

Toward Strauss's Intention and Teaching in *Natural Right and History*

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The very character of *Natural Right and History* is controversial. As noted in the introduction to this volume, it is obvious to any reader that the historical studies that compose *Natural Right and History* do not represent conventional historical scholarship. But it is also obvious to any reader that most of the book indeed comprises historical studies. To state the terms of the controversy directly, it will suffice to raise a few questions: What was Leo Strauss's understanding of historical scholarship? And how did Strauss understand the relation between a historical study and a philosophical study? Since the philosophical study of historical thinkers implies a philosophical engagement with them, the difference between the claims that Strauss reveals his own teaching in *Natural Right and History* and that the book is a collection of historical studies is probably no more than a nuance—but it is an important nuance nonetheless.

The short answer to this difficult question is probably as follows: according to Strauss, a historical study conducted in a nonhistoricist vein must assume, as a starting point, that it is approaching the views of an earlier author as the “true doctrine” which, so to speak, must “answer back,” that is, must meet our refutations and objections. That is how we learn from a philosopher. A thorough treatment of this point was perhaps never articulated as clearly by Strauss as in his 1941 lecture on historicism, in which he developed the following arguments: (1) The movement to replace philosophy by history, that is, “the tendency on the part of philosophers to devote their attention to the past or to the present or to the future rather than to what is always or the eternal” is impoverishing and hence undesirable—what once was a liberating force is now “a blinder, for it has become a prejudice itself.” According to Strauss's understanding, the study of a doctrine should counteract the conflation of history and philosophy, the reduction of philosophy to history. (2) The examination of some, if not all, forgotten philosophical questions requires us to engage in historical studies, “for

there does not exist any longer any significant philosophic position which is not tinged by historicism"; "as matters stand today, in our time, one is unable to elaborate, and to answer, a fundamental philosophic question without actually becoming a historian of philosophy," but this connection between philosophy and history is accidental and not necessary. (3) To be true to a philosophical doctrine, one must consider it possible that it is or may be "the true doctrine; one must familiarize oneself with the outlook of the author by practicing it," which is to say that "one has not understood an author of the past as long as one does not know from intimate knowledge how he would have reacted to our modern refutations of his doctrine." (4) This familiarity and real engagement are far more important than, say, the impossible rules of an "exact" historian. These rules can be ignored if they constitute an obstacle to the search for the truth. Strauss's expositions in *Natural Right and History* of Plato, Locke, or Rousseau, for example, ignore some of these putative rules: that a historical period "must not be judged by standards alien to it"; that an adequate interpretation is not the ultimate goal but rather "the indispensable prerequisite for judgment or explanation" by other factors; that any claims about an earlier author "are ultimately borne out by explicit statements of the author himself,"¹ taken at face value; and that no terminology "must be used in the interpretation of an author which cannot be literally translated into the language of the author, and which has not been used by the author himself or which was not in fairly common use in his time."

Natural Right and History is not only a collection of historical studies. It has a subtext suggested with "pedagogical reserve"; Strauss presents, for instance, his own view of justice, his unique "philosophical anthropology" based on a conception of human nature capable of dismissing "pseudo-human sciences" that explain man by subhuman factors, an original solution to the Humean-Kantian problem of the absolute separation of facts and values, and an exposition of the relation between reason and revelation. Further, it conveys Leo Strauss's view of the most important philosophical problem of our time, and the only political concept which is certainly of philosophical origin, i.e., natural right. If the approach suggested here is correct, *Natural Right and History* includes a defense of philosophy within a historical-political framework, and this framework sheds light on political teaching and on philosophical teaching proper. This afterword will merely underline the coherence of the whole book and point to some questions clarified by these early drafts. Considering how soon after his departure

