered was the meaning of the epigraph from Swift's *The Battle of the Books*: "The ancients would therefore advise the moderns rather to raise their own side of the hill than dream of pulling down that of the ancients; to the former of which they would not only give license but also largely contribute." The discussion centered, above all, on the practical cast of the epigraph. A number of participants suggested that the epigraph presented in shorthand one of Strauss's primary practical aims: the employment

of classical political philosophy to ennoble, to raise, the political edifices inspired by modern political philosophy. It seemed that Strauss—famous for his emphasis on the “quarrel between the ancients and the moderns”—was paradoxically suggesting a harmonization of classical and modern thought, to the extent possible. Also noted was Strauss’s failure to use the term “ancient” in the essay proper: *classical* political philosophy was best characterized by its manner of treatment, not its era. Next, several curiosities concerning the essay’s introduction were raised for consideration: these included Strauss’s limiting the “galaxy of political philosophers” engaged in a common quest to the thinkers “from Socrates to Rousseau,” thereby omitting the great German thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries. Perhaps, it was suggested, the harmonization between ancients and moderns could work only up to a point, both in degree and in time. Strauss’s emphasis on the importance of “conditions”—particularly the conditions for philosophy—was also noted, an emphasis that seemed to reinforce the suggestion of a strong practical motivation on his part.

Important and interesting as the epigraph and the omitted four paragraphs were, it was pointed out that perhaps they were not deserving of the emphasis initially accorded them because, after all, Strauss chose *not* to republish them. The focus then shifted to the essay proper. The question was raised as to why Strauss, in the first paragraph common to both versions of the essay, suggested

that the interpretation that followed was meant only to “point the way” towards, i.e., not provide, “a truly historical” or “adequate” interpretation of classical political philosophy. At the very least, such a comment illustrated how provisional Strauss meant the essay to be. The provisional character of “On Classical Political Philosophy” was underscored by consideration of what the essay either obscured— e.g., classical political philosophy’s aristocratic bent—or failed to treat altogether—e.g., natural right and religion. Reflection on the essay’s title also brought forth this aspect of Strauss’s procedure: a “truly historical” account would have had to take account of the heterogeneity of classical thought. In order to present a unified “classical” teaching, one inevitably had to obscure the differences between, e.g., Platonic and Aristotelian political philosophy. It was suggested that the essay was more apologetic than historical, an attempt to show classical political philosophy in its best light to contemporary readers.

In the discussion that followed three further topics stood out. The first was the essay’s emphasis on the importance, to classical political philosophy, of the pre-philosophic life. It was noted that Strauss’s emphasis in the essay was on the way in which classical political philosophy, or “political science,” arose from and had a “direct relation” to pre-philosophic political life. Though it is difficult to say precisely what the “pre-philosophic” is, it is necessary to try to determine its outlines so that one can better grasp that

original political opinion which had not been distorted by a tradition of political philosophy. In other words, it was mistaken to try to distinguish between politics and the “pre-philosophic.” Instead, one had to try to bring about a synthesis of the two so as to be able to discern, as it were, the natural cave. The second topic—one of considerable controversy—concerned the relation between classical political philosophy and American liberal democracy. Particular emphasis was placed on the fact that Strauss employed a statement of Thomas Jefferson’s—“That form of government is best, which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of [the] natural *aristoi* into office”—as a shorthand encapsulation of the classics’ view of aristocracy. Contrary to the common view according to which Strauss believed that American liberal democracy stood on “low but solid ground,” several participants suggested that Strauss in fact thought that there was a considerable harmony between American republicanism and the classical view of the best practicable regime. In response, a number of participants suggested that this was a much too sanguine view of liberal democracy: at any rate, they argued, Strauss’s implicit harmonization could perhaps best be thought of as an attempt to counter today’s thoughtless dismissal of the classics as anti-democratic. The third topic was a discussion of the essay’s relatively brief second part. Whereas the first part emphasized the responsible character of classical political philosophy, identifying its view with that of the

umpire, the good citizen, or the enlightened statesman, the second part emphasizes the tension between philosophy and political life that was obscured in the first. Strauss discusses the fact that political philosophy means not merely the philosophic study of political things but the popular or political defense of philosophy. Some participants suggested that what Strauss calls “this deeper meaning of political philosophy” was, in fact, for Strauss its chief or most important meaning. Others challenged this claim by pointing to the character of Strauss’s rhetoric, its qualifications (“from this point of view”) and uncharacteristic assertiveness (“I say”). It was further noted that, given how strongly Strauss stressed the importance of the “surface,” it was not at all clear that “deeper” meant “more important.”



