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Author(s): S. B. Drury

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I. THE ESOTERIC PHILOSOPHY OF LEO STRAUSS

S. B. DRURY
University of Calgary

IN THIS ARTICLE I argue that Strauss is not fundamentally or primarily a historian of ideas.¹ He is a philosopher with a unique and disturbing set of ideas of which he is reluctant to give a clear and unambiguous account. Instead, he hides his own views behind a veil of scholarship. The esoteric art of writing that he attributes to the writers of antiquity is not just a hermeneutic for studying the history of political thought. Nor is it just a style that ancient philosophers cultivated to avoid persecution in societies with a violent antipathy to philosophy. It is a style necessitated by a particular political philosophy. In particular, it is a philosophy that considers philosophical truth to be dangerous to political order and stability. To uncover the content of this terrible truth is to discover the reasons that prevented Strauss from ever giving a clear and unambiguous account of his teaching. This means that I will have to abandon his desire for secrecy and uncover at least part of what he considered to be the unpalatable truth of philosophy. I will persist in what he considers folly because I am unconvinced that philosophical truth is as terrible and as dangerous to society as he believes it to be.

To read Strauss as he has taught us to read others is to understand anew the central themes of his work—"Athens and Jerusalem," "ancients and moderns," the "teacher of evil," the "crisis of modernity." In this article I concentrate on the conflict between Athens and

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Jerusalem (i.e., reason and revelation, philosophy and religion). Although this theme is not unrelated to the other central themes, it is the one that is most intimately connected to the esoteric art of writing and is therefore at the heart of the esoteric philosophy.

The esoteric art of writing is a style that writers of antiquity cultivated in order to avoid persecution in societies with a violent antipathy to philosophy. It is a style of writing that Strauss is said to have "discovered." This is not as trivial as it may seem. What Strauss discovered is not just a style of writing; nor is it simply a hermeneutic for studying the history of political thought. Strauss's discovery is the key to the secret wisdom of antiquity, the loss of which explains the reason for the decline of our civilization, or what Strauss calls the "crisis of modernity." Recovering this wisdom is therefore not just an exercise in antiquarianism, it is a noble project that has important practical consequences. It may well enable us to postpone, if not to arrest altogether, the decline of the West.

If Strauss's aim is to recover the wisdom of antiquity, why should he write esoterically? Is it not more reasonable to think that he must write clearly and unambiguously what the ancients were able to write only between the lines? And is it not precisely because they had to write between the lines that their wisdom has come to be lost for us? The answer to these puzzling questions lies in the nature and content of the wisdom that Strauss shares with the ancients.

To suggest that Strauss himself was a master of the esoteric art of writing may seem preposterous. Writing in twentieth-century North America, what persecution could Strauss possibly fear? But it is a mistake to consider esoteric writing to be primarily an art cultivated to avoid persecution. Esoteric writing is not just a response of some writers of antiquity with heterodox views to their social circumstances. On the contrary, it is integral to the wisdom of the ancients as Strauss understands it. The style is a necessary part of their philosophy. It contains a particular conception of the nature of philosophy and its relation to the world. Like the ancient philosophers he admires, Strauss felt compelled to hide his views out of decency and a sense of social responsibility. He believed that philosophical truth is not only unpopular for all time, but dangerous to political life. Therefore, it is the duty of the philosopher to keep it hidden from public view. Is there a truth so terrible that it must remain secret lest it threaten to wreak havoc on public order and decency?

The Islamic philosophers were first to bring to the attention of Leo Strauss the discord between philosophy and the world, and hence the precarious predicament of philosophy and of true philosophers in the world. The dangerous plight of the philosopher was particularly acute in the Islamic world, in which philosophy became a suspect pursuit and philosophers a suspect group of men. Indeed, the word philosophy, or *falasifa* in modern Arabic, still carries a derogatory connotation, indicating empty talk, full of false human pride, setting itself above divine wisdom. The *falasifa* were suspected of irreligion particularly because of their praise of the pagan philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. And this being largely true, they had to cultivate an exoteric teaching in contradistinction with their esoteric philosophy in order to protect philosophy as well as themselves. As Strauss writes,

The exoteric teaching was needed for protecting philosophy. It was the armor in which philosophy had to appear. It was needed for political reasons. It was the form in which philosophy became visible to the political community. It was the political aspect of philosophy. It was "political" philosophy.²

Strauss is reluctant to say explicitly that the suspicions of the world were true and that the *falasifa* were antireligious. He merely says that their opponents were instrumental in helping them conceal their thought because they "feared the harm which its publication would cause to those of their fellow-believers whose faith was weak."³

Al Farabi was a true or genuine philosopher. He understood the conflict between philosophy and the world and so became particularly adept at the esoteric art of writing. Strauss's admiration of Farabi is undeniable. He is a master of the lost art of antiquity and Strauss sets out to be his apprentice. The art consists of a variety of techniques meant to conceal the heterodox teachings from all but the few who could read carefully and could think. Clues to this peculiar form of writing include the following: contradictions, principles frequently stated but silently contradicted by upholding an incompatible view, inexact repetitions, pseudonyms, strange expressions, a frequent use of technical language, ambiguity of expression, and other infelicities of style. All of these must be assumed to be deliberate, as it is foolish to think they would escape an intelligent person. Only the uninitiated will be foolish enough to mistake the real teaching of a philosopher with what he or she says most frequently. The young people with

intelligence who can read between the lines will be struck by these literary deficiencies and will understand their meaning. Writing between the lines does not, however, preclude stating important truths openly and unambiguously by using as a mouthpiece some disreputable character. If Plato were an esoteric writer, he might have used Thrasymachus as his mouthpiece. If Strauss is an esoteric writer, as I believe he is, then he probably used Machiavelli as his mouthpiece.