from the New School Strauss delivered the Walgreen Lectures, in the fall of 1949, it is hardly surprising to find that most if not all of his distinctive philosophical stances had already taken shape a long time before his arrival at the University of Chicago; indeed, these had been developed in his courses and writings as far back as 1937. In spite of—or even because of—Strauss's surprising attention to “great books” of metaphysics or anthropology on which he commented, such as *De Anima* or *The Passions of the Soul*, among others, the philosophical positions he articulated during the New York period are represented not only in the 1953 book but also (often more fully) in many of his later writings. In particular, there is evidence in *Natural Right and History* of his reading of Plato's *Republic* as an ancient experiment in utopianism, which Plato devised as if he were “organizing an insane asylum,” yet which has more than antiquarian interest because as “genuine political philosophy” it aims essentially at “reminding us of the limits set to all human hopes and wishes.”² There is also evidence in the writings of the New School period of his polemical treatment of modern philosophy, from Machiavelli to Locke and Hobbes or Rousseau, as presenting an alternative “historical” account to the biblical account of the origins of society. The same could be said of his view of political philosophy as the “eccentric core” of philosophy, or of the quarrel between philosophy and poetry or between philosophy and revelation. But no insights about *Natural Right and History* or these later texts should assume that they represent Strauss' general stance or his final view, considering how restless a philosopher Strauss was, always ready to start his inquiries anew. It is more prudent to limit the scope of this brief summary to the controversies surrounding the 1953 book's origins.

Strauss's Intention in *Natural Right and History*

It is therefore time to venture an interpretation of Strauss's intention and the main teachings in *Natural Right and History*. Is *Natural Right and History* an apology for philosophy or is it primarily moral and political in its intention?³ One would do well to begin with the most obvious markers Strauss has given about the intention of a philosopher writing a book. One such indication is commonsensical: “An author may reveal his intention by the titles of his books,” and subordinately, by their chapter headings as well, “which occupy an intermediate position between the titles of the books and their substance.”⁴ Even the rhetorical force of the introduction to the 1953 book is significant. It is significant because Strauss says elsewhere that

while reading an author, even the “most obvious and explicit, if initial and provisional statement concerning his intention guides us towards the adequate understanding of his intention, provided ‘we put 2 and 2 together’ or do some thinking on our own.”⁵ The title mentions not only “Natural Right” but also “History.”

Strauss faces the stark possibility that historicism’s contention—all is historical, there are no permanent problems—is a “deadly truth,” as Tanguay says. The courage to face this truth cannot be reduced to, or even based on, a “moral condemnation.” Instead Strauss proposes presenting historicism’s arguments as honestly and as strongly as possible as well as critically examining its philosophical assumptions, because historicism leads to the denial of the possibility of philosophy.

Nonetheless, in addition to the threat that historicism poses to philosophy Strauss also stresses that the moral and political consequences of forgetting natural right can be disastrous; that without natural right “life would be impossible,” or at least that the decent life which free societies take for granted would be impossible. The confrontation between the authority of History and natural right appears to be the essential theme of the book, as revealed by the title, whose words contain “*Natural Right*” first—and not only “History.”

Consequently, while some have emphasized a philosophical teaching in *Natural Right and History*, assigning only secondary importance to its moral and political intention, others have proposed just the opposite. Both are plausible on the basis of the author’s explicit statements and subtle hints. These differences, however, seem to have deeper roots that point to the fundamental intention of the 1949 Walgreen Lectures. A third way, pursued here, is to approach the book as a very compressed summary of Strauss’s philosophical teaching within a historical framework that also puts forward part of his political teaching. In this interpretation Strauss is not unlike Plato, who also presented his deepest apology for philosophy as a way of life in a political setting.

This volume takes these texts as supplements to the version he chose to make public in 1953, and no interpretation of *Natural Right and History* should discard the “paradoxes” that pervade the book, as pointed out in the introduction to the volume, unless Strauss’s own standards are abandoned. The book should be read as one of the “works of those thinkers who were exceedingly careful writers, who were so careful that, so to speak, not a single word occurs in their works which is not full of significance.”⁶ Strauss’s

own “exoteric” writing or “pedagogical reserve”⁷⁷ should not, however, be insurmountable.