∞ SESSION 2 ∞

ESOTERICISM AND THE PROBLEM OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Readings: Persecution and the Art of Writing,
"Introduction." 1952

"Persecution and the Art of Writing,"
Social Research, November 1941

The session opened by considering Strauss's thematic treatment of the practice of esoteric writing. Why did he, as one participant put it, "spill the beans" about esotericism? (On a historical note, it was pointed out that Strauss was not the first thinker to speak openly about esotericism. For example, Maimonides did so at the outset of his *Guide*, and even before him the Islamic thinker Algazel spoke of this kind of writing; no previous thinker, however, had done so with such emphasis as Strauss.) It was suggested that the first and foremost reason for his doing so was a practical one: it was a necessary weapon against historicism, the most influential school of our time. If Strauss could show that all philosophers were in fact grappling with the same trans-historical questions—the "permanent problems"—then historicism would lose much of the evidence it was thought to possess; no longer would scholars be able to dismiss condescendingly

the great philosophers of the past as products of their times.

In revealing esotericism, what risks did Strauss take? Viewed in one light, Strauss could be certain that his disclosure would cause little public damage; for he knew that, at least at first, only very few would believe him. Yet Strauss certainly knew that by making esotericism public he was incurring some risk to himself: no aspect of Strauss's teaching evoked as much hostility or ridicule as did his claims about esotericism. It put a lever into the hands of his opponents who could portray him as an elitist and even as a cynical atheist. Two general reasons were suggested as to why this teaching aroused so much hatred. First, ordinary people do not like being lied to, nor do ordinary scholars; having failed even to suspect that they were being duped, the latter were especially resentful on this score. Second, and more importantly, people became very angry about esotericism's necessary implication of inequality: many resent the idea that there are truths not meant for all.

Why, according to Strauss, did the philosophers believe that it was politically necessary to practice esotericism? Was it merely a shield to hide their heterodoxy or atheism from public view? From the point of view of politics, it was suggested that the problem was not so much atheism as it was skepticism: if philosophers were to reveal their reasons for doubting the authoritative beliefs or conventions, the belief in morality necessary for public life would be

severely shaken. In short, it would be the height of political irresponsibility for philosophers to speak their minds openly.

From the point of view of the philosophers, why was the practice of esotericism necessary? The most immediate reason, as the title to Strauss's foremost work on esotericism proclaimed, was the philosopher's desire to avoid persecution. Yet it was pointed out that Strauss says that this desire was only "the most obvious and the crudest reason" for esotericism (*PAW*, p.17); indeed, in the "Intro-duction" to *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss did not employ the term "persecution" even once. Why, then, did he stress persecution so visibly? Most simply, because more than any other reason he set forth, it was immediately and intuitively plausible; in order to get even a hearing for his thesis, Strauss had to set forth a reason that people would not dismiss out of hand.

If persecution was only the crudest reason, then there must have been others. What were they? The most important of these, as Strauss comments at the conclusion of "Persecution and the Art of Writing," was "education." Philosophers write their books chiefly not for fellow philosophers but for potential philosophers, the "puppies" of their race. Yet one can only realize that potential when one thinks, or discovers, the philosophic truth himself. The philosopher writes to facilitate that highest form of education.

From the point of view of the philosophers, then, there are two chief reasons to employ this

manner of writing, persecution and education or, more generally, fear and love.

By stressing the private character of the cultivation of the mind, Strauss, it was suggested, could be viewed as a liberal of sorts. When one takes into account the fact that the debunking of historicism makes it possible to take seriously not only the tradition of reason, but that of revelation as well, Strauss shows himself to be a true friend of those today who wish to live a genuinely pious life. So one might say that in the very act of revealing the atheism or heterodoxy of some of the philosophers of the past, Strauss helped make revelation once again respectable.



❧ SESSION 3 ❧

JERUSALEM AND ATHENS

Readings: Philosophy and Law, "Introduction." 1935
"Jerusalem and Athens: Some
Preliminary
Reflections," *The City College Papers*,
no. 6. 1967
Spinoza's Critique of Religion, "Preface."
1968

Session three opened with two questions: 1) To what extent was the Strauss of 1935 the Strauss of 1967? Or put another way, how did his thought develop from his youth? 2) How, if at all, did Strauss resolve the tension between Athens and Jerusalem, the life of free inquiry versus that of piety? Though he seemed to have chosen the life of Athens, was he able to justify that choice rationally?

Discussion began with consideration of the second question. The first suggestion was to the effect that because of the Socratic or skeptical character of classical political philosophy, it was not only impossible, but unnecessary, to resolve that tension. Since Socratic philosophy—knowledge of ignorance—knows it cannot turn itself into wisdom, it, or the rationalism based upon it, does not need to

refute—or try to refute—the *possibility* of revelation; in this regard classical rationalism differs fundamentally from modern rationalism, the development of which led to “The Crisis of the West” and a loss of faith in both reason and revelation. In support of this contention, reference was made to the famous passage in *Natural Right and History* (pp. 75-76) wherein Strauss says that reason cannot refute revelation—a statement that points to the possible superiority of revelation. In any event, by undermining the claims of modern “rationalism,” Strauss’s revival of classical political philosophy provided grounds for both faith and philosophy; he thereby restored the dignity of reason *and* revelation. This suggestion proved controversial.

