

Noble lies and perpetual war: Leo Strauss, the neo-cons, and Iraq

by Danny Postel

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Are the ideas of the conservative political philosopher Leo Strauss a shaping influence on the Bush administration's world outlook? Danny Postel interviews Shadia Drury – a leading scholarly critic of Strauss – and asks her about the connection between Plato's dialogues, secrets and lies, and the United States-led war in Iraq.

What was initially an anti-war argument is now a matter of public record. It is widely recognised that the Bush administration was not honest about the reasons it gave for invading Iraq. Paul Wolfowitz, the influential United States deputy secretary of defense, has acknowledged that the evidence used to justify the war was “murky” and now says that weapons of mass destruction weren't the crucial issue anyway (see the book by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber, *Weapons of Mass Deception: the uses of propaganda in Bush's war on Iraq* (2003).)

By contrast, [Shadia Drury](#), professor of political theory at the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, argues that the use of deception and manipulation in current US policy flow directly from the doctrines of the political philosopher Leo Strauss (1899-1973). His disciples include [Paul Wolfowitz](#) and other neo-conservatives who have driven much of the political agenda of the Bush administration.

If Shadia Drury is right, then American policy-makers exercise deception with greater coherence than their British allies in Tony Blair's 10 Downing Street. In the UK, a [public inquiry](#) is currently underway into the death of the biological weapons expert David Kelly. A central theme is also whether the government deceived the public, as a BBC reporter suggested. The inquiry has documented at least some of the ways the prime minister's entourage 'sexed up' the presentation of intelligence on the Iraqi threat. But few doubt that in terms of their philosophy, if they have one, members of Blair's staff believe they must be trusted as honest. Any apparent deceptions they may be involved in are for them matters of presentation or 'spin': attempts to project an honest gloss when surrounded by a dishonest media.

The deep influence of Leo Strauss's ideas on the current architects of US foreign policy has been referred to, if sporadically, in the press (hence an insider witticism about the influence of “Leo-cons”). Christopher Hitchens, an ardent advocate of the war, wrote unashamedly in November 2002 (in an article felicitously titled [Machiavelli in Mesopotamia](#)) that: “[p]art of the charm of the regime-change argument (from the point of view of its supporters) is that it depends on premises and objectives that cannot, at least by the administration, be publicly avowed. Since Paul Wolfowitz is from the intellectual school of Leo Strauss – and appears in fictional guise as such in Saul Bellow's novel *Ravelstein* – one may even suppose that he enjoys this arcane and occluded aspect of the debate.”

Perhaps no scholar has done as much to illuminate the Strauss phenomenon as Shadia Drury. For fifteen years she has been shining a heat lamp on the Straussians with such books as *The*

Political Ideas of Leo Strauss (1988) and *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (1997). She is also the author of *Alexandre Kojève: the Roots of Postmodern Politics* (1994) and *Terror and Civilization* (forthcoming).

She argues that the central claims of Straussian thought wield a crucial influence on men of power in the contemporary United States. She elaborates her argument in this interview.

A natural order of inequality

Danny Postel: You've argued that there is an important connection between the teachings of Leo Strauss and the Bush administration's selling of the Iraq war. What is that connection?

Shadia Drury: Leo Strauss was a great believer in the efficacy and usefulness of lies in politics. Public support for the Iraq war rested on lies about Iraq posing an imminent threat to the United States – the business about weapons of mass destruction and a fictitious alliance between al-Qaida and the Iraqi regime. Now that the lies have been exposed, Paul Wolfowitz and others in the war party are denying that these were the real reasons for the war.

So what *were* the real reasons? Reorganising the balance of power in the Middle East in favour of Israel? Expanding American hegemony in the Arab world? Possibly. But these reasons would not have been sufficient in themselves to mobilise American support for the war. And the Straussian cabal in the administration realised that.

Danny Postel: The neo-conservative vision is commonly taken to be about spreading democracy and liberal values globally. And when Strauss is mentioned in the press, he is typically described as a great defender of liberal democracy against totalitarian tyranny. You've written, however, that Strauss had a "profound antipathy to both liberalism and democracy."

Shadia Drury: The idea that Strauss was a great defender of liberal democracy is laughable. I suppose that Strauss's disciples consider it a noble lie. Yet many in the media have been gullible enough to believe it.

How could an admirer of Plato and Nietzsche be a liberal democrat? The ancient philosophers whom Strauss most cherished believed that the unwashed masses were not fit for either truth or liberty, and that giving them these sublime treasures would be like throwing pearls before swine. In contrast to modern political thinkers, the ancients denied that there is any natural right to liberty. Human beings are born neither free nor equal. The natural human condition, they held, is not one of freedom, but of subordination – and in Strauss's estimation they were right in thinking so.

Praising the wisdom of the ancients and condemning the folly of the moderns was the whole point of Strauss's most famous book, *Natural Right and History*. The cover of the book sports the American Declaration of Independence. But the book is a celebration of nature – not the natural rights of man (as the appearance of the book would lead one to believe) but the natural order of domination and subordination.

The necessity of lies

Danny Postel: What is the relevance of Strauss's interpretation of Plato's notion of the noble lie?

Shadia Drury: Strauss rarely spoke in his own name. He wrote as a commentator on the classical texts of political theory. But he was an extremely opinionated and dualistic commentator. The fundamental distinction that pervades and informs all of his work is that between the ancients and the [moderns](#). Strauss divided the history of political thought into two camps: the ancients (like Plato) are wise and wily, whereas the moderns (like Locke and other liberals) are vulgar and foolish. Now, it seems to me eminently fair and reasonable to attribute to Strauss the ideas he attributes to his beloved ancients.

In Plato's dialogues, everyone assumes that Socrates is Plato's mouthpiece. But Strauss argues in his book [The City and Man](#) (pp. 74-5, 77, 83-4, 97, 100, 111) that [Thrasymachus](#) is Plato's real mouthpiece (on this point, see also M.F. Burnyeat, "Sphinx without a Secret", *New York Review of Books*, [30 May 1985](#) [paid-for only]). So, we must surmise that Strauss shares the insights of the wise Plato (alias Thrasymachus) that justice is merely the interest of the stronger; that those in power make the rules in their own interests and call it justice.

Leo Strauss repeatedly defends the political realism of Thrasymachus and [Machiavelli](#) (see, for example, his *Natural Right and History*, p. 106). This view of the world is clearly manifest in the foreign policy of the current administration in the United States.

A second fundamental belief of Strauss's ancients has to do with their insistence on the need for secrecy and the necessity of lies. In his book *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss outlines why secrecy is necessary. He argues that the wise must conceal their views for two reasons – to spare the people's feelings and to protect the elite from possible reprisals. The people will not be happy to learn that there is only one natural right – the right of the superior to rule over the inferior, the master over the slave, the husband over the wife, and the wise few over the vulgar many. In *On Tyranny*, Strauss refers to this natural right as the "tyrannical teaching" of his beloved ancients. It is tyrannical in the classic sense of rule above rule or in the absence of law (p. 70).

Now, the ancients were determined to keep this tyrannical teaching secret because the people are not likely to tolerate the fact that they are intended for subordination; indeed, they may very well turn their resentment against the superior few. Lies are thus necessary to protect the superior few from the persecution of the vulgar many.

The effect of Strauss's teaching is to convince his acolytes that they are the natural ruling elite and the persecuted few. And it does not take much intelligence for them to surmise that they are in a situation of great danger, especially in a world devoted to the modern ideas of equal rights and freedoms. Now more than ever, the wise few must proceed cautiously and with circumspection. So, they come to the conclusion that they have a moral justification to lie in order to avoid persecution. Strauss goes so far as to say that dissembling and deception – in effect, a culture of lies – is the peculiar justice of the wise.