Strauss gives a vivid contemporary example of how a person of heterodox views would proceed to avoid persecution. Philosophers from the Communist bloc would do well to acquaint themselves with this peculiar style of writing. A philosopher might declare that he or she has set out to provide a critique of liberalism, even though the contrary is his or her true aim. He or she would first have to state the liberal position he or she really wants to defend:

He would make the statement in the quiet, unspectacular and somewhat boring manner which would seem to be but natural; he would use many technical terms, giving many quotations and attach undue importance to insignificant details; he would seem to forget the holy war of mankind in the petty squabbles of pedants.⁴

The bulk of the work would consist of "virulent expansions of the most virulent utterances in the holy book or books of the ruling party." Only when the philosopher reaches the heart of the argument

would he write three or four sentences in that terse and lively style which is apt to arrest the attention of young men who love to think. That central passage would state the case of the adversaries more clearly, compellingly and mercilessly than it had ever been stated.⁵

One of the most powerful vehicles at the disposal of esoteric writers is to use the history of ideas as a vehicle for expressing their own views. Not surprisingly, Farabi, a true master of the art,

avails himself then of the specific immunity of the commentator or the historian in order to speak his mind concerning grave matters in his "historical" works, rather than in the works in which he speaks in his own name.⁶

For example, Farabi's commentary on Plato is the clue to Farabi's own thought; indeed, to the *falasifa* as such, Strauss maintains. In

other words, what Farabi tells us Plato thinks we can safely take as an indication of Farabi's own views. For example, Farabi thought the key to the complete happiness of nations and cities is the rule of the philosophers. He associated philosophy with prophecy, and the role of the philosopher in the city with that of the prophet. The prophet was to replace the sacred Law with his own wisdom. That wisdom, however, is not identical to religious knowledge, for the latter is, according to Farabi, "the lowest step on the ladder of cognitive pursuits."⁷ But as the rule of the wise is unlikely, we have two choices. First, we can give up worldly happiness. That, however, is not a reasonable option for one who, like Farabi, rejects the belief in a happiness different from the happiness of this life. In his commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* he declares that the only happiness is in this life, and that all divergent views are but "ravings and old women's tales."⁸ In his commentary on Plato he denies that Plato believes in the immortality of the soul or in the life beyond. Strauss describes this as a "flagrant" violation of the letter of Plato's teaching. He does not say whether it is a flagrant violation of the substance of Plato's thought.

In view of the impossibility of the rule of the philosopher and the unreasonableness of giving up happiness in the only life there is, we must find another alternative. Farabi believed Plato to have discovered it and I believe Strauss follows Farabi in thinking so. Strauss describes the solution as follows:

We may say that Farabi's Plato eventually replaces the philosopher-king who rules openly in the virtuous city, by the secret kingship of the philosopher who lives privately as a member of an imperfect society which he tries to humanize within the limits of the possible.⁹

What is needed is to have princes friendly to philosophy. In this way philosophy will have the ear of the powerful, and philosophers can rule the city behind the scenes with no risks to themselves or to philosophy. The solution can be found in the difference between Plato's *Republic* and his *Laws*. The *Laws* fulfills, rather than violates, the *Republic*. Farabi's understanding of Plato is shared by Strauss, although he is silent on the matter. Indeed Strauss's own introduction to Plato came through the Islamic and Jewish philosophers, and so he tends to understand Plato in a way that is antithetical

to the tradition of Christian Neo-Platonism. Later, when Strauss studies Plato's *Laws* for himself, he comes to the same conclusion as did Farabi. The Nocturnal council is cleverly introduced only in the twelfth book of the *Laws*, where it is likely to be missed. It ensures the secret rule of the philosopher in the real city.¹⁰

Strauss understands Farabi as a man who replaces religion with politics and who therefore lays the foundation for the secular alliance between philosophers and princes friendly to philosophy. **In so doing, he "initiates the tradition whose most famous representatives in the West are Marsilius of Padua and Machiavelli."**¹¹ Strauss silently omits Plato.

Let me say more explicitly what Strauss says only implicitly about Farabi's philosophy. There is no life beyond this life. There is no happiness but the happiness to be found in this life. There is no transcendent God. Philosophers are as gods among men. The only happiness accessible to people is through the rule of the philosophers. But the philosophers are neither loved nor recognized. On the contrary, they are despised and ridiculed. Instead, people wish to be ruled by the Divine Law, being ignorant of the inevitable shortcomings of even the best laws and their inability to accommodate the variable circumstances of human life. Wisdom must replace law and philosophy must replace the dogged adherence to sacred Law. If the philosophers seem arrogant, that should not surprise us; they are a sort of wounded aristocracy, a jilted deity. But it should not surprise us that they are made a laughing stock by the world. They are rather awkward and their step is unsure in the darkness of the cave; that is not their domain. They belong to a domain outside the cave, with the sun and the other heavenly bodies. If they openly attempt to take their rightful place at the helm, they will be thrown overboard as stargazers by the drunken sailors.