A number of participants countered that Strauss did not—indeed, could not—in the final analysis see revelation as a genuinely viable alternative to philosophy. Among the evidence cited to support this claim were the following: 1) The passage in question from *Natural Right and History* is explicitly a summary of Weber’s views, not Strauss’s; moreover, that passage posits that if philosophy cannot refute revelation then it would in fact itself be refuted. If that were the case then Strauss—a man dedicated to justifying his way of life rationally—by his own standards would have led a life based on mere willfulness. 2) The fact that Strauss prefaced his final book, on Plato’s *Laws*, with Avicenna’s statement that “...the treatment of prophecy and divine law is contained in...the *Laws*” seemed to indicate that at the end of his life, at least, Strauss was trying to understand

revelation in light of reason. 3) Strauss went to great lengths to show that his medieval models, Arab and Jewish, assigned no cognitive weight to revelation. 4) Strauss's vindication of orthodoxy was not unqualified. Attention was drawn to the following statement in his autobio-graphical preface: "The victory of orthodoxy through the self-destruction of rational philosophy was not an unmitigated blessing, for it was a victory not of Jewish orthodoxy, but of any orthodoxy, and Jewish orthodoxy based its claim to its superiority to other religions from the beginning on its superior rationality" (*LAM* p. 256). By showing reason to be the arbiter of orthodoxy Strauss pointed the way to reason as *the* standard simply. 5) The comforting thought that reason and revelation can accommodate one another does injustice to both claims; it subsumes their fundamental incompatibility for the sake of promoting morality.

Others tried to bridge the gap between these two positions by claiming that Strauss took the side of reason, but in a qualified manner; he always remained open to the possibility of revelation. Reference was made to Strauss's claim at the end of his lecture "Progress or Return" that as much as possible we have the duty to be both philosophers and theologians. Strauss was concerned not with faith simply but Biblical faith; for the latter is clearly much more open to reason than is, say, the belief in the Greek gods. Indeed, it was contended that revelation's very reasonableness gave the Bible—in Strauss's opinion—much of its dignity;

yet it was added that his respect for that dignity in no way indicated any necessary reliance upon revelation. One could see this reasonableness in part by contrasting the Biblical God with the pagan gods and their constant strife.

The thematic discussion of the relation between Jerusalem and Athens concluded by considering the conclusion of "Jerusalem and Athens" (pp. 172-173). Therein, Strauss relates two stories—one Biblical, one Greek—that are in some way parallel; yet, without elaboration, Strauss indicates that these stories are meant to bring out the contrast between the Jews and the Greeks. The story of Nathan and David (2 *Sam.* 12:1-7) was seen, on the one hand, as vindicating the effectiveness of Biblical morality: one can speak truth to (unjust) power if one comes armed with the authority of God. In this light Xenophon's story of Socrates and Critias makes philosophy seem weak and ineffectual. An alternative interpretation was offered that focused on the theme of "actualization." Like the proposed regime of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates's criticism of Critias led nowhere practically: classical reason has to rest content with lack of authority. It cannot actualize the good. *The Bible*, on the other hand, can. Providence conquers chance. Yet this desire to conquer chance becomes problematic when it is secularized, as it has been in modernity. Modern rationalism's desire for comprehensive justice promotes immoderation.

Other questions discussed in the session included: How "autobiographical" was the so-

called “autobiographical preface”? With few dissenting, it was concluded that it genuinely was an account of the outset of Strauss’s intellectual life. There was some division on the question of what made Strauss most attractive to his students and followers: were his students united by a desire to find grounds for “rational morality”? Or were they attracted by Strauss because he spoke to their natural desire to think? What was the significance of Strauss’s treatment of revelation for America? It was suggested that at the very least his great public respect indicated a felt need to support, if not restore, a serious life of faith.

At the end of this session, there was an impromptu discussion that began with a question concerning Strauss’s almost exclusive focus upon Athens and Jerusalem. Why did he, as it were, neglect Rome? It was suggested first and foremost that his reason lay in the fact that Christianity was post-Greek; as such, it constituted an impossible halfway house between Jerusalem and Athens: in Christianity, one can see neither reason or revelation in its fullness. A criticism was advanced that Strauss would have had to set forth a fuller account of Rome in order to provide a wholly adequate picture of political history. It was countered that Strauss did this to a great extent in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, wherein the rise of modernity was traced to a philosophic reaction against Christianity. In addition, Strauss took account of Christianity in his study of Marsilius of Padua and the problem of the Church and the Empire.