Strauss justifies his position by an appeal to Plato's concept of the noble lie. But in truth, Strauss has a very impoverished conception of Plato's noble lie. Plato thought that the noble lie is a story whose details are fictitious; but at the heart of it is a profound truth. In the myth of metals, for example, some people have golden souls – meaning that they are more capable of resisting the temptations of power. And these morally trustworthy types are the ones

who are most fit to rule. The details are fictitious, but the moral of the story is that not all human beings are morally equal.

In contrast to this reading of [Plato](#), Strauss thinks that the superiority of the ruling philosophers is an *intellectual* superiority and not a *moral* one (*Natural Right and History*, p. 151). For many commentators who (like Karl Popper) have read Plato as a totalitarian, the logical consequence is to doubt that philosophers can be trusted with political power. Those who read him this way invariably reject him. Strauss is the only interpreter who gives a sinister reading to Plato, and then celebrates him.

The dialectic of fear and tyranny

Danny Postel: In the Straussian scheme of things, there are the wise few and the vulgar many. But there is also a third group – the gentlemen. Would you explain how they figure?

Shadia Drury: There are indeed three types of men: the wise, the gentlemen, and the vulgar. The wise are the lovers of the harsh, unadulterated truth. They are capable of looking into the abyss without fear and trembling. They recognise neither God nor moral imperatives. They are devoted above all else to their own pursuit of the “higher” pleasures, which amount to consorting with their “puppies” or young initiates.

The second type, the gentlemen, are lovers of honour and glory. They are the most ingratiating towards the conventions of their society – that is, the illusions of the cave. They are true believers in God, honour, and moral imperatives. They are ready and willing to embark on acts of great courage and self-sacrifice at a moment’s notice.

The third type, the vulgar many, are lovers of wealth and pleasure. They are selfish, slothful, and indolent. They can be inspired to rise above their brutish existence only by fear of impending death or catastrophe.

Like Plato, Strauss believed that the supreme political ideal is the rule of the wise. But the rule of the wise is unattainable in the real world. Now, according to the conventional wisdom, Plato realised this, and settled for the rule of law. But Strauss did not endorse this solution entirely. Nor did he think that it was Plato’s *real* solution – Strauss pointed to the “nocturnal council” in Plato’s *Laws* to illustrate his point.

The real Platonic solution as understood by Strauss is the *covert rule of the wise* (see Strauss’s – [The Argument and the Action of Plato’s Laws](#)). This covert rule is facilitated by the overwhelming stupidity of the gentlemen. The more gullible and unperceptive they are, the easier it is for the wise to control and manipulate them. Supposedly, Xenophon makes that clear to us.

For Strauss, the rule of the wise is not about classic conservative values like order, stability, justice, or respect for authority. The rule of the wise is intended as an antidote to modernity. Modernity is the age in which the vulgar many have triumphed. It is the age in which they have come closest to having exactly what their hearts desire – wealth, pleasure, and endless entertainment. But in getting just what they desire, they have unwittingly been reduced to beasts. Nowhere is this state of affairs more advanced than in America. And the global reach of American culture threatens to trivialise life and turn it into entertainment. This was as terrifying a spectre for Strauss as it was for Alexandre Kojève and [Carl Schmitt](#).

This is made clear in Strauss’s exchange with Kojève (reprinted in Strauss’s *On Tyranny*), and in his commentary on Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political* (reprinted in Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*). [Kojève](#) lamented the

animalisation of man and Schmitt worried about the trivialisation of life. All three of them were convinced that liberal economics would turn life into entertainment and destroy politics; all three understood politics as a conflict between mutually hostile groups willing to fight each other to the death. In short, they all thought that man's humanity depended on his willingness to rush naked into battle and headlong to his death. Only perpetual war can overturn the modern project, with its emphasis on self-preservation and "creature comforts." Life can be politicised once more, and man's humanity can be restored.

This terrifying vision fits perfectly well with the desire for honour and glory that the neo-conservative gentlemen covet. It also fits very well with the religious sensibilities of gentlemen. The combination of religion and nationalism is the elixir that Strauss advocates as the way to turn natural, relaxed, hedonistic men into devout nationalists willing to fight and die for their God and country.

I never imagined when I wrote my first book on Strauss that the unscrupulous elite that he elevates would ever come so close to political power, nor that the ominous tyranny of the wise would ever come so close to being realised in the political life of a great nation like the United States. But fear is the greatest ally of tyranny.

Danny Postel: You've described Strauss as a nihilist.

Shadia Drury: Strauss is a nihilist in the sense that he believes that there is no rational foundation for morality. He is an atheist, and he believes that in the absence of God, morality has no grounding. It's all about benefiting others and oneself; there is no objective reason for doing so, only rewards and punishments in this life.

But Strauss is not a nihilist if we mean by the term a denial that there is any truth, a belief that everything is interpretation. He does not deny that there is an independent reality. On the contrary, he thinks that independent reality consists in nature and its "order of rank" – the high and the low, the superior and the inferior. Like Nietzsche, he believes that the history of western civilisation has led to the triumph of the inferior, the rabble – something they both lamented profoundly.

Danny Postel: This connection is curious, since Strauss is bedevilled by Nietzsche; and one of Strauss's most famous students, [Allan Bloom](#), fulminates profusely in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* against the influence of Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger.

Shadia Drury: Strauss's criticism of the existentialists, especially Heidegger, is that they tried to elicit an ethic out of the abyss. This was the ethic of resoluteness – choose whatever you like and be loyal to it to the death; its content does not matter. But Strauss's reaction to moral nihilism was different. Nihilistic philosophers, he believes, should reinvent the Judæo-Christian God, but live like pagan gods themselves – taking pleasure in the games they play with each other as well as the games they play on ordinary mortals.

The question of nihilism is complicated, but there is no doubt that Strauss's reading of Plato entails that the philosophers should return to the cave and manipulate the images (in the form of media, magazines, newspapers). They know full well that the line they espouse is mendacious, but they are convinced that theirs are noble lies.

The intoxication of perpetual war

Danny Postel: You characterise the outlook of the Bush administration as a kind of realism, in the spirit of Thrasymachus and Machiavelli. But isn't the real divide within the administration (and on the American right more generally) more complex: between foreign policy realists, who

are pragmatists, and neo-conservatives, who see themselves as idealists – even moralists – on a mission to topple tyrants, and therefore in a struggle *against* realism?

Shadia Drury: I think that the neo-conservatives are for the most part genuine in wanting to spread the American commercial model of liberal democracy around the globe. They are convinced that it is the best thing, not just for America, but for the world. Naturally, there is a tension between these “idealists” and the more hard-headed realists within the administration. I contend that the tensions and conflicts within the current administration reflect the differences between the surface teaching, which is appropriate for gentlemen, and the ‘nocturnal’ or covert teaching, which the philosophers alone are privy to. It is very unlikely for an ideology inspired by a secret teaching to be entirely coherent.

The issue of nationalism is an example of this. The philosophers, wanting to secure the nation against its external enemies as well as its internal decadence, sloth, pleasure, and consumption, encourage a strong patriotic fervour among the honour-loving gentlemen who wield the reins of power. That strong nationalistic spirit consists in the belief that their nation and its values are the best in the world, and that all other cultures and their values are inferior in comparison.

[Irving Kristol](#), the father of neo-conservatism and a Strauss disciple, denounced nationalism in a 1973 essay; but in another essay written in 1983, he declared that the foreign policy of neo-conservatism must reflect its nationalist proclivities. A decade on, in a 1993 essay, he claimed that “religion, nationalism, and economic growth are the pillars of neoconservatism.” (See “The Coming ‘Conservative Century’”, in *Neoconservatism: the autobiography of an idea*, p. 365.) .

In *Reflections of a Neoconservative* (p. xiii), Kristol wrote that: “patriotism springs from love of the nation’s past; nationalism arises out of hope for the nation’s future, distinctive greatness.... Neoconservatives believe... that the goals of American foreign policy must go well beyond a narrow, too literal definition of ‘national security’. It is the national interest of a world power, as this is defined by a sense of national destiny ... not a myopic national security”.