Let me articulate the three key points that these texts and essays add to the understanding of Strauss’s intention and teaching in his Walgreen Lectures. Pervading all these earlier essays in this volume and all “historical” studies in the 1953 book, we find these constants: (1) He navigates between the Scylla of Kantian-style justifications of morality or justice as a set of universal principles or rules—that are either dependent on divine revelation or the residues of morality based on revealed religion—and the Charybdis of altogether denying natural right in the face of eternally mutable answers to specific historical situations; (2) he puts forward the view that human “morality” at its noblest can flourish only in the best political settings; (3) he gives a glimpse of the core of his philosophical teaching, based on the notion of nature and science as presented to man.

Strauss’s Negative Political Teaching: The Status of the Rights of Man

Let me try first a negative approach, since it is often easier to describe something by tracing its boundaries from the outside. In fact, familiarity breeds habituation among Straussian scholars, while a liberal finds himself in uncharted territory (to avoid any misunderstanding: I am one myself, trying to grasp Strauss’s thought in the 1953 book in the current idiom of someone versed in liberal political science). After all, we need to separate ourselves from the object of our attention, which comes with a price, in order to see the overall picture. This interpretation therefore begins by examining what Strauss’s political teaching is *not*.

Today, “theories of justice” are the center of attention. Take, for instance, the conceptions of justice that Strauss discards. Note: I speak of “justice” because Strauss himself states that “if one understands the idea of justice in a precise sense, in the sense of Plato or that of Kant, it is identical at least for all practical purposes with natural right.”⁷⁸

Why then is Kantianism discarded? Strauss barely mentions Kant in the book,⁹ but it is clear that although Kant addresses the same problem, Strauss thinks that his proposal, according to which morality is identified with or reduced to a “good intention,” is very weak. Now, in Kantian terms, justice is based on the respect for man *qua* man, based on “the infinite value of the individual soul,”¹⁰ such as taking man as an end in himself, or shaping

individual behavior based on rules deemed universal. Moral motivation, according to Kant and all of Rawls's heirs, should exclude any reference to passions or pleasure in order to be qualified as truly "moral."¹¹

Nor can a just ordering of society rest solely in "institutions." As Strauss recalls, "[t]he sternest moral philosopher of modern times, Kant, protested against the view that the right political order would presuppose a nation of *angels*: no, he says, the right political order can be established in a nation of *devils* provided they have sense."¹²

One might, therefore, observe the additional weakness of Kantian constructivism: "modern utopianism naturally forgets the existence of the 'forces of evil' and the fact that these forces cannot be fought successfully by enlightenment."¹³ As he asserts, "at least some people want more: power, precedence, dominion. And these dangerous people, even if few in number, are able to counteract the whole effort of enlightenment by employing various devices, which sometimes are more effectual than the quiet voice of enlightening reason."¹⁴

He apparently dismisses (through Aristotle's voice) the attempts to combine in a set of rules what is by nature just in a precise sense. Kant and Kantians of any brand—including Rawls and his heirs—are today by far the most influential proponents of a morality based on universal rules or principles. Strauss acknowledges that there are some principles of justice that apply to man as man, say, to Robinson Crusoe facing Friday—that is, a man on a desert island—such as basic principles of commutative and distributive justice *in the absence of human laws*. He points out some that Aristotle mentions: "Naturally right therefore are the equality of the price of a thing with the value of the labor and expense of the producer of the thing; or the proper proportion between crime and punishment."¹⁵

Nonetheless, ethics by rules can be grounded only on a view of human nature that is mere "basic nature,"¹⁶ and these rules are in fact universal or "almost" universal. But even basic rules such as "the prohibition against murder, theft, etc."¹⁷ are not in fact rules but "just determinations of given cases . . . based exclusively on principles of either commutative or distributive justice."¹⁸

Nor, according to Strauss, is natural right defined by "social cohesion and durability,"¹⁹ a standard that may not be very different from the mere morality of a gang of robbers—if there is honor among thieves, that is.