Yet despite the abuse heaped on them by a vulgar and ungrateful world, they will not take revenge. They should retreat and, consorting only with one another, live in a sort of Epicurian garden pursuing their own happiness through the activity for which they are supremely fit; namely, contemplation of the intelligent heavenly bodies with whom they share a special kinship. But they do not. For love of the world, they try to rule in secrecy. If they say that there is no connection between philosophy and the world or between the "city in speech" and the earthly city, that is only their exoteric philosophy,¹² the means

by which they protect philosophy and themselves from the ruthless persecution of the vulgar. The esoteric philosophy is about the secret kingship of the philosopher. If the philosopher is identified with the *Imam*, that is only a concession to public opinion; it is a “noble lie,” a “pious fraud,” an “economy of truth,” a matter of “considering one’s social responsibilities.” Nor is it altogether false, as the role that the philosopher must occupy in the real city is not unlike that of the prophet who has the ear of a God-fearing king. The difference is that philosophers are prophets without a god. But that is their secret.

Farabi could not have failed to see that the predicament of philosophy in the Islamic world was not unlike its predicament in the pagan world of Plato. Plato’s master was a philosopher who spoke openly in the market place and consequently was condemned to death. Plato’s philosophy therefore can be understood as the search for the means by which the danger to philosophy and to the philosopher can be avoided. “The art of Plato” was the way in which the danger was averted. That art consisted of esoteric writing regarding the secret kingship of the philosophers. Strauss hastens to add that “the success of Plato must not blind us to the existence of a danger which, however much its forms may vary, is coeval with philosophy.”¹³

The Jewish philosophers Helevi and Maimonides inherited the art of Plato from the Islamic philosophers. They took it for granted that being a Jew and being a philosopher are mutually exclusive. Strauss explains that the Jewish tradition emphasized God’s justice and not His wisdom. This contributes (although it does not explain) to the lack of proximity of Judaism to philosophy. As Spinoza bluntly said, the Jews despised philosophy. More explicitly, the antipathy between philosophy and Judaism or Islam is coeval with the antipathy of true philosophy or pagan philosophy and revealed religion as such. In light of this truth, we must conclude that Christianity has long labored under a gross illusion.

Strauss explains that the difference between Christianity, on one hand, and Islam and Judaism, on the other, is that the latter consider the sacred doctrine to be a legal interpretation of Divine Law (*talmud* or *figh*), whereas for the Christian the sacred doctrine is revealed theology. This is why Maimonides’s *Guide for the Perplexed*, the Jewish equivalent to St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, never acquired the authority or stature of the latter. But Strauss is not to be understood as praising Christianity for its open-minded and

unreserved love of wisdom. On the contrary, Christianity has done a disservice to philosophy. It drew it to its bosom only to impose upon it ecclesiastical supervision that is tantamount to its destruction; for, as I will show shortly, the essence of philosophy for Strauss is freedom from authority, human or divine. Of course, Strauss does not say all this explicitly, but he does say that

the precarious status of philosophy in Judaism as well as in Islam was not in every respect a misfortune for philosophy. The official recognition of philosophy in the Christian world made philosophy subject to ecclesiastical supervision. The precarious position of philosophy in the Islamic-Jewish world guaranteed its private character and therewith its inner freedom from supervision.¹⁴

For Strauss, the antipathy between Islam or Judaism and philosophy is "identical with the issue of Jerusalem versus Athens."¹⁵ The belief in the harmony between philosophy and revelation in Christianity smacks of the foolhardiness of modernity. Although Strauss is reluctant to say so explicitly, what he calls modernity has its roots in the Christian failure to recognize the permanent discord between philosophy and revelation, Athens and Jerusalem. Egalitarianism and an indiscriminate faith in the value of truth characterize both modernity and Christianity and set them apart from the wisdom of antiquity.

Strauss shares with the writers of antiquity certain assumptions about man, politics, religion, and philosophy that necessitate the cultivation of this special style. These can be summarized as follows: The gulf between the vulgar and the wise is permanent and no amount of public education or mass enlightenment will obliterate it. The vulgar not only are incapable of grasping philosophical truth, they have a natural aversion to it. Philosophical truth is not just unpalatable to certain societies at certain times, it is undesirable "for all time." Nor are the "vulgar" altogether to blame. There is in the nature of philosophical truth something dangerous to political order, indeed to civilization as such. Strauss is reluctant to say this explicitly, but it seems that he shares the sentiment of the esoteric writers of antiquity who considered philosophy and religion to be mutually exclusive and antagonistic yet recognized that religion is a necessary foundation for political order.

To share the wisdom of antiquity is to share its art of writing. Strauss too writes esoterically; he too avails himself of the immunity

of the commentator. This does not preclude his saying anything lucidly and clearly in that lively style that is bound to “arrest the attention of young men who love to think.” But like his counterparts in antiquity, he is not foolish enough or cruel enough to utter these dangerous truths in his own name. Instead, he uses some disreputable character as his mouthpiece. What more disreputable a character can be found in our own time than the diabolical Machiavelli? Like his imaginary writer from the Communist bloc, he sets out to attack that which he really intends to defend. He does this in his *Thoughts on Machiavelli* as well as in his *Natural Right and History*.¹⁶ What description of Strauss’s work could be more apt than his own description of how his imaginary writer from the Communist bloc would proceed?