The same sentiment was echoed by the doyen of contemporary [Straussianism](#), Harry Jaffa, when he said that America is the “Zion that will light up all the world.” It is easy to see how this sort of thinking can get out of hand, and why hard-headed realists tend to find it naïve if not dangerous.

But Strauss’s worries about America’s global aspirations are entirely different. Like Heidegger, Schmitt, and Kojève, Strauss would be more concerned that America would succeed in this enterprise than that it would fail. In that case, the “last man” would extinguish all hope for humanity (Nietzsche); the “night of the world” would be at hand (Heidegger); the animalisation of man would be complete (Kojève); and the trivialisation of life would be accomplished (Schmitt). That is what the success of America’s global aspirations meant to them.

Francis Fukuyama’s [The End of History and the Last Man](#) is a popularisation of this viewpoint. It sees the coming catastrophe of American global power as inevitable, and seeks to make the best of a bad situation. It is far from a celebration of American dominance.

On this perverse view of the world, if America fails to achieve her “national destiny”, and is mired in perpetual war, then all is well. Man’s humanity, defined in terms of struggle to the death, is rescued from extinction. But men like Heidegger, Schmitt, Kojève, and Strauss expect the worst. They expect that the universal spread of the spirit of commerce would soften manners

and emasculate man. To my mind, this fascistic glorification of death and violence springs from a profound inability to celebrate life, joy, and the sheer thrill of existence.

To be clear, Strauss was not as hostile to democracy as he was to [liberalism](#). This is because he recognises that the vulgar masses have numbers on their side, and the sheer power of numbers cannot be completely ignored. Whatever can be done to bring the masses along is legitimate. If you can use democracy to turn the masses against their own liberty, this is a great triumph. It is the sort of tactic that neo-conservatives use consistently, and in some cases very successfully.

Among the Straussians

Danny Postel: Finally, I'd like to ask about your interesting reception among the Straussians. Many of them dismiss your interpretation of Strauss and denounce your work in the most adamant terms ("bizarre splenetic"). Yet one scholar, Laurence Lampert, has reprehended his fellow Straussians for this, writing in his *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* that your book *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* "contains many fine skeptical readings of Strauss's texts and acute insights into Strauss's real intentions." [Harry Jaffa](#) has even made the provocative suggestion that you might be a "closet Straussian" yourself!

Shadia Drury: I have been publicly denounced and privately adored. Following the publication of my book *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* in 1988, letters and gifts poured in from Straussian graduate students and professors all over North America – books, dissertations, tapes of Strauss's Hillel House lectures in Chicago, transcripts of every course he ever taught at the university, and even a personally crafted [Owl of Minerva](#) with a letter declaring me a goddess of wisdom! They were amazed that an outsider could have penetrated the secret teaching. They sent me unpublished material marked with clear instructions not to distribute to "suspicious persons". I received letters from graduate students in Toronto, Chicago, Duke, Boston College, Claremont, Fordham, and other Straussian centres of "learning." One of the students compared his experience in reading my work with "a person lost in the wilderness who suddenly happens on a map." Some were led to abandon their schools in favour of fresher air; but others were delighted to discover what it was they were supposed to believe in order to belong to the [charmed circle](#) of future philosophers and initiates.

After my first book on Strauss came out, some of the Straussians in Canada dubbed me the "bitch from Calgary." Of all the titles I hold, that is the one I cherish most. The hostility toward me was understandable. Nothing is more threatening to Strauss and his acolytes than the truth in general and the truth about Strauss in particular. His admirers are determined to conceal the truth about his ideas.

My intention in writing the book was to express Strauss's ideas clearly and without obfuscation so that his views could become the subject of philosophical debate and criticism, and not the stuff of feverish conviction. I wanted to smoke the Straussians out of their caves and into the philosophical light of day. But instead of engaging me in philosophical debate, they denied that Strauss stood for any of the ideas I attributed to him.

[Laurence Lampert](#) is the only Straussian to declare valiantly that it is time to stop playing games and to admit that Strauss was indeed a Nietzschean thinker – that it is time to stop the denial and start defending Strauss's ideas.

I suspect that Lampert's [honesty](#) is threatening to those among the Straussians who are interested in philosophy but who seek power. There is no doubt that open and candid debate about Strauss is likely to undermine their prospects in Washington.

Who is Leo Strauss?

Leo Strauss was born in 1899 in the region of Hessen, Germany, the son of a Jewish small businessman. He went to secondary school in Marburg and served as an interpreter in the German army in the first world war. He was awarded a doctorate at Hamburg University in 1921 for a thesis on philosophy that was supervised by Ernst Cassirer.

Strauss's post-doctoral work involved study of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and in 1930 he published his first book, on Spinoza's critique of religion; his second, on the 12th century Jewish philosopher Maimonides, was published in 1935. After a research period in London, he published *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* in 1936.

In 1937, he moved to Columbia University, and from 1938 to 1948 taught political science and philosophy at the New School for Social Research, New York. During this period he wrote *On Tyranny* (1948) and *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952).

In 1949, he became professor of political philosophy at the University of Chicago, and remained there for twenty years. His works of this period include *Natural Right and History* (1953), *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958), *What is Political Philosophy?* (1959), *The City and Man* (1964), *Socrates and Aristophanes* (1966), and *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (1968). Between 1968 and 1973, Strauss taught in colleges in California and Maryland, and completed work on Xenophon's Socratic discourses and *Argument and Action of Plato's Laws* (1975). After his death in October 1973, the essay collection *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (1983) was published.

Philosophers and kings

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A strange waltz involving George Bush, ancient Greece and a dead German thinker

FROM the moment George Bush moved into the White House, the search has been on for the man (or woman) who is pulling his strings. Is the puppeteer Dick Cheney or Donald Rumsfeld? Karl Rove or Condoleezza Rice? Big Oil or old-time religion? Each has had their spell in the spotlight. But now all are forgotten in the fuss about the most surprising suspect of all: Leo Strauss, a political philosopher who died in 1973 and wrote such page-turners as "Xenophon's Socratic Discourse".

In March the *Executive Intelligence Review*, an eccentric website run by Lyndon LaRouche, posted a profile of Strauss entitled "Fascist Godfather of the Neo-Cons". You might have thought that the article's overheated language and conspiracy-mongering would have killed the argument. But since then a flotilla of respectable publications, from the *New Yorker* to *Le Monde*, have jumped on the bandwagon. Who on earth was Leo Strauss?

The "Fascist Godfather of the Neo-Cons" was, in fact, a German Jew who fled the Holocaust to find a safe haven in the United States. He produced a series of learned studies of political theorists that are variously described as seminal and utterly opaque. But his real talent was for teaching. He taught at the University of Chicago for two decades, and produced a small army of devoted pupils who spread the word.

One reason why Strauss is in the news is because so many of his admirers are now important figures in conservative Washington. Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy secretary of defence, invariably tops the list, but other Straussians in or around the administration include Abram Shulsky, director of the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans, John Walters, the drug tsar, and Leon Kass, the head of the president's council on bioethics. Irving Kristol, one of the first neocons, has passed the creed down to his son Bill, the ubiquitous editor of the *Weekly Standard*. Every July 4th, about 60 Washington Straussians have a picnic.

The second reason why Strauss is so controversial is that a little selective quotation can be used to give his thinking a decidedly sinister tinge. Strauss emphasised both the fragility of democracy and the importance of intellectual elites. He was also a devotee of Plato, who famously argued that "philosopher kings" sometimes had to be willing to tell "noble lies" in order to keep the ignorant masses in line. The implication: Mr Wolfowitz and his fellow Straussians deliberately lied about Saddam Hussein's nukes to advance their political cause.