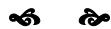
Further consideration of this claim that modernity arose in reaction to Christianity led one of the participants to question the usefulness of the typical Straussian formulation according to which the ancients are good and the moderns are bad. It was claimed that such a distinction—however useful pedagogically—abstracts from a number of essential considerations. To begin with, one cannot ignore the fact that philosophers at all times have had to respond to vastly different political situations. Christianity was a novel problem that called for a novel solution. Machiavelli's reaction to the softness of Christianity, however, went too far in the opposite direction. Strauss was then faced with a considerable dilemma: To defeat historicism's claim that modernity was an inevitable result of the workings of History, Strauss had to show that modernity was the self-conscious product of philosophic thought; yet he had to show the inadequacies of Machiavelli's solution. Strauss accomplished these two tasks, but his solution was open to caricature. His subtle thought was reduced to the crude formulation that modernity, having originated in the work of an evil genius, was itself evil. This formula, however, does injustice to the heterogeneity of modern thought; specifically it fails to recognize that there are elements within modernity that offer an admirable response that is not itself anti-Christian to the political problems posed by Christianity. In John Locke's thought, above all, one sees a healthy modernity. And today it is politically necessary to show what is good in the modern project.

Once Locke's thought had been put on the table, the discussions scheduled for the next day were given a premature start. What, it was first asked, was the relation between Locke's doctrine of property and the phenomenon of capitalism? According to Strauss, as one participant noted, Locke's doctrine of property could not simply be reduced to, or equated with, capitalism. Instead, Strauss showed that Locke's doctrine is connected to a specific conception of the common good. Locke sought to emancipate man's acquisitive abilities so as to bring about a condition of plenty. And it was in such a condition that Locke saw, or sought, the common good. It is this conception of the common good that links Locke's teaching to the American regime, as Strauss's sole quote of *The Federalist* in *Natural Right and History* suggests (p. 245). Locke's conception of the common good goes hand in hand with a new-found respect for the dignity of the individual as individual. In short, Locke's promotion of plenty for all is a *moral* argument.

The discussion then shifted from a consideration of Locke's teaching to the historical question of that teaching's place in "modernity." To what extent is Locke's doctrine related to—or responsible for—that which came after him? Two suggestions were set forth that led in different directions. On the one hand, Strauss argues that Locke's notion of men's natural *equality* in rights—with its emphasis on the body and not the soul—gave a powerful impetus to modernity's tendency to radical egalitarianism. Strauss's desire

to reveal this tendency accounts for his teaching on the first and second “waves” of modernity: an account that links Locke’s thought to Rousseau’s. On the other hand, Locke’s emphasis on labor was seen to lead to the even more radical teaching of modernity’s third wave. It took but a few steps for labor to be transformed into “intellectual labor” and then “creativity.” In these ways, one could say that his account of modernity was historicist in character. Indeed, at times it seems as if Strauss was speaking not simply of a tendency for modernity to self-radicalize, but of an inevitability to do so.

Was “modernity,” then, simply bad in Strauss’s account? In a number of respects Strauss saw much to admire within modernity. Politically, modernity—especially American liberal democracy—could be said to fulfill to a considerable degree the classical standards of freedom and civilization. Although the early moderns may have lowered the goal of politics—as a necessary response to Christianity—it did not mean that they tried to eliminate the possibility of the high.



⌘ SESSION 4 ⌘

MODERNITY AND AMERICA

Readings: Natural Right and History, "Introduction"
and "Locke." 1953

Thoughts on Machiavelli, "Introduction."
1958

Eulogy of Winston Churchill. 1965

This session opened with consideration of the peculiar character of Strauss's essay on Locke. Several observations were offered. The essay—which occurs almost two-thirds of the way through Strauss's most famous book (i.e., past the section on the ancients)—contains the volume's first and most extensive discussion of the practice of esoteric writing. It is an essay whose most memorable part (pp. 248-251) is not even clearly about Locke. (Its final sentence, one of Strauss's most famous, sets forth as the effectual truth of Locke's teaching the claim that "Life is the joyless quest for joy.") Moreover, by its almost exclusive focus on Locke's doctrine of property, the essay offers an unjust—or, at the very least, distorted—picture of Locke's teaching. As such, it is not a typical "Straussian" treatment. To see the character of its distortion it was suggested that one had only to glance at Strauss's treatment of Locke

in the essay "Liberal Education and Responsibility," wherein Strauss's primary focus is on Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, a work Strauss fails even to cite in his essay on Locke in *Natural Right and History*. Strauss's seemingly strong, if implicit, criticism in this chapter of American capitalism and liberal democracy perhaps hurt his standing in the academy more than any of his other writings.