Does Strauss not frequently write in a quiet, unspectacular, and boring manner? Does he not give many quotations and attach undue importance to insignificant details? Has he not stated the case of Machiavelli and Thrasymachus more compellingly and mercilessly than it had ever been stated before?¹⁷ Does not the bulk of *Natural Right and History* consist in the most virulent expansions of the most virulent utterances of the holy book of the ruling party? Does it not begin with the declaration of independence with its simple-minded belief that all men are created equal, its childish trust in God and in the inalienable rights of individuals? And has Strauss not told us that the wise know better? And are we not entitled to think that Strauss shares the views of those he considers most wise? When Strauss attributes to Plato the thoughts of Thrasymachus, are we not entitled to attribute these same ideas to Strauss? For is he not, by his own admission, the guardian of the wisdom of antiquity? And was it not his unique achievement to “single-handedly revive an interest in the classical texts and the knowledge they contained” at a time when “classicists no longer took seriously the content of the books entrusted to their care?”¹⁸

It is not lack of courage or fear of mockery that prevents the philosopher from speaking his or her mind openly and unambiguously. There is a deeper and more profound reason that the philosopher today, no less than in antiquity, is reluctant to do so. The explanation rests in the fact that the esoteric art of writing was adopted by philosophers to avert danger not only to themselves, but to the world. They thought that philosophy threatened their civiliza-

tion, its political stability, and its religion. This is a result of their understanding of the necessary ingredients of civilization as well as of philosophy. Civilization needs religion in order to flourish, but philosophy presupposes complete freedom from the restraints that religion must necessarily impose on thought. More explicitly, there exists a necessary conflict between reason and revelation, Athens and Jerusalem. Strauss elaborates on this in an important essay that is not widely known.

In "Jerusalem and Athens" Strauss provides a delightful account of *Genesis*, the full implication of which is unlikely to be clear to anyone unfamiliar with the esoteric philosophy. The essay is an informal description of the similarities and differences between the biblical and pagan accounts of the human condition. The point of the essay is that the similarities between religions are more fundamental than the differences. All religions, regardless of their nature, are ultimately locked into an irresolvable conflict with philosophy. Strauss makes his choice obvious by saying that if we desire to know, to reason, and to question, "we have already decided in favor of Athens against Jerusalem."¹⁹ He treats this conflict as self-evident and does not argue for it. He does, however, bring to bear an overwhelming amount of authoritative support for his position. Not only do the Islamic and Jewish philosophers, following Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, take for granted the conflict between Jerusalem and Athens, the conflict is recognized by the Bible. Indeed, it is the very theme of *Genesis*.

Strauss does not say this explicitly. I will therefore attempt to restate his account in the hope of making Strauss's meaning more explicit. Man's life in the Garden of Eden is a life devoid of evil, old age, and death. Adam and Eve live happily with neither sorrow nor toil. Their life also is marked by a conspicuous absence of the arts or crafts. It is characterized simultaneously by simplicity and abundance. But it is a life lived under the tutelage of God. For Adam and Eve lived as children in the Garden of Eden. They were forbidden to eat of the tree of knowledge but not of the tree of life. Despite the innocence of man's childlike simplicity, Strauss does not paint him as being altogether devoid of knowledge. On the contrary, he explains that man is a being "that can understand to some degree that knowledge of good and evil is evil for it."²⁰ Strauss explains that the "Bible

intends to teach that man was meant to live in simplicity, without knowledge of good and evil."²¹ And Strauss would be more inclined to add, if he were more candid, that the Bible is right. Humans are beings who cannot withstand the burden of knowledge. Yet paradoxically, they are drawn to it by a sort of inexplicable *eros*. It seems that the choice between knowledge and eternal life is one with which people are confronted from the beginning. In choosing knowledge, they forfeit eternal life.

The choice is the clue to the human condition. Evil is the price people must pay for their love of knowledge. Evil also is the emancipator of people from bondage. Had they not sinned, they would not have earned their freedom. Only in the light of Strauss's understanding of the biblical myth can we make sense of the epitaph to the second chapter of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* from W. E. H. Lecky, which reads, "That vice has often proved an emancipator of the mind, is one of the most humiliating, but, at the same time, one of the most unquestionable, facts in history."²²

Love of knowledge is coeval with love of freedom. Crime is the beginning of wisdom. It seems the serpent was right after all. Strauss's understanding of the story is not altogether unlike Hegel's. In his *Early Theological Writings* Hegel suggests that the serpent did not lie to Eve in telling her that eating of the tree of knowledge would make her like God. What the serpent fails to tell her is that the success will not be achieved immediately. It will be preceded by a long dialectical process known as history. But at the end of history, the alienation of man and God that will inevitably follow upon disobedience will be overcome in a new synthesis that will establish the identity of man and God. For Strauss, the serpent was telling only part of the truth. Crime and suffering are the price people must pay for love of knowledge. But there will be no respite, there will be no reconciliation at the end of history. As seekers after wisdom, people set themselves up in permanent opposition to God; an opposition that is identical to the conflict between the love of knowledge and the love of God, Athens and Jerusalem.

Eve was the first lover of knowledge, the first seeker after wisdom, the first *philo-sophoi*. In view of the close alliance between philosophy and *eros*, which Strauss shares with Plato, Eve is a particularly appropriate symbol of the love of wisdom. But Eve also is the repre-

sentative of evil, of wickedness, and of the disobedience to God. Strauss points out, however, that God's prohibition was given to Adam, and that God had not spoken to Eve directly. She knew of it only through Adam. Strauss curiously comments that she knew of the prohibition only from "tradition." This is an important clue to Strauss's understanding of the meaning of the myth.