This is stretching it. Strauss was critical of democracy in much the same way that Winston Churchill was: he believed (unlike Plato) that it was the worst political system apart from all the others. He focused on the weaknesses of liberal democracy—particularly its habit of underestimating the dangers of tyranny—precisely because he had seen the Weimar Republic destroyed at close hand.

As for Mr Wolfowitz, he is a clever cove, but deputy defence secretaries don't go around making the country's foreign policy—particularly when they have men like Mr Rumsfeld and Mr Cheney sitting above them. Nor is Mr Wolfowitz a pure Straussian. He may have studied with Strauss's alter ego, Allan Bloom, and even earned a walk-on part in Saul Bellow's

novel, "Ravelstein", but the biggest influence on his thinking was Albert Wohlstetter, a mathematician-cum-military strategist.

So is the flap about Strauss a pointless waltz? Arguably, Mr LaRouche and the *New Yorker* have been looking in the wrong place. The true impact of all these Straussians walking the corridors of power is not really to do with telling noble fibs in diplomacy; it has to do with domestic policy.

Having a Platonic relationship. No, really

The rise of the Straussians suggests that American conservatism has shifted its focus from liberty to virtue. Ronald Reagan was surrounded with free-marketers in Adam Smith ties. Newt Gingrich regarded the government as a monster that needed to be beheaded. But Mr Bush is an intensely religious man who has no qualms about using big government to improve people's behaviour. Strauss was an agnostic, but he also stressed the cultivation of personal virtue, and his followers (perhaps traducing him, and certainly outraging Plato) have argued that organised religion is a necessary buttress of civilisation.

Strauss's paternalist side would have warmed to the way that Mr Bush has expanded the Department of Education, has started promoting marriage through the Department of Health and Human Services and has toughened America's drug policies. Straussians such as Mr Walters and Mr Kass have helped to clothe Mr Bush's Christian instincts in the non-religious language of moral philosophy and practical policy.

More than anything, however, the Straussians show what a strangely intellectual place Washington is. It may be led by a man who regarded Yale as a drinking competition (which he damn-near won). But it is a place where PhDs are a dime a dozen and where people seriously debate everything from "rules and tools for running an empire" (the topic of a seminar on June 16th) to the cultural contradictions of capitalism. In what other world capital, except perhaps Paris, could 60 Plato-worshipping politicians and academics have a picnic?

The rise of the Straussians also illustrates an odd point about modern American conservatism. Despite all their bile about Old Europe, the American right has repeatedly found its inspiration in European thinkers. A few years ago, it was an Austrian libertarian called Friedrich Hayek. Now it is a German Jew who regarded ancient Greece as the fountain of all wisdom. With European constitution-makers seeking inspiration in the Philadelphia Convention, and American conservatives embracing European philosophical tracts, perhaps transatlantic relations aren't quite as bad as all that.

LEO STRAUSS'S PLATONISM

Neil Robertson

ngrobert@is.dal.ca

For Platonists are not concerned with the historical (accidental) truth, since they are exclusively interested in the philosophic (essential) truth. Only because public speech demands a mixture of seriousness and playfulness, can a true Platonist present the serious teaching, the philosophic teaching, in a historical, and hence playful, garb.

Leo Strauss
"Farabi's Plato"⁽¹⁾

[1] Leo Strauss, the historian of political philosophy, is especially noted for seeking to revive the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. In a number of books Strauss calls for a return to and a renewal of ancient political philosophy, and in particular that of Plato. Yet Strauss's actual interpretations of Platonic texts have often been regarded by non-Straussians as idiosyncratic, perverse or simply bizarre.⁽²⁾ Strauss, for his part, argues that he has recovered the original Plato lost sight of by the tradition of Neo-Platonic and Christian interpretation.⁽³⁾ In this paper I wish, on the one hand, to agree with critics of Strauss that his is not the original Plato, but, on the other hand, to try to discern the logic underlying Strauss's reading of Plato. My paper concludes by suggesting that Strauss's discussion of Plato can be seen to be of the greatest interest if it is read less as providing an interpretation of the original Plato and more as a contribution to contemporary thought. What underlies Strauss's interpretation of Plato is a one-sided, but nonetheless significant, consideration of the contemporary.

[2] Strauss explains the basis of his return to antiquity in the introduction to *The City and Man*:

It is not self-forgetting and pain-loving antiquarianism nor self-forgetting and intoxicating romanticism which induces us to turn with passionate interest, with unqualified willingness to learn, toward the political thought of classical antiquity. We are impelled to do so by the crisis of our time, the crisis of the West.⁽⁴⁾

Strauss follows Nietzsche and Heidegger in seeing a crisis of nihilism at the heart of modernity which opens up the possibility of a return to a principle forgotten or lost sight of within modernity. Again, like Nietzsche and Heidegger, Strauss would see that the recovery of this lost principle involves a return to the ancients who are now able to speak to us free from the distorting effects of modern assumptions. However, in striking contrast to Nietzsche and Heidegger, Strauss turns not to the pre-Socratics, but to Plato and Aristotle--precisely those thinkers who for Nietzsche and Heidegger are the architects of Western metaphysics and thus fully implicated in modernity and its nihilism.⁽⁵⁾ This different assessment of the ancients has its roots in a different conception of the character of modernity's crisis. For Strauss, the problem of modernity is not so readily captured by phrases like "the death of God" or "the forgetting of Being" as by "relativism" or "the rejection of natural right".⁽⁶⁾ In short, Strauss characterizes the

crisis of modernity as primarily moral and political rather than existential. It is more fundamentally about the Good than about Being.⁽⁷⁾

[3] Strauss has recently been accused of being a closet Nietzschean or Heideggerian, so it is important to be clear about how Strauss's position is to be distinguished from theirs.⁽⁸⁾ Strauss's critique of existentialism is that rather than escaping from modernity, it forms modernity's third and most radical "wave."⁽⁹⁾ Strauss argues that Nietzsche and Heidegger have misdiagnosed the character of contemporary nihilism. For Strauss, nihilism resides not in the loss of an originary or authentic encounter with Being or the abyss, but in the loss of contact with nature in our moral and political lives--the discovery for moderns that no particular way of life has inherent worth.⁽¹⁰⁾ The pursuit of authenticity, far from being a road to release from modernity, is a symptom of modernity bereft of all connection with nature.⁽¹¹⁾ The release from modernity, for Strauss, will involve a release from the hermeneutic or self-interpreting self, from *dasein*, as the most extreme, and therefore truest, form of modernity. Instead of the self-interpreting exister, Strauss points to the human being engaged in and structured by civic life, standards, laws.⁽¹²⁾ He sees that the crisis of modernity is not centrally at the level of meaning or significance for the individual exister, but about our capacity to engage in a moral and political life that connects citizens to a structure of human excellence.⁽¹³⁾ The "originary" encounter is, for Strauss, not for the human as *dasein*, but for the human as citizen, as a certain "type" structured by a shared moral and political life.⁽¹⁴⁾ To recover this form of the "originary," one turns not to the poetic musings of pre-Socratic poets and philosophers, but to the dialectical rationalism of the dialogues of Plato.⁽¹⁵⁾

[4] For Strauss the need to return to the Platonic and other ancient texts in order to recover the nature of political life arises from the particular character of modernity. Modernity originated in the transformation of political philosophy effected by Machiavelli, who redirected political philosophy from an essentially contemplative or theoretical consideration of political things to the active transformation of those things.⁽¹⁶⁾ Strauss describes the change in political philosophy effected by Machiavelli in various ways: as a lowering of horizons, as a new conception of nature, and as a replacement of human will for nature as the source of standards. In all of these characterizations, it is clear that, for Strauss, modernity is founded upon the internalizing of the sources of morality within human subjectivity, and, as the necessary correlative of this, results in the oblivion of nature and total historicization of all moral and political standards.⁽¹⁷⁾