However necessary for life in society "in normal circumstances," all rules of natural right still lack universality except as an intuition of the prephilo-

sophical idea of divine law, or as part of a revealed theology as in Aquinas. While Strauss asserts that he prefers such a notion of natural right to the historicist or positivist alternatives,²⁰ if taken as an inflexible set of rules natural law has two important flaws. On the one hand, it makes natural right dependent on revelation, while natural right is purported to be more accessible than natural theology. On the other hand, such inflexibility hampers the latitude of statesmen, who eventually discard ethical principles as naïve; and once rules have been dismissed by politically minded men, it leads to Machiavelli's position, a cure that proves worse than the disease.²¹ Furthermore, the inflexibility of any set of rules eventually becomes inconsistent, because rules cannot predict every circumstance in which action or inaction occurs. Even Aquinas has recourse to divine exemptions.

Conspicuously absent in Strauss's acknowledged forms of justice is also the notion that the principles of justice should be based on the (subjective) rights of man or on the expression of "individuality." According to Strauss the most significant characteristic of modern natural right is that it identifies the goal of government as the protection of man's rights rather than the cultivation of his duties.

Basing justice on self-interest, that is, utilitarianism, is equally futile: "One merely evades the issue [of the principles of justice] if one says that our translegal standards are expediency or utility,"²² for utility may favor some and yet harm others—and curiously this remark seems to settle the issue.

Nor is justice merely an "ideal" of our society that cannot serve as the foundation of duty. So what, then, may serve as this foundation?

Strauss's Positive Political Teaching: "Morality" and Polity

To attempt to fill in the content of Strauss's political teaching, one could begin by saying that Strauss upholds both in these texts and in the *Walgreen Lectures* that philosophy is able to show what is good for man by nature and it can even establish a hierarchy of these goods: external goods, goods for the body, and goods for the soul—that is, as concerns individuals. But Strauss also teaches that the real basis of what is by nature just is, paradoxically, presented by the ancients in the form of the "best regime," that is, in political life.

Most moral and political thinkers today, on the other hand, tend to think that ethics should be more permanent or universal than regimes.²³ Today,

“[t]he central significance of the phenomena called ‘regimes’ has become somewhat blurred.”²⁴ Strauss argues that only with Christianity and egalitarian natural right does the problem of the best regime “lose its crucial significance.”²⁵ According to him, “[t]he best regime as the classics understood it ceases to be identical with the perfect moral order.”²⁶ And this is the understanding he is trying to retrieve.

However peculiar, this proposal is certainly rich in consequences and deserves careful consideration even by someone versed in liberal political science. In a political setting, ethics takes a very different shape. Political authority is not an artificial construct or “social contract,” purportedly established to assure a set of individual rights, but a deep human necessity. Only in a polity can one find the full density of human life and therefore of ethics.

Outside a polity, in fact, moral law can be no more than a law of reason or a framework for the codes of law.²⁷ Even in the simplest of societies, some customs or law enforcement would soon prove to be necessary, so everywhere murder is outlawed and theft condemned as destructive.²⁸ Such “basic” ethical rules are a far cry from a “gentleman’s” ethics: a man of great heart, so to speak, does not limit himself to abiding by the law; he is generous, magnificent, and patriotic, that is, he contributes with his best efforts to the flourishing of the city, takes up arms to defend the polity, and cultivates all forms of human excellence or virtue.

The gentleman’s magnanimity or citizens’ “moral virtues” do not yet constitute a philosophical ethics; rather they are a mere image or a popular morality, because to keep their compelling force they must go unquestioned. The discovery of nature by the first conventionalists was unfortunate for the *polis* and destructive to society. Questioning casts doubt on the naturalness of the polity and jeopardizes all forms of human allegiance and all human bonds, even or especially the most apparently sacred ones, such as family ties, property, or the sacredness of the inherited lot—the rationale behind the biblical epigraphs in the 1953 book.