In *Natural Right and History* Strauss explains that philosophy emerges in opposition to the conventional, the ancestral, or the traditional. The distinction between nature and convention is fundamental to philosophy. The discovery of nature is the work of philosophy.²³ "Nature" does not refer indiscriminately to all that there is. On the contrary, it refers to what is good or excellent. As a result, it emerges as a challenge to the conventional, the traditional, or the ancestral. The latter is considered good because it is believed to have a divine origin, to have been founded by gods or sons of gods or men (like Adam) to whom God has spoken directly. Philosophy therefore presupposes the doubt of authority—not only human, but divine. It is therefore opposed not only to convention, but to religion, as the former generally derives its authority from the latter. Indeed, Strauss identifies the ancestral with the divine code and uses ancestral and divine interchangeably.²⁴

"Nature" refers not only to the good, but also to the "primal" or first things. Plato articulates the meaning of *physis* as that which is first, primary, and good. This, he tells us, is the sense it has for both himself and his adversaries.²⁵ In view of this, Strauss notes that nature claims to be older than the ancestral or to precede it, and hence to be the real authority, the traditional being only a sham. Strauss even believes that Aristophanes points to the truth when he suggests that Socrates' fundamental premise could induce a son to beat his father or to repudiate the most natural authority.²⁶ Therefore, it should not surprise us that Socrates was condemned for irreligion or for inventing new gods. The new god he invented was reason with which he opposed both the conventional wisdom of the poets and the traditional religion. **It is Strauss's view that Socrates was not falsely or even unjustly accused. Indeed, Strauss joins Farabi in thinking Plato, following Socrates, replaced "the cave of Zeus" with philosophy. But unlike his teacher, Plato was a master of the esoteric art of writing. So**

much so that he succeeded not only in avoiding persecution, but in fooling the whole tradition of Neo-Platonism.

The opposition of philosophy to traditional or divine authority has its source in the fact that they are two competing authorities, each claiming to be the legitimate one. Each claims to provide humans with the knowledge they need to live well. Strauss discusses the issue in the midst of his commentary on Max Weber's methodology in a rather long diversion that is only superficially connected with Weber:

The fundamental question, therefore, is whether men can acquire that knowledge of the good without which they cannot guide their lives individually or collectively by the unaided efforts of their natural powers, or whether they are dependent for that knowledge on Divine Revelation. No alternative is more fundamental than this: human guidance or divine guidance. . . . The first possibility is characteristic of philosophy or science in the original sense of the term, the second is presented in the Bible. The dilemma cannot be evaded by any harmonization or synthesis. For both philosophy and the Bible proclaim something as the one thing needful, as the only thing that ultimately counts, and the one thing needful proclaimed by the Bible is the opposite of that proclaimed by philosophy: a life of obedient love versus a life of free insight.²⁷

This is the clue to the discord between reason and revelation. It is not just that each claims to be the supreme authority on what is needful for the good life. They each contain conflicting conceptions of the good life for people. Neither can refute the other, so a choice must be made. On one hand, "man is so built that he can find his satisfaction, his bliss, in free investigation, in articulating the riddle of being."²⁸ On the other hand, people's yearning for a solution attracts them to revelation. But philosophy cannot "grant that revelation is possible" without also granting that the philosophical life is not necessary or is not the best life. Nor can the philosophical life be made compatible with revelation, for "philosophy, the life devoted to the quest for evident knowledge available to man as man, would itself rest on an unevident, arbitrary, or blind decision."²⁹ All this Strauss says in the midst of his commentary on Max Weber's methodology. After what seems like a long digression, Strauss writes, "But let us hasten back from these awful depths to a superficiality which, while not exactly gay, promises at least a quiet sleep."³⁰ Strauss's style is here at its liveliest. At this point, he resumes abruptly his rather tedious discussion of Weber's methodology.

The incompatibility of the two types of lives consists in the fact that one is a life of submission and obedience to God that renounces reason, whereas the other is a life of free insight and inquiry that exalts reason. This is the choice with which man is confronted in the Garden of Eden. For love of knowledge, Eve makes the choice against God. It seems that philosophy or the love of wisdom cannot be eradicated from the heart of humans, and as a result evil must always find a place in their breasts. For the two are coeval with one another; evil is the price we pay for philosophy. As Marx knew, there will be no need for philosophy when the evils of history are terminated. It seems that man's desire to live without evil is as intransigent and as intractable as her love of knowledge. God gives people the opportunity to live without evil in the Garden of Eden in order to show them that their deepest wish cannot be fulfilled. The story of the Fall is "the first part of the story of God's education of man."³¹ Man has to live with the knowledge of good and evil and suffer the consequences.

The fate of philosophy in the world is the same as the fate that God inflicts on Eve. She is to be subject to the authority of Adam, the ancestral, the one who came first (at least in one out of the two accounts of man's creation provided in Genesis). If Eve is to have any freedom in the world, she must retire to the private domain and shun the glory of the public realm. Likewise, philosophy must live eternally in the shadow of the ancestral and avoid offending it for fear of its very life. If it is to enjoy a modest freedom, it must keep itself hidden and shun the glory of power and politics.³² This is not to say (contrary to the way in which Strauss is commonly understood or misunderstood) that philosophy has nothing to do with politics or nothing to offer it.³³ On the contrary, it has a great deal to offer; so much so that any happiness that man can attain depends on philosophy's success in secretly influencing the powers that be and ruling vicariously or behind the scenes, as women have always ruled over men.