[5] Historicism arises in modernity because modernity is premised on a "conquest of nature"-namely, the conception that human activity can transform nature, that it can produce a reality that is other than and superior to the natural condition of man. The radical historicism and relativism that belongs to Nietzsche and Heidegger is simply the most complete "conquest" of nature, the final result of Machiavelli's transformation of political philosophy. However, the nature to which Strauss would have us return is not the "other" that modernity has conquered, but rather "another conception of nature."⁽¹⁸⁾ The "nature" that modernity "conquered" was itself an interpretation posited by modernity.⁽¹⁹⁾ The escape from modernity, for Strauss, occurs not through a return to the "other" posited within modernity, but through an appearance of a nature prior to all modernizing interpretation.⁽²⁰⁾ Strauss puts this sense of a return to nature through a return to the ancients with particular clarity in one of his earliest writings, *Philosophy and Law*:

The natural foundation which the Enlightenment aimed for but itself overthrew becomes accessible only if the battle of the Enlightenment against "prejudices,"-- which has been pursued principally by empiricism and by modern history--is accordingly brought to a conclusion: only if the Enlightenment critique of the tradition is radicalized, as it was by Nietzsche, into a critique of the principles of the tradition (both the Greek and the Biblical), so that an original understanding of these principles again becomes possible. To that end and only to that end is the "historicizing" of philosophy justified and necessary: only the history of philosophy makes possible the ascent from the second, "unnatural" cave, into which we have fallen less because of the tradition itself than because of the tradition of polemics against the tradition, into that first, "natural" cave which Plato's image depicts, to emerge from which into the light is the original meaning of philosophizing.⁽²¹⁾

The difficulty in emerging from out of the crisis of modernity lies in the character of modernity as a constructed reality, a second cave. It is a reality built out of a desire to humanize nature, or-- more accurately--to construct a human world in place of nature. This specifically human world is the realm of culture or history.⁽²²⁾ At the heart of modernity is a nihilism of nature. The crisis of the West is the bringing to light of this nihilism, that in the very triumph of modernity the West discovers that humanity cannot inwardly generate what Charles Taylor helpfully calls "constitutive goods."⁽²³⁾ The "second cave" of modernity, Strauss argues, is human history understood as a self-constituting reality. To be free of modernity is to dissolve the notion of human history, by regaining contact with a nature untouched by history, and, even in modernity's nihilism, implicitly constitutive of human life. But how is this rise above history not to be a Nietzschean turn to the abyss, to the dissolution of humanity and nature altogether?

[6] It is in response to this question that Strauss calls for a return to ancient philosophy, and particularly to Plato, as the necessary way to regain an understanding of nature in its pre-modern sense.⁽²⁴⁾ Strauss is therefore uniting two projects: a correction of the contemporary crisis in political philosophy, and a re-reading of Plato. What allows Strauss the confidence that his re-reading of Plato can be illuminating for contemporary concerns is that Strauss has located an ahistorical nature as both the subject matter of Platonic philosophy and the needful response to contemporary nihilism. However, the Platonism known to the western tradition would ill serve Strauss's purposes. This Platonism, centred on the doctrine of the Ideas, appears implicated in Heidegger's critique of western metaphysics.⁽²⁵⁾ Traditional Platonism, if not directly implicated in modernity, at least cannot be the starting point of a return to nature as envisioned by Strauss-- it seems to transform nature too directly into thought.⁽²⁶⁾ In his commentary on *The Republic*, Strauss writes:

The doctrine of ideas which Socrates expounds to his interlocutors is very hard to understand; to begin with, it is utterly incredible, not to say that it appears to be fantastic...No one has ever succeeded in giving a satisfactory or clear account of this doctrine of ideas.⁽²⁷⁾

[7] To return to nature or rationalism, but in such a way as not to be open to Heidegger's critique, Strauss had to "discover" a Plato without a doctrine of ideas or immortality of the soul,

without metaphysics. A number of commentators on Strauss have pointed out that he came to read Plato in this apparently perverse fashion from his reading of Farabi's commentary on Plato.⁽²⁸⁾ It was also from reading Farabi and other medieval Islamic and Jewish commentators that Strauss stumbled upon the tradition of esoteric/exoteric writing.⁽²⁹⁾ While of course Farabi nowhere states the esoteric view that Plato's doctrine of the ideas and the immortality of the soul are merely exoteric teachings, this can be "discovered" by careful reading premised on the esoteric/exoteric distinction which Strauss also "discovers" in Farabi's writings.⁽³⁰⁾ Strauss has uncovered a Plato that perfectly meets the need of contemporary humanity to regain contact with a phenomenological nature able to be a constitutive source of moral and political life. The difficulties of directly refuting Strauss's hermeneutic may be compared to the difficulties of refuting psychoanalysis; both point to an object only available to those who practice an art which requires as a premise the prior acceptance of the existence of that object--the hidden text or the unconscious mind.⁽³¹⁾ However, by Strauss's own principles, his interpretation of Plato cannot be premised upon a supposed tradition of interpretation, but must be grounded in the texts themselves. At this level, however, Strauss can hardly be said to have demonstrated the exoteric character of the Platonic ideas: rather, he asserts that as a metaphysical standpoint, it is simply incredible.⁽³²⁾

[8] This is not to say that for Strauss Plato's ideas have no reference at all. By contrast, they refer to the "fundamental and permanent problems."⁽³³⁾ Strauss's ahistoricism is an ahistoricism of the permanent problems that structure "the whole" as this appears to the philosopher, and in particular the human part of the whole, "the city."⁽³⁴⁾ Philosophy, in its turn, emerges as an ahistorical pursuit relative to the ideas understood in this sense:

philosophy is knowledge that one does not know; that is to say, it is knowledge of what one does not know, or awareness of the fundamental problems, and, therewith, of the fundamental alternatives regarding their solution that are coeval with human thought.⁽³⁵⁾

The philosophic life, according to Strauss, is fundamentally zetetic, a quest for an understanding of the fundamental problems. But Strauss warns us that to resolve those problems by coming to a determinate solution is necessarily to collapse into dogmatism. The search for wisdom can never become wisdom but only dogmatism:

Yet as long as there is no wisdom but only quest for wisdom, the evidence of all solutions is necessarily smaller than the evidence of the problems. Therefore the philosopher ceases to be a philosopher at the moment at which the "subjective certainty" of a solution becomes stronger than his awareness of the problematic character of that solution.⁽³⁶⁾

The moment that the thinking of the philosopher becomes determinate--that is, becomes one with being--the philosopher collapses into opinion. As we shall see, this problematic belongs to Strauss's whole conception of Platonism. In a preliminary way here it can be seen in Strauss's very formulation of philosophy as the movement between alternatives that determinate thought is opinion: these alternatives are necessarily exclusive, one-sided and given. Metaphysics, and in particular the Platonic ideas as self-constituting realities or as a mediated activity of thinking and

being premised on a unity beyond their distinction, is not even allowed to appear. Strauss presents, as the true Platonism, a Platonism without metaphysics.

[9] In what, then, does Platonism consist for Strauss? Strauss sees the need to turn to classical political philosophy as a whole to be integral to recovering an understanding of nature. Nature, in a pre-modern sense, emerges when the governing opinions of the city come to be questioned and the need arises to come to know the relation of those opinions to an abiding reality, nature.⁽³⁷⁾ Strauss's return to the ancients is premised upon the need for a contemporary recovery of a phenomenological or pre-philosophic awareness. That awareness is the necessary beginning point of philosophy if it is to recover a rationalism that is non-technological.⁽³⁸⁾ In the rise from opinion to knowledge, the philosopher does not emerge as a subjectivity disengaged from nature. Indeed, precisely because the ideas are not metaphysical, causal realities but rather permanent problems, the philosopher can only seek for a knowing he can never attain or master. The method of the philosopher, embodied for Strauss in the life of Socrates, is to ask the "What is...?" questions about human and non-human things.⁽³⁹⁾ In the dialectic of enquiry the natures or essences of these things emerge--not as metaphysical causes, but as phenomenological realities. Out of the questioning of philosophy, nature emerges as a heterogeneity of various natures; the whole consists of different parts.⁽⁴⁰⁾ However, the nature of these natures or parts is itself fundamentally problematic. The philosopher can never grasp the whole in all of its parts; nature can never be a pure object of thought. The Socratic philosopher is defined by knowledge of ignorance.⁽⁴¹⁾ In short, the philosopher never converts phenomenology into metaphysics.