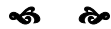
A number of participants took issue with the claim that the Locke of Strauss's essay was the Locke that influenced the American Founders. Strauss set forth Locke's esoteric teaching, but the American Founders only incorporated into our regime the principles of Locke's exoteric teaching. The Founders, for instance, saw no connection between the teachings of Locke and Hobbes. Locke's exoteric teaching, it was maintained, is more or less compatible with classical principles. The Founders' Locke, by separating church and state, helped secure civil peace and the rule of law. In so doing, Locke helped secure the conditions that made possible the pursuit of the highest ends. It was added that one can see the same sort of selective appropriation in the case of Lincoln, who elevated the doctrine of natural rights by employing only its highest elements. To these claims, it was responded that even if the Founders did not fully grasp the whole of Locke's teaching, by setting up Lockean institutions they allowed—or even provided the impetus for—the unhealthy elements of Locke's teaching to emerge and to predominate in our public life.

In defense of Strauss's essay, a number of participants noted that even though there is more to Locke than his teaching on property, Strauss's portrayal of that teaching is correct as far as it goes. Several participants then offered possible explanations for the essay's odd character. It was suggested that Strauss might have written the chapter to fire, as it were, a warning shot to Americans and American conservatives about dangers he foresaw and of which they were unaware. Strauss proceeded in a like manner in his introductions to *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern* and *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. In the former, by stressing the apparent similarity of the ultimate goals of liberalism and communism, Strauss showed liberals that they shared premises with Marxists. In the latter, by bringing to sight the Machiavellian foundation of our regime, Strauss wanted to make us uneasy, to remove our complacency. In short, he sought to sharpen our sense of the crisis of the West.

The suggestion was then made that, properly understood, Strauss's seemingly devastating critique of Locke was, in fact, a service to him. Strauss, it was claimed, first had to destroy Locke in order to save him. That is to say, part of Locke's teaching was sound, sensible, and politically salutary. To shore up liberal democracy one needs authoritative principles to which one can appeal. A natural source for those principles is Locke. Unlike the classics, Locke is, as it were, part of our regime. Yet in order to allow us to make use of what is healthy in Locke, one first has to excise

what is unhealthy. Strauss's chapter performed that task for us.

The session ended with a brief discussion of "Strauss and conservatism." Was Strauss a conservative? And, if so, of what sort? First, two ways in which Strauss was not a conservative were mentioned: he was neither "a throne and altar" conservative nor was he the sort of conservative whose principles could be said to share "in the last analysis a root with present-day liberalism and even with Communism" (*LAM*, p. ix). (In this way, it was noted, Strauss's account of conservatism mirrored his treatment of liberalism.) More than anything else, what seemed to unite Strauss with the thoughtful conservatives of his day was his anti-communism.



⌘ SESSION 5 ⌘

LIBERALISM, CONSERVATISM, AND MODERNITY

*Readings: Liberalism: Ancient and Modern, "Preface,"
and "Liberal Education and
Responsibility." 1968*
The City and Man, "Introduction." 1977
*Letter to the editors of The National
Review*
on "The State of Israel." January 5, 1956

The session began with a continuation of the discussion of Strauss and conservatism. It was proposed that one way to grasp Strauss's relation to conservatism was to consider Strauss's eulogy of Winston Churchill. Strauss never called himself a conservative; yet he had a profound admiration for that great conservative statesman. What were the grounds of that admiration? And what does the phenomenon of Churchill teach us about politics and political philosophy? To begin with, one can say that Strauss admired Churchill not for his conservatism but for his greatness; yet by that very admiration for the high and noble Strauss made conservatives see that a leading element of genuine conservatism is respect for greatness and nobility.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Strauss's eulogy is his claim (twice made within the space of a page) that Churchill's death reminds students of political science of "the limitations of their craft." Foremost among these, it was suggested, were lessons on the limitations of both politics and political philosophy. Strauss emphasized not only Churchill's success in defeating Hitler but also Churchill's failure to stop Stalin, a failure "too great to be called tragedy." By doing so, Strauss illustrates in a very real way how necessarily imperfect the sphere of action is. Churchill's life shows us that we cannot expect too much from politics: his life thereby is a lesson in political moderation. Yet one can say that the example of Churchill is just as much a lesson in moderation to would-be political philosophers, for it shows them that there are limits to the effect of thought upon society. Churchill was, as it were, a natural accident. He was not the product of philosophy or philosophic education, nor could he or his impact upon events have been predicted by any all-comprehensive theory. Political life has a certain (if limited) imperviousness to theory because politics is subject to the chance workings of nature, which means also to the permanent workings of nature.