After the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, God gives man freedom to live in the absence of law. When Cain slays his brother Abel, God does not punish him. On the contrary, He threatens to punish severely anyone who will kill him. Cain was the founder of a city. Like Cain, Romulus, founder of Rome, slew his brother. Like his fellow fratricide, he gets away with it. It seems that even God recog-

nized fratricide as necessary to the founding of a city. Strauss says implicitly and behind the veil of the commentator what Machiavelli and Hannah Arendt say openly and in their own name: "Whatever brotherhood human beings may be capable of has grown out of fratricide, whatever political organization men have achieved has its origin in crime."³⁴

Because crime is the foundation of human affairs, those who enter politics must first learn not to be good. Arendt believes that Machiavelli was first to see the truth of this and he therefore attributed to politics a domain whose laws and principles were independent of morality, and particularly of the teaching of the Church. Strauss's account of Genesis indicates that he considers these ideas to have much older origins. The extent to which Strauss shares the ideas of Arendt and Machiavelli requires a close examination of his *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, which is not possible within the limits of this article.³⁵

The race of Cain ends with the song of Lamech, who "boasted" to his wives of the slaying of men and of being superior to God as an avenger. In contrast, the race of Seth (the replacement of Abel) cannot "boast" a single inventor. Its distinguished members are Noah and Enoch, who were righteous and "walked with God." The contrast between the race of Cain, the founder of a city, and the race of Seth leads Strauss to conclude that "civilization and piety are two very different things."³⁶ But he does not elaborate. It seems that those who walk with God cannot aspire to greatness. Those who aspire to greatness must renounce God. Strauss repeats Nietzsche's claim that for the Greeks the individual is marked by the pursuit of excellence, supremacy, and distinction, but for the Jews the individual is marked by honoring mother and father or living a life of obedience to the ancestral.³⁷ The Jews are not lovers of philosophy as Spinoza observed, and Strauss seems to suggest that this may be the reason that they have failed to found a great civilization. For the latter, craftsmanship and the arts are needed, and these are an extension of man's love of knowledge; they are part of the revolt against God and the aspiration to compete with God by remaking the world to his own liking. By their great words and deeds (not good words and deeds), humans aspire to the immortality of the gods.

The arts are not part of the simple life of antediluvian humans. The Bible teaches that people were meant to live simply and without knowledge. Indeed, knowledge succeeds only in bringing disaster

upon humankind. Pagan religion taught the same lesson; and this shows that the similarities between religions are far greater and more significant than the differences. The Greek myth of Prometheus also tells of the disaster that befell humankind as a result of the gift of fire or knowledge that the philanthropist Prometheus offered them.

God, as it were, “experimented” with the education of humankind. First, he gave them the opportunity to live as innocent children in the Garden of Eden, free of evil. Then he tried letting them live without restraint or law. But that did not work either. Rampant wickedness was the result, and God had to destroy almost every living creature with the flood. After the flood, God made a compact with humans in the form of the revelation of his Torah or law. It seems that a covenant in which humans and God are equally, although not equal, partners is the foundation of law. As Hobbes would say, law, which has its origin in contract, replaces the original freedom of humankind; and the exchange of law for freedom is necessary for the survival of humankind. Fallen (or “awake” as Strauss adds, using the philosophical symbolism of Heraclitus) humankind needs the restraint of law. Zeus, the biblical God, and Hobbes’s mortal god all guard their law with jealousy and wrath; and in so doing, exact the required obedience.

Strauss paints Zeus and the biblical God with the same brush strokes. Both jealousy demand exclusivity, forbid the worship of other gods, and declare themselves the only true god. Both are willful and capricious. Just as the biblical God takes mercy and favors whom he chooses, so Zeus “takes cognizance of men’s justice and injustice only if he so wills.”³⁸ There is no significant difference between the two gods. Will and caprice rather than reason and wisdom are their distinguishing marks. Strauss comments that the relation of Zeus and Metis “may remind one of the relation of God and wisdom in the Bible.”³⁹ Metis (wisdom) is Zeus’ first spouse, and she becomes inseparable, although not identical, with him. Characteristically, Strauss does not elaborate. What is implicit is that here, as in the Bible, wisdom is associated with woman. Love of wisdom or philosophy therefore is not love of God. On the contrary, it is a sort of competition with him, an attempt to possess Metis, who, being a woman, can be seduced. All this deepens the opposition of Athens and Jerusalem.

Although not marked primarily by wisdom, both the pagan and the biblical gods are distinguished by justice. One wonders what Strauss could possibly mean by that. His meaning becomes transparent if we understand justice, as Hobbes did, to be a function of law, which is in turn a function of the will of the legislator. In contrast to both the pagan and the biblical gods, the god of the philosophers does not give orders or laws, he is not a creator, and he does not dispense justice; he is “only a thinking being, pure thought that thinks itself and only itself.”⁴⁰ It is almost a blasphemy to ascribe justice to the god of Aristotle. By implication, philosophers, in the act of free and uninhibited thought, aspire to the imitation of a god who is pure reason and knows no jealousy: a god that is beyond good and evil.

Strauss declares that a synthesis of Athens and Jerusalem, reason and revelation, philosophy and religion is impossible. Elsewhere, Strauss wrote that Herodotus “had indicated this state of things” when he told us that “free discussion took place in truth-loving Persia after the slaughter of the Magi.”⁴¹ If God is dead, the philosophers are to blame. Indeed, the death of God and the ascendancy of philosophy are the hallmarks of modernity.