[10] But it is here that Strauss brings out the fundamental problematic of philosophy and the fundamental subject matter of the Platonic dialogues: the relation of the philosopher to the city. For Strauss, the enquiry that looks to human ends, to the question of the good, is an activity destructive of the good of the city. Strauss takes up the Nietzschean view that what holds together forms of human life (cities or cultures) is a certain horizon or opinion that gives significance and moral direction to people's lives. In Strauss's terms, the city is, and must be, closed.⁽⁴²⁾ Here lies the ambivalence in Strauss's concept of nature. The city, the natural community of humans, is sustained by the engagement of its citizens. This engagement is premised upon a belief that the laws of the city are legitimate. For cities that have come to question their foundation and tradition, this legitimacy is premised on notions of justice and right, ultimately grounded in nature. But, for Strauss, no actual city can be just or be in accord with nature. Every city must be conventional, structured by determinate opinions, and thus not open to "the whole."⁽⁴³⁾ Each city must have decided among the various alternatives and in order to retain the engagement of its citizens must by force and persuasion (even to the point of a noble lie), instill the engagement of its citizenry.⁽⁴⁴⁾ There is an irresolvable conflict between the philosopher, the highest type of man who would live in openness to nature as a whole, and the city, which by nature must be closed to nature as a whole. The conflict between the philosopher and the city is at the heart of Strauss's position, and at the heart of his reading of Plato. For Strauss, the Platonic dialogues are not metaphysical but a "psychological" and "sociological" phenomenology of the relation between the philosopher and the city.⁽⁴⁵⁾

[11] In his published writings, Strauss has provided us with analyses of eight Platonic dialogues: *The Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphron*, *Republic*, *Statesman*, *Minos*, and *Laws*.⁽⁴⁶⁾ In each of these commentaries Strauss's procedure is the same: he seeks by a close

reading of the text to bring out the content of the dialogue as an exploration of the vexed relation of philosophy to other aspects of human, and in particular civic, life.⁽⁴⁷⁾ So the dialogues explore the relation of philosophy to religion, poetry, rhetoric, sophistry, legislation, art (techne) and so on. Strauss above all focusses on the figure of Socrates whose life embodies the opposition between civic life and the life of the philosopher, the life dedicated to thought.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Strauss seeks to illuminate the inherently political character of the relation of the various aspects of the city to one another and to philosophy. For Strauss the heterogeneity of nature, most readily evidenced by the heterogeneity of the human, is irreducible and immune to synthesis.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Nonetheless these heterogeneous ends must co-exist in the city--hence the irreducibly "political" character of human existence, the ever-present need to mix force and persuasion, nature and necessity, convention and natural right. Modernity, in its internalizing of the Good, reduces and synthesizes the given ends and so loses sight of Nature as the mysterious source of human aspiration for the Good and an inherent limit to the humanization of that Good. For Strauss, each Platonic dialogue is a necessarily incomplete or abstracted consideration of Nature as it emerges in the interaction of the philosopher with various types of citizens.⁽⁵⁰⁾ The Socratic or Platonic character of the Dialogues for Strauss is revealed in philosophy's turning to a consideration of its conditions in political life: thought knows itself to be beyond political life, beyond opinion, but always connected to political life. In Strauss's reading of Plato this comes out in his distinction between the argument and action of the dialogues. As both dramatic and theoretical, the dialogues present an interplay between thought and life. What distinguishes Strauss's use of this often noted feature of the *Dialogues* is that he seeks to bring out the conflict between, not the mutual relation of, "deeds" and "speeches."⁽⁵¹⁾ In this sense, the "teachings" of the dialogues are never directly present in the "arguments" of the dialogue, but rather are intimated to the careful reader. The *Dialogues* are not works of metaphysical theory, but of the central problematic of human life: that human excellence in general demands a determinate community to sustain the phenomenological activity of moral and political life and yet truth and the pursuit of truth shows this given realm of moral and political activity to be mere opinion. For Strauss, the city is and must remain a "cave" of opinion, in contrast to philosophy's rise above all particular caves into the realm of fundamental problems. Aside from the life of the philosopher, there can be no synthesis of truth and life: modernity's nihilistic result evidences this.

[12] Strauss's reading of Plato as the articulation of philosophy and as an openness to a Nature prior to modernity, has a rather ironic result. In the terms of the traditional, exoteric Plato of the "ideas", this view of Philosophy, far from being an escape from the cave of opinion (to say nothing of the cave below, the cave of modernity) is at best an escape from "images" to a zetetic or skeptical consideration of "things."⁽⁵²⁾ Strauss's philosopher may have loosed his chains, but he remains wandering about the back of the cave. Precisely because for Strauss philosophy is never the attainment of knowledge, but remains searching among alternative teachings, among the permanent problems, there can never be a rise from opinion to knowledge. Certainly "images"--the pre-philosophic opinions of citizens, the phenomena--are resolved into teachings or fundamental alternatives. But because, for Strauss, philosophy is simply the movement between alternatives it can have no content which is not opinion. Thus it belongs to Strauss's vision of philosophy that all determinate thinking is dogmatic. Philosophy as zetetic points to the need for a movement beyond the cave, but Strauss declares dogmatically that this is unattainable. For Strauss the actual uniting of thinking and being in a realm beyond opinion remains impossible. This certainly prevents a rise to "metaphysics" and so leaves the phenomenological

in its integrity, thus avoiding exposure to a Heideggerian critique of metaphysics. However, from a Platonic standpoint, what is remarkable is the capacity of the Straussian philosopher to resist the movement of the thinking of appearance (phenomena) to the thinking of the principle that is the reality of appearance. What explains this resistance to a rise to a thinking and being beyond appearance is that Strauss both assumes and requires of his Plato a thoroughly contemporary phenomenological concreteness. Strauss's ahistorical esoteric hermeneutic appears not so much as a respectful reading of philosophers of the past as they understood themselves, but more as the importing-into ancient texts of contemporary assumptions and concerns.⁽⁵³⁾ The permanent problems then seem to be thoroughly contemporary problems about the place of the good in the face of modern technological subjectivity.

[13] Seen in these terms, Strauss's Platonism appears no longer as a bizarre reading of the *Dialogues*, but as a reflection on moral and political phenomenology that can readily be connected to considerations by thinkers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. While Strauss's position is neither existentialist nor Nietzschean in crucial aspects, nonetheless Strauss does emerge as a contributor to the contemporary phenomenological critique of modernity. Strauss's reading of Plato is rendered systematically distorting by too directly connecting a contemporary problematic to the Platonic texts. Yet, while Strauss's readings cannot be definitive, precisely because they are systematically distorting, they can provide a way into the reading of Plato in a Platonic manner.