From Strauss's affinity with conservatism, the discussion shifted to consideration of why Strauss and his teaching have been so appealing to conservatives. Among the reasons set forth were: 1) First and foremost, Strauss offers the most powerful diagnosis of the relativism into which liberalism is collapsing; moreover, he provides the

most satisfactory and effective antidote to that malady. 2) More positively, Strauss has shown conservatives that human well-being, or happiness, is dependent upon virtue; in so doing, he made virtue attractive. 3) One may say that practically Strauss was a "conservative liberal." He appeals to friends of liberal institutions because he teaches them how to defend those institutions in a liberal manner; he does so, in part, by connecting liberalism to the classical conception of liberality. In response to the foregoing, it was pointed out that however congenial Strauss may be found by conservative friends of liberal democracy, they should be aware that Strauss did not and could not defend any society unqualifiedly. Since all societies are necessarily imperfect, they can demand no more than a provisional allegiance. And that includes America.

At the conclusion of the session, reference was made to that arena where Strauss most visibly made an impact upon conservatism: the academy. Strauss gave standing (limited though it may be) to conservatives and conservatism in the academy both by the evident power and intelligence of his teaching and by the diffusion of his students in the universities. Moreover, Straussians and their conservative allies were forced to grow stronger by adversity. The hostility that Strauss's teaching engendered forced his students to stand apart; whatever they may have learned in the classroom, outside of it they were taught the meaning of spiritedness. Yet, it was added, despite their common experiences in the academy, Straussians

seem to have split apart, at least to some extent. Political philosophy may be said to have two meanings. On the one hand, it can be viewed as an attempt to employ philosophy as a guide for politics; this was said to be a leading view of the West Coast Straussians. On the other hand, political philosophy can be conceived of chiefly as “politic” philosophy—the attempt of philosophers to protect themselves and their activity from a potentially hostile political community; this was said to be a leading view of the East Coast Straussians.



SESSION 6

HISTORICISM AND RADICAL HISTORICISM

Readings: "Political Philosophy and History,"
Journal
of the History of Ideas. 1949
"Philosophy as Rigorous Science and
Political Philosophy," *Interpretation.*
1971

Though this session was intended to explore the problem of historicism, it began by further developing points that had been raised in the previous session's discussion.

First to be discussed was the contemporary moral crisis. Generally speaking, this crisis stems from the fact that many people today do not believe in a rational and objective morality. There are no authoritative standards to which conservatives and others may appeal. Most today will not even entertain the possibility of an appeal to, say, nature and natural morality. Indeed, one may speak of a revolt against nature. Perhaps the foremost example of this revolt is the dogma that homosexuality is as worthy a "life-style" as a life that adheres to traditional sexual mores. Though Strauss did not address explicitly the problems and issues we face today, he is perhaps the best

guide we have to understanding their intellectual source.

It was suggested that one may, however, find a general approach in Strauss's works that would help us to confront these issues. The notion of Strauss as a "conservative liberal" was again set forth. Strauss sought to promote a liberalism that was congenial to conservative ends. Indeed, it was argued, one would do better to oppose conservatism not to "liberalism" but to "progressivism," as Strauss bids do in "Progress and Return." By replacing "liberalism" with "progressivism" one avoids to some extent the type of partisan disputes that Strauss, following the classics, warned us against. A powerful resource to stem this "progressive" revolt against nature, it was suggested, can be found in the revival of religious education. By habituating people to speak and to think about moral questions in a serious way, such an education could open people up to the possibility of a natural answer to those questions. Paradoxical as it might seem, the revival of serious religion could be a powerful aid to the revival of classical political philosophy.

At this point a caution was raised against the danger of relying too heavily upon Strauss's writings as a guide to today's political problems: there are no recipes in Strauss's works. Moreover, the issues we face today—e.g., feminism and homosexuality— were not predominant in Strauss's time, and the immediate problem Strauss seemed most concerned with, the threat of a universal and homogeneous state, no longer seems

to threaten us. In conjunction with this caution, the issue of the two meanings of political philosophy, broached at the end of the last session, was raised once more. Citing a passage from *What is Political Philosophy?* where Strauss speaks of the dangers threatening philosophy when it embraces solutions (p. 116), it was suggested that Strauss did not view the two types of political philosophy as equal. The political philosopher is not a partisan. He addresses all parties from a view above them. Perhaps in only one regard may Strauss be viewed as an advocate or partisan: he advocated liberal education in speech and practiced it in deed.

Following upon this last point, it was pointed out that for Strauss there was a third meaning of political philosophy that had not yet been addressed. For Strauss philosophy is first and foremost political philosophy, or the philosophic study of the human and political things, because the study of those things provides the best access to the truth about all things, or the whole. Thus understood, political philosophy is *the* means to the philosopher's goal par excellence.