The Christian belief in the possibility of a synthesis between Athens and Jerusalem is responsible for the naive trust in philosophy that is the hallmark of modernity. Christianity embraced philosophy as its crowning glory, oblivious to the fact that its queen would become its vanquisher and destroyer. The history of Western civilization is the story of the disastrous failure of the Christian project. It is a testimony to the fact that reason and revelation, Athens and Jerusalem, cannot coexist; they cannot live together in harmony. One must ultimately overthrow the other. The agony in which Western civilization finds itself has its source in the fact that philosophy has vanquished Christianity. But in spite of this sad state of affairs, the moderns, the heirs of Christianity, continue to cling to the belief that philosophy is salutary. So great is their faith in philosophy that they think Western civilization could withstand the death of God. They believe that philosophy could replace God or that universal enlightenment would suffice to establish good order and political bliss. As a result, they parted with the wisdom of the ancients, according to whom the masses need myths and illusions. They need to believe that there is an unchanging moral law sanctioned by a divine creator and

backed by the powers that be. If the vulgar were to discover, as the philosophers have always known, that God is dead, they might behave as if all is permitted. Strauss does not say all this explicitly because a wise person ought not to say publicly that there is no God and no unchanging moral law.

Genuine philosophers know that people's love of knowledge has brought them only grief. But modernity succeeds in making things worse by bringing philosophy to the masses. Nothing, says Strauss, separates the ancients from the moderns more than the attitude they have to "noble (or just) lies" and "pious frauds."

In light of the above, we must understand anew Strauss's distinction between ancients and moderns. The differences are not what they appear to be at first blush. The single most fundamental difference between ancients and moderns is that the latter no longer believe in the need or the necessity of esoteric writing. If Strauss is indignant when he speaks of the "moderns," this is not due so much to the content of their thought as to the public manner in which they present it. His disdain for them is due to the foolishness with which they dispense philosophy as if it were the gospel.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have attempted to establish the following: **First, that Strauss himself writes esoterically and that he provides us with a great deal of reasons why philosophers ought to do so. I argued that the reason is not just to avoid persecution for their heterodox views.** The more interesting reason has to do with the dangerous nature of philosophical truth. Philosophy is destructive of religion, yet the latter is necessary to sustain a civilization. Second, that Strauss's disagreement with the moderns has to do with the public manner in which they dispense philosophy as if a civilization can be sustained without religious illusions. Third, that the best political order or the rule of the philosophers is not just a "city in speech" or a transcendent and distant ideal of no practical political relevance. Only the city in which the philosopher rules openly is a city in speech, a city that is politically unattainable. In the real city the philosophers can rule in secret by having influence over the powerful. The attainment of the

philosophical ideal depends on the chance occurrence of princes friendly to philosophy. It is by no means beyond reach. What sort of influence they exert and what sort of advice they give to the powerful is the subject matter for another article. But it is not unlike the sort of influence that we find neoconservatism exerting on contemporary politics.

Finally, I hoped to show that philosophers have an important role to play in the real city, even if they do not succeed in winning the ear of the powerful. Strauss's insistence that philosophy must remain hidden does not mean that it ought not to play a significant role in public life. On the contrary, appearing in its exoteric garb as "political" philosophy it is the creator of the noble lies and pious frauds without which civilization would perish.

I am suggesting that Strauss's philosophy resembles Nietzsche's much more closely than it does Plato's (at least as the latter is ordinarily understood). First, he shares with Nietzsche a nihilistic conception of truth. Second, he voices anew one of Nietzsche's fundamental insights regarding the dangerous and detrimental nature of truth and knowledge. Third, his conception of the philosopher is modeled after Nietzsche's superman.

First, it is often believed that Nietzsche rejects altogether the correspondence theory of truth according to which there is an independent reality to which philosophical truth must correspond. In contrast, he claims that truth is a function of human making; it is a product of art. Nevertheless, he insists on telling us something about reality, the truth of which he does not seem to doubt. He also rejects all notions of objective good, yet he insists on distinguishing between master and slave, noble and base. Commentators often have observed that his philosophy is trapped in a self-defeating contradiction. His conception of truth is said to leave his own message without foundation or support; there is no reason to regard it as being truer than any other philosophical position. But this contradiction is so blatant, so ordinary, so obvious, that it is hard to believe that it could have escaped the notice of an intelligent person. Nietzsche must have meant something different. Strauss suggests a more plausible interpretation.

In denying the correspondence theory of truth, Nietzsche means to deny that morality, law, and justice have any support in the uni-

verse. These ideas have for him no transcendent or independent reality apart from humans. "Truth" (or what passes for truth) consists of fabrications necessary for the survival of the "herd." But to say this is not to say that anything goes, or that what is deemed true is arbitrary. On the contrary, nature determines the sorts of things necessary for the survival of the race. Strauss praises Nietzsche for reviving, in the midst of the modern revolt against nature, the idea of nature as the standard or measure.⁴² Truth is one thing, and what passes for truth is another. The latter is for the many, whereas the former is for the few; the latter is salutary and serves to preserve the herd, whereas the former is dangerous and threatens the survival of the race. Only the few have the intestinal fortitude to withstand the harsh truth of nihilism. So understood, Nietzsche's conception of truth is indistinguishable from Strauss's, as I understand him.