Notes

1. "Farabi's Plato" in *Louis Ginzberg : Jubilee Volume* (New York, 1945) 376-7. The following abbreviations will be used for Strauss's various texts: *The City and Man* (1964), *CM*; *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (1989), *CR*; *Natural Right and History* (1953), *NRH*; *On Tyranny* (1991), *OT*; *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952), *PAW*; *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (1983), *SPPP*; *What is Political Philosophy* (1959), *WIPP*; *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (1952), *PPH*; *Philosophy and Law* (1995), *PL*; *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958), *TM*; *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1965), *SCR*; *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (1968), *LAM*; *History of Political Philosophy* (1972), *HPP*; *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity* (1997), *JP*.
2. See M.F. Burnyeat "Sphinx without a Secret" *New York Review of Books* 32:9 (30 May 1985) 30-6.
3. See Catherine Zuckert *Postmodern Platos* (Chicago, 1996), 5.
4. *CM* 1.
5. Strauss criticizes Heidegger in a way comparable to Heidegger's critique of Nietzsche. See "Nietzsche's Word: God is Dead" in Martin Heidegger *The Question Concerning Technology* (New York, 1977) 53-112. In other words, Strauss like Derrida argues that Heidegger has not

sufficiently freed himself from the tradition he critiques. For Derrida Heidegger still shows a continuing relation to presence or, in Strauss's terms, nature. For Strauss, Heidegger rather shares in the modern oblivion of nature. In this respect Strauss, who did not live to encounter deconstruction, would surely have seen it as a hyper-modernism. Consider the discussions of Derrida in Stanley Rosen *Hermeneutics and Politics* (Oxford, 1987) 50-86 and Zuckert, 201-53.

6. See "Relativism" in *CR*, 13-26; *NRH*, 5.

7. See *OT*, 212. Stewart Umphrey "Natural Right and Philosophy" in Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Niggorski eds. *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker* (Lanham, 1994) 287. Umphrey points out that Strauss's notion of Natural Right can be seen to parallel Heidegger's notion of Being.

8. For Strauss as a Nietzschean see Shadia Drury "The Esoteric Philosophy of Leo Strauss" *Political Theory* 13:3 (1985) 315-37 and *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York, 1988); Laurence Lampert *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago, 1996); and Peter Levine *Nietzsche and the Modern Crisis of the Humanities* (Albany, 1995). For Strauss as a Heideggerian see Luc Ferry *Political Philosophy I: Rights--The New Quarrel Between the Ancients and the Moderns*, trans. Franklin Philip (Chicago, 1990).

9. See "The Three Waves of Modernity" in Hilail Gildin ed. *Political Philosophy: Six Essays by Leo Strauss* (Indianapolis, 1975) 81-98; *CR*, 24-6, 27-46.

10. Strauss builds on Carl Schmitt's insight that the crisis of modernity can be seen as the loss of the "political". See *SCR*, 331-51. For an account of the limitations of Strauss's understanding of Heidegger see Ian Lodeman "Historical Sickness: Heidegger and the Role of History in Political Thought" (unpublished, 1998) 1-28.

11. Strauss clearly distinguishes himself from existentialism on a number of occasions: see his letter to Eric Voeglin December 17, 1949 in Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper, eds. *Faith and Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voeglin, 1934-1964* (University Park, 1993) 62-3. To the extent that existentialism is identifiable with Heidegger and Sartre, Strauss is certainly correct. Strauss would not agree that existence precedes essence or that language is the House of Being. In a broader sense, however, where existentialism is identified as a contemporary phenomenism in reaction to technological humanism, Strauss can certainly be identified as existentialist.

12. Strauss tries to develop a middle ground between modern objectivity and existential engagement--what could be called the sphere of objective engagement, the sphere of institutions and roles. Strauss makes this critique of existentialist terminology: "When speaking about someone with whom I have a close relation I call him my friend. I do not call him my Thou. Adequate 'speaking about' in analytical or objective speech must be grounded in and continue the manner of 'speaking about' which is inherent in human life." *WIPP*, 29.

13. The "secret" teaching of Strauss is that in fact only the life of the philosopher has inherent worth or is good by nature. The city derives its worth a) hiddenly but truly, as the condition for

philosophy; b) openly but falsely, by convincing its citizens that partial or conditional virtues, are intrinsically good. See Zuckert, 111-115.

14. For Strauss, the philosopher's encounter with nature is more primordial or fundamental than that of the citizen., but in this it parallels the relation of authenticity to everydayness in Heidegger's account of *dasein*.

15. Strauss does not see language as the House of Being; rather he sees opinion as the place of contact with nature. Strauss's writings are, then, a testing or interplay of opinions that seeks out of this interplay or dialectic to bring forth the nature of things, or at least the fundamental alternatives. As shall be suggested below, Strauss's rationalism and anti-existentialism do not mean that his position is not deeply rooted in a phenomenology that could be called existential in a broader sense of the term.

16. *WIPP*, 40.

17. See "Three Waves", 96.

18. *PPH* 170

19. *SCR* 336 and *CM* 43-4.

20. *PL* 135-6.

21. *PL* 136.

22. *SCR*, 336.

23. See Charles Taylor *Sources of the Self* (Harvard, 1989) 91-107. Taylor, in contrast to Strauss, argues for the possibility of constitutive goods within modern subjectivity. See Taylor *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto, 1994).

24. Robert Pippin "The Modern World of Leo Strauss" in P.G. Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes and Elizabeth Glaser-Schmidt eds. *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss* (Cambridge, 1995) 139-60, 152 points out that Strauss's turn to the ancient Greek polity as somehow originary in a way that parallels Heidegger's turn to *pragmata* is problematic at best.

25. See *NRH* 30-1.

26. Strauss's critique of the doctrine of Ideas is primarily of their "separateness": see *CM* 119-20 and *OT* 292.

27. *CM* 119.

28. Zuckert 5 and *FP* 364, 371, 376.

29. *PAW*, 8; *JP* 463.

30. Alfons Sölner "Leo Strauss: German Origin and American Impact" in Kielmansegg et al. 121-137, 126 points to Strauss's use of the esoteric/exoteric distinction as a parallel to Heidegger's use of etymology. Both methods allow the interpreter to "discover" a contemporary concern in ancient texts. Strauss reads every text as "dialogic", involving both argument and action.

31. One could readily build up a set of parallels between Freudian psychoanalysis and Straussian careful reading, with this difference: that the hidden object in Strauss is a conscious construction, whereas in Freud it is an unconscious construction.

32. See *HPP*, 44.

33. *WIPP* 39.

34. See *WIPP* 229; *NRH* 24, 32-3. Because for Strauss the ideas are "problems" they are necessarily understood as being *for* the philosopher (they are surely not problems in themselves) and not as self-subsisting realities or causes in a metaphysical sense. In short, Strauss sees the ideas as phenomenological realities for the philosopher who encounters them. See *HPP*, 50-1.

35. *NRH* 32

36. *OT* 196

37. *NRH*, 83-93.

38. *WIPP*, 86.

39. *CM*, 19.

40. *CM*, 19; *CR*, 141-2; *WIPP*, 39-40.

41. *CM*, 20-1; *WIPP*, 38-9.

42. It is a nice question to ask why for Strauss the city must be closed. As Peter Levine argues, Strauss shares with Nietzsche the conviction that to escape modern technological humanism requires a rise above historical life into a realm beyond horizons. The capacity to "escape" history depends upon a phenomenology of identity as premised upon horizon construction in the face of an unliveable or unthinkable 'reality.' An alternative phenomenology of identity, which Levine relates to humanism, is a phenomenology of practices. Here there can be no standpoint beyond historical life; positions only develop within history. It is this latter phenomenology that Taylor and MacIntyre develop.

43. *WIPP*, 227.

44. *CM*, 102.

45. *RCPR* 179-80 and *PAW* 21. It belongs to Strauss's conception of philosophy that it is incommunicable. As zetetic, it can not be reduced to a teaching. The writings of philosophers are then, not philosophy but ways of both considering and influencing the conditions of philosophy: the relation of philosophy to the city. In short, Strauss posits philosophy as an absolute activity, the only inherently worthy or good human activity, but gives it no content: it is a mania. See *JP*, 463 and the useful discussion in Zuckert, 121-8.

46. Commentaries of *The Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, are in *SPPP*, 38-88; *Eutypron*, in *CR*, 187-206; *Republic* in *CM* 50-138 and with *Statesman* and *Laws* in *HPP* 7-63; *Laws* in *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws* (1975); *Minos* in *LAM*, 65-75.