An objection was also raised to the claim that we are not troubled today by the threat of "the universal and homogeneous state." Though it may no longer go by that name, the threat still exists today, as the fashionable talk about the end of history would seem to suggest. With few exceptions, society is not open today to anything that is, and desires to be, non-universal or non-homogeneous. In America this threat can be seen in microcosm in the deadening uniformity that is the

result of the administrative centralization that Tocqueville foresaw and cautioned against.

The next topic to be addressed was Strauss's relation to Martin Heidegger. This relation, it was claimed, was not simply one of opposition or enmity as the title *Natural Right and History*—the political equivalent of *Being and Time*—testifies implicitly. Strauss was indebted to Heidegger for his *Destruktion* of the tradition of philosophy. By challenging the very possibility of political philosophy—a possibility which seemingly had not been doubted by the tradition—Heidegger made it possible and necessary to shake off the accretions that had plagued political philosophy almost since its founding. It was noted that in the revised edition of "On Classical Political Philosophy," Strauss added the following sentence: "The tradition of political philosophy, being a tradition, took for granted the necessity and possibility of political philosophy" (*WIPP?*, pp. 78–79). Yet one cannot take for granted that political philosophy is both possible and necessary: its possibility and its necessity must be established, as it were, from the beginning. More specifically, as Strauss made clear in "A Giving of Accounts," Heidegger's efforts to "uproot" Aristotle's philosophy paved the way for Strauss's (and Jacob Klein's) rediscovery of Plato. In some sense then, due to Heidegger, Strauss might have believed that his was a privileged moment in which it was possible to rectify the *seeming* dogmatism of almost the entire tradition.

After these comments, the discussion shifted once more to the question of the proper political role of political philosophy within society. Two candidates were set forth. The political philosopher may take on the role of umpire and try to mediate partisan disputes from within and ultimately from above. This is the Tocquevillian model. Alternatively, the political philosopher may take on the character of a partisan or a prophet. This may be called the Lincolnian model. If the political philosopher adopts the first mode, he must of necessity exist, as it were, outside a regime. He may be friendly to a given political order, but he cannot be a part of it. If he adopts the second, he puts himself in a position to aid directly, both in the short and long term, a political order that requires his help and is worthy of it. Examples of the first include Aristotle, Alfarabi, and Montesquieu. Cicero, Maimonides, and Aquinas exemplify the second. It was suggested that in America today we might need more prophecy and less umpiring. If one attempts merely to analyze equality impartially, one risks making oneself politically irrelevant. More specifically, in a regime founded on the principle of man's natural equality, whoever decides what equality means controls political life. In response, it was objected that there is a real danger in extending Lockean political principles to social life. Such principles, as Tocqueville suggests, need to be supplemented by principles whose tendencies head in an opposite direction.

At the end of the session there was again a brief consideration of Strauss's view of Heidegger. Two points were made that together showed the ambivalent character of that view. First, a summary of Strauss's criticism of Heidegger's approach in *Being and Time* was offered. Heidegger, it was stated, inveighs against the "abstract" history of philosophy in a text that is itself remarkably abstract. In contrast, Strauss's texts always discuss phenomena in light of, and in the language of, how they first come to sight in everyday political life. Second, Strauss's indebtedness to Heidegger was once again emphasized. Though it goes without saying that one cannot question the genuine and passionate conviction that underlay Strauss's condemnation of Heidegger's politics, it was argued that if one follows the movement of Strauss's rhetoric in *What is Political Philosophy?*—specifically in the first two chapters (see, e.g., pp. 55, 57, 76)—one sees that what began as unqualified condemnation issues in partial vindication: for it was Heidegger who paved the way for the "special effort [that was] required to transform inherited knowledge into genuine knowledge by revitalizing its original discovery" (p. 76). As in the case of Machiavelli, though much more starkly, one should be wary of dismissing Heidegger's thought as evil simply because his politics were. It was no small part of Strauss's genius that while he was able to learn from a thinker like Heidegger, he did not succumb to him. Indeed by meeting the challenge of his thought head-on, Strauss taught us the necessity of

confronting the fundamental, indeed the permanent problems of human life. In short, we owe Strauss an immense debt not only as students of political philosophy, but as human beings and citizens.



Appendix A

Strauss's Letter to the Editors of *National Review*

For some time I have been receiving NATIONAL REVIEW, and I agree with many articles appearing in the journal. There is, however, one feature of the journal which I completely fail to comprehend. It is incomprehensible to me that the authors who touch on that subject are so unqualifiedly opposed to the State of Israel.