Second, Strauss's fundamental insight into the "crisis" of modernity is Nietzschean. Like Nietzsche, Strauss traces the ills of modernity to its unquenchable quest for truth—its immoderate, excessive, and suicidal devotion to knowledge. Scientific knowledge, for example, threatens us with extinction, yet we are convinced that only more knowledge can save us. For Strauss, as for Nietzsche, what is true of scientific knowledge is equally true of philosophical knowledge. Like Nietzsche, Strauss forces us to think the unthinkable. He forces us to question the goodness of truth and knowledge for humankind. Nihilism, or the insight into the groundlessness of our ideas of law, justice, and morality, is (to use Nietzsche's phrase) a "deadly truth." We therefore are confronted with a choice between this deadly truth and a life-saving myth. Unless we are bent on self-annihilation, we should choose the life-saving myth. Truth is not good for humans; they cannot survive without myths and illusions. The necessary connection between goodness, happiness, and truth that traditional philosophers have long fostered is an illusion, but its disruption threatens our very survival.

Third, Strauss's philosopher is modeled after Nietzsche's superman. Like the latter, the philosopher is the creator of the needed or necessary truths that ensure the survival of the herd in a condition of peace and tranquility. The philosopher, like the superman, fashions the opinions, attitudes, and sensibilities of the vulgar; he or she determines their art, their feelings, and their very horizon of

possibility. But neither the philosopher nor the superman partakes of the illusions he or she creates for the consumption of the herd. They are noble liars who do not deceive themselves; they know their truths to be fabrications with no correspondence to reality. This latter activity is the “political” aspect of philosophy; it is political philosophy.

I did not set out to criticize Strauss in this article. I set out to bring the issues with which he is concerned into the light, where they may become subjects of philosophical debate rather than objects of faith for the initiated. Is philosophical truth really dangerous? Is nihilism the only true doctrine? Does philosophy necessarily involve an antipathy to revealed religion? Are the inequalities between humans as great as Strauss makes them out to be? Are the ills of Western civilization really due to an excess of enlightenment? Is the philosophical life the only truly noble life?

It seems to me that the truth of Strauss’s claim regarding the dangerous and unsalutary nature of philosophical truth is guaranteed by what he regards as the content of the latter. If Strauss is wrong about the content of philosophical truth, the *raison d’être* of his esotericism collapses.

NOTES

1. Those who have written critically about Strauss have considered him a sufficiently noteworthy historian of ideas to take issue with his interpretations of various philosophers. See, for example, J. W. Yolton, “Locke on the Law of Nature,” *Philosophical Review* 67 (1958), pp. 477-498; Robert McShea, “Leo Strauss on Machiavelli,” *Western Political Quarterly* 16 (1963), pp. 782-797; Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., “Strauss’ Machiavelli,” and J. G. A. Pocock’s response, “Prophet and Inquisitor,” both in *Political Theory* 3 (November 1975), pp. 372-405; Edward Andrew, “Descent to the Cave,” *The Review of Politics* 45 (October 1983), pp. 510-535.

2. Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1952, 1973), p. 18.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 24. A more apt description of Strauss’s writings could not be found.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

10. Leo Strauss, *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).
11. Strauss, *Persecution*, p. 15.
12. See Andrew, "Descent to the Cave."
13. Strauss, *Persecution*, p. 21.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
16. These ideas are explored more fully in my forthcoming book, *The Esoteric Philosophy: The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*.
17. See *ibid.*
18. Walter Burns, "The Achievement of Leo Strauss," *National Review* (December 1973). This issue contains articles by Walter Berns, Herbert J. Storing, Harry V. Jaffa, and Werner J. Dannhauser, written in commemoration of the death of Leo Strauss.
19. Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens," *Commentary* (June 1967), p. 46; this article is based on the Frank Cohen Lectures in Judaic Affairs at Community College of New York.
20. Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens," p. 50.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
22. Strauss, *Persecution*, p. 24.
23. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950, 1953), p. 81.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
25. Plato, *Laws*, Bk. 10; see also my "Idea of nature," in S. B. Drury and R. Knopff, eds., *Law and Politics* (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Ltd., 1980).
26. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 93.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
31. Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens," p. 50.
32. See Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "The Philosopher and the Female in the Political Thought of Plato," *Political Theory* 4, 2 (1976), pp. 195-213; see also her "Eros and the Female in Greek Political Thought: An Interpretation of Plato's Symposium," *Political Theory* 12 (February 1984).
33. See Andrew, "Descent to the Cave"; and the debate between Strauss and Alexander Kojeve in Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963). See also the discussion of that debate by George Grant, "Tyranny and Wisdom," in G. Grant, ed., *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969).
34. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), p. 10.
35. See my forthcoming paper, "The Hidden Meaning of Strauss' Thoughts on Machiavelli," *History of Political Thought*.
36. Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens," p. 50
37. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

39. Ibid., p. 53.

40. Ibid., p. 54.

41. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 85.

42. See Leo Strauss, "Relativism," in H. Schoeck and J.W. Wiggins, eds., *Relativism and the Study of Man* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1961), pp. 153-154; see also "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*," in T.L. Pangle, ed., *Leo Strauss: Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 174-191.

S. B. Drury is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Calgary. She is editor of Law and Politics (Calgary, 1980). Her articles include, "Locke and Nozick on Property," Political Studies 30 (1982); "H. L. A. Hart's Minimum Content Theory of Natural Law," Political Theory 9 (1981); "John Locke: Natural Law and Innate Ideas," Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review 19 (1980); "The Relationship of Substances and Simple Natures in the Philosophy of Descartes," Canadian Journal of Philosophy 4, (1978). She currently is working on a book on Leo Strauss.