47. Strauss makes clear that philosophy is inherently theoretic and not reducible to a) serving the moral and political needs of the city; b) reflecting only upon the human things. The life of the philosopher is self-sufficient and so centrally "apart" from the city. But for Strauss, Platonic philosophy is crucially Socratic in enriching the pre-socratic conception of nature to include human things. This enrichment is brought about through philosophy's consideration of its own conditions. Pre-socratic philosophy tended to a materialistic homogeneous conception of nature: Socrates brings to light the ineliminably heterogeneous character of human ends. Philosophy becomes a never complete effort to hold together without reduction heterogeneity and homogeneity. In this sense philosophy itself both includes and transcends the city. However, this zetetic activity is never directly the subject of philosophic writings: it can only be intimated to those capable of it. The *Dialogues* are therefore never directly philosophic. See *WIPP*, 39-40 and Zuckert 116-8.

48. Strauss explores the figure of Socrates not only as he is presented by Plato, but also by Aristophanes and Xenophon. A good beginning point for gaining a sense of Strauss's view of Socrates in this wider context is "The Problem of Socrates: Five Lectures" in *CR*, 103-183.

49. *WIPP*, 39-40.

50. *CM*, 50-63

51. *CM*, 61-2.

52. See *Republic*, 509d-510b.

53. This is, of course, contrary to Strauss's intention: see "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy" *Social Research* 13:3 (1946) 326-67.

Leo Strauss' Philosophy of Deception

By Jim Lobe, [AlterNet](#)

May 19, 2003

What would you do if you wanted to topple Saddam Hussein, but your intelligence agencies couldn't find the evidence to justify a war?

A follower of Leo Strauss may just hire the "right" kind of men to get the job done – people with the intellect, acuity, and, if necessary, the political commitment, polemical skills, and, above all, the imagination to find the evidence that career intelligence officers could not detect.

The "right" man for Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, suggests Seymour Hersh in his recent New Yorker article entitled 'Selective Intelligence,' was Abram Shulsky, director of the Office of Special Plans (OSP) – an agency created specifically to find the evidence of WMDs and/or links with Al Qaeda, piece it together, and clinch the case for the invasion of Iraq.

Like Wolfowitz, Shulsky is a student of an obscure German Jewish political philosopher named Leo Strauss who arrived in the United States in 1938. Strauss taught at several major universities, including Wolfowitz and Shulsky's alma mater, the University of Chicago, before his death in 1973.

Strauss is a popular figure among the neoconservatives. Adherents of his ideas include prominent figures both within and outside the administration. They include 'Weekly Standard' editor William Kristol; his father and indeed the godfather of the neoconservative movement, Irving Kristol; the new Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, Stephen Cambone, a number of senior fellows at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) (home to former Defense Policy Board chairman Richard Perle and Lynne Cheney), and Gary Schmitt, the director of the influential Project for the New American Century (PNAC), which is chaired by Kristol the Younger.

Strauss' philosophy is hardly incidental to the strategy and mindset adopted by these men – as is obvious in Shulsky's 1999 essay titled "Leo Strauss and the World of Intelligence (By Which We Do Not Mean Nous)" (in Greek philosophy the term *nous* denotes the highest form of rationality). As Hersh notes in his article, Shulsky and his co-author Schmitt "criticize America's intelligence community for its failure to appreciate the duplicitous nature of the regimes it deals with, its susceptibility to social-science notions of proof, and its inability to cope with deliberate concealment." They argued that Strauss's idea of hidden meaning, "alerts one to the possibility that political life may be closely linked to deception. Indeed, it suggests that deception is the norm in political life, and the hope, to say nothing of the expectation, of establishing a politics that can dispense with it is the exception."

Rule One: Deception

It's hardly surprising then why Strauss is so popular in an administration obsessed with secrecy, especially when it comes to matters of foreign policy. Not only did Strauss have few qualms about using deception in politics, he saw it as a necessity. While professing deep respect for American democracy, Strauss believed that societies should be hierarchical – divided between an elite who should lead, and the masses who should follow. But unlike fellow elitists like Plato, he

was less concerned with the moral character of these leaders. According to Shadia Drury, who teaches politics at the University of Calgary, Strauss believed that "those who are fit to rule are those who realize there is no morality and that there is only one natural right – the right of the superior to rule over the inferior."

This dichotomy requires "perpetual deception" between the rulers and the ruled, according to Drury. Robert Locke, another Strauss analyst says, "The people are told what they need to know and no more." While the elite few are capable of absorbing the absence of any moral truth, Strauss thought, the masses could not cope. If exposed to the absence of absolute truth, they would quickly fall into nihilism or anarchy, according to Drury, author of 'Leo Strauss and the American Right' (St. Martin's 1999).

Second Principle: Power of Religion

According to Drury, Strauss had a "huge contempt" for secular democracy. Nazism, he believed, was a nihilistic reaction to the irreligious and liberal nature of the Weimar Republic. Among other neoconservatives, Irving Kristol has long argued for a much greater role for religion in the public sphere, even suggesting that the Founding Fathers of the American Republic made a major mistake by insisting on the separation of church and state. And why? Because Strauss viewed religion as absolutely essential in order to impose moral law on the masses who otherwise would be out of control.

At the same time, he stressed that religion was for the masses alone; the rulers need not be bound by it. Indeed, it would be absurd if they were, since the truths proclaimed by religion were "a pious fraud." As Ronald Bailey, science correspondent for Reason magazine points out, "Neoconservatives are pro-religion even though they themselves may not be believers."

"Secular society in their view is the worst possible thing," Drury says, because it leads to individualism, liberalism, and relativism, precisely those traits that may promote dissent that in turn could dangerously weaken society's ability to cope with external threats. Bailey argues that it is this firm belief in the political utility of religion as an "opiate of the masses" that helps explain why secular Jews like Kristol in 'Commentary' magazine and other neoconservative journals have allied themselves with the Christian Right and even taken on Darwin's theory of evolution.

Third Principle: Aggressive Nationalism

Like Thomas Hobbes, Strauss believed that the inherently aggressive nature of human beings could only be restrained by a powerful nationalistic state. "Because mankind is intrinsically wicked, he has to be governed," he once wrote. "Such governance can only be established, however, when men are united – and they can only be united against other people."

Not surprisingly, Strauss' attitude toward foreign policy was distinctly Machiavellian. "Strauss thinks that a political order can be stable only if it is united by an external threat," Drury wrote in her book. "Following Machiavelli, he maintained that if no external threat exists then *one has to be manufactured* (emphases added)."

"Perpetual war, not perpetual peace, is what Straussians believe in," says Drury. The idea easily translates into, in her words, an "aggressive, belligerent foreign policy," of the kind that has been advocated by neocon groups like PNAC and AEI scholars – not to mention Wolfowitz and other administration hawks who have called for a world order dominated by U.S. military power. Strauss' neoconservative students see foreign policy as a means to fulfill a "national destiny" – as Irving Kristol defined it already in 1983 – that goes far beyond the narrow confines of a "myopic national security."

As to what a Straussian world order might look like, the analogy was best captured by the philosopher himself in one of his – and student Allen Bloom's – many allusions to Gulliver's Travels. In Drury's words, "When Lilliput was on fire, Gulliver urinated over the city, including the palace. In so doing, he saved all of Lilliput from catastrophe, but the Lilliputians were outraged and appalled by such a show of disrespect."

The image encapsulates the neoconservative vision of the United States' relationship with the rest of the world – as well as the relationship between their relationship as a ruling elite with the masses. "They really have no use for liberalism and democracy, but they're conquering the world in the name of liberalism and democracy," Drury says.

Jim Lobe writes on foreign policy for Alternet. His work has also appeared on Foreign Policy In Focus and TomPaine.com.