No reasons why that stand is taken are given; mere antipathies are voiced. For I cannot call reasons such arguments as are based on gross factual error, or on complete non-comprehension of the things which matter. I am, therefore, tempted to believe that the authors in question are driven by an anti-Jewish animus; but I have learned to resist temptations. I taught at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem for the whole academic year of 1954-1955, and what I am going to say is based exclusively on what I have seen with my own eyes.

The first thing which strikes one in Israel is that the country is a Western country, which educates its many immigrants from the East in the ways of the West: Israel is the only country which as a country is an outpost of the West in the East. Furthermore, Israel is a country which is surrounded by mortal enemies of overwhelming

numerical superiority, and in which a single book absolutely predominates in the instruction given in elementary schools and in high schools: the Hebrew Bible. Whatever the failings of individuals may be, the spirit of the country as a whole can justly be described in these terms: heroic austerity supported by the nearness of biblical antiquity. A conservative, I take it, is a man who believes that "everything good is heritage." I know of no country today in which this belief is stronger and less lethargic than in Israel.

But the country is poor, lacks oil and many other things which fetch much money; the venture on which the country rests may well appear to be quixotic; the university and the government buildings are within easy reach of Jordanian guns; the possibility of disastrous defeat or failure is obvious and always close. A conservative, I take it, is a man who despises vulgarity; but the argument which is concerned exclusively with calculations of success, and is based on blindness to the nobility of the effort is vulgar.

I hear the argument that the country is run by labor unions. I believe that it is a gross exaggeration to say that the country is run by labor unions. But even if it were true, a conservative, I take it, is a man who knows that the same arrangement may have very different meanings in different circumstances.

The men who are governing Israel at present came from Russia at the beginning of the century. They are much more properly described as pioneers than as labor unionists. They were the

men who laid the foundations under hopelessly difficult conditions. They are justly looked up to by all non-doctrinaires as the natural aristocracy of the country, for the same reasons for which Americans look up to the Pilgrim fathers. They came from Russia, the country of Nicolai the Second and Rasputin; hence they could not have had any experience of constitutional life and of the true liberalism which is only the reverse side of constitutional democracy adorned by an exemplary judiciary.

On Page 16 of the November 17 issue of the REVIEW, Israel is called a racist state. The author does not say what he understands by a "racist state," nor does he offer any proof for the assertion that Israel is a racist state. Would he by any chance have in mind the fact that in the state of Israel there is no civil marriage, but only Jewish, Christian and Moslem marriages, and therefore that mixed marriages in the non-racist sense of the term are impossible in Israel? I am not so certain that civil marriage is under all circumstances an unmitigated blessing, as to disapprove of this particular feature of the State of Israel.

Finally, I wish to say that the founder of Zionism, Herzl, was fundamentally a conservative man, guided in his Zionism by conservative considerations. The moral spine of the Jews was in danger of being broken by the so-called emancipation which in many cases had alienated them from their heritage, and yet not given them anything more than merely formal equality; it had brought about a condition which has been called

“external freedom and inner servitude”; political Zionism was the attempt to restore that inner freedom, that simple dignity, of which only people who remember their heritage and are loyal to their fate, are capable.

Political Zionism is problematic for obvious reasons. But I can never forget what it achieved as a moral force in an era of complete dissolution. It helped to stem the tide of “progressive” leveling of venerable, ancestral differences; it fulfilled a conservative function.

LEO STRAUSS
Chicago, Ill.

Appendix B

Spontaneous Remarks Made by Leo Strauss, on Hearing of the Death of Churchill

The death of Churchill is a healthy reminder to academic students of political science of their limitations, the limitations of their craft.

The tyrant stood at the pinnacle of his power. The contrast between the indomitable and magnanimous statesman and the insane tyrant—this spectacle in its clear simplicity was one of the greatest lessons which men can learn, at any time.

No less enlightening is the lesson conveyed by Churchill's failure which is too great to be called tragedy. I mean the fact that Churchill's heroic action on behalf of human freedom against Hitler only contributed, through no fault of Churchill's, to increase the threat to freedom which is posed by Stalin or his successors. Churchill did the utmost that a man could do to counter that threat—publicly and most visibly in Greece and in Fulton, Missouri. Not a whit less important than his deeds and speeches are his writings, above all his *Marlborough*—the greatest historical work written in our century, an inexhaustible mine of political wisdom and understanding, which

should be required reading for every student of political science.

The death of Churchill reminds us of the limitations of our craft, and therewith of our duty. We have no higher duty, and no more pressing duty, than to remind ourselves and our students, of political greatness, human greatness, of the peaks of human excellence. For we are supposed to train ourselves and others in seeing things as they are, and this means above all in seeing their greatness and their misery, their excellence and their vileness, their nobility and their triumphs, and therefore never to mistake mediocrity, however brilliant, for true greatness.

*In class, at the University of
Chicago
January 25, 1965*