According to yet another lecture in this volume, a philosopher, once the idea of nature has been discovered, can no longer ignore the fundamental difference between nature and convention. Strauss supports the ancients in the idea that ethical behavior is based naturally on “awe.”²⁹ Nature has a power in itself: if you expel nature with a hayfork, it returns with a vengeance.³⁰ But the discovery of nature changed everything: “philosophy is *the* anti-traditional force; the liberation from the opinions of the past,

the opening up of new vistas is, and always has been, of the essence of philosophy.”³¹

Conventionalist philosophers share with the proponents of natural right the belief that nature is a higher standard than convention, but err in thinking that the sole human principle of human good is pleasure.³² The ancients, however, did not stop at conventionalism. Conventionalists were confronted with classic natural right proponents. In these lectures Strauss considers the list of the goods derived from the classical tradition (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle), supplemented by the biblical virtues of mercy and humility, to be a fundamentally sound guide.

If ethics takes its shape in a political setting, however, man’s duties to his fellow citizen cannot be extended to all humanity without the loss of their moral weight.³³ Certainly no hierarchy of goods suffices to make wise decision about the here and now.

In the 1953 book, Strauss returns, after presenting the common features of classic natural right, to the different branches of classic natural right to address this issue. Only in its Socratic-Platonic-Stoic version is one confronted with the true demands of natural right or justice: every man should receive what is good for him, which implies that any actual distribution of property or family bonds is partly based on convention. Undiluted natural right, in its extreme form, implies the abolition of irrelevant differences between man and woman, the abolition of the family and all property rights, etc.; and the resulting social standard would lead to the absolute rule of the wise over the unwise many.

Now such perfect justice as designed by infinitely “generous men” would face the opposition of the many and the indifference of the wise. The principles of justice must therefore, in practice, be objects of compromise or dilution, and they imply a mixture of wisdom and consent, which will lead to the mixed regime.

The Historical Framework: Lessons from the Ancients

As mentioned before in this volume, even the ancients who upheld natural right against the conventionalists thought that natural right in its undiluted form was an insufficient guide to political action. The hierarchy of goods for man, the right proportion of which remains a problem, must be sometimes bracketed with a superior principle, namely, the common good of the pol-

ity. The existence of the polity is a necessary condition for the flourishing of human excellence, which cannot exist in a void, for as Strauss says, “[i]n order to reach his highest stature, man must live in the best kind of society, in the kind of society that is most conducive to human excellence. The classics called the best society the best *politeia*.” The best life is possible only in the best polity.³⁴ “Polity”—a word that Strauss used in his teaching as a synonym for the ancient *polis*—may perhaps today take the form of the nation that allows both freedom and civilization. At the heart of Leo Strauss’s concern about the problem of natural right since 1931 is the purpose of the modern state as opposed to the ancient *polis*.³⁵

Starting in the early 1940s, Strauss upheld that the best regime is “utopian” but not in the modern sense:³⁶ the ancients upheld the best regime, whose goal was fostering human virtue or excellence, as a standard. Modern utopianism assumes that human nature is infinitely flexible. Modern utopianism requires a “new man,” since those currently in existence resist fitting into the model. There is room for a legitimate utopianism, which is the very heart of the philosophy of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and is not “pie in the sky” but a standard by which to measure or perfect all existing regimes. The fundamental lesson that Strauss derives from the ancients is, therefore, that their legitimate utopianism is the best cure for political idealism: if you seek perfect justice, what you get is not the best regime but a true nightmare.

Why such a sharp contrast between these two forms of utopianism? The “legitimate utopianism” of Plato and Aristotle’s philosophy differs from the modern kind because the ancients did not expect that a perfect society could be achieved *by political means*. That a prudent statesman would design sensible policies without obvious recourse to political philosophy is of course not unthinkable—almost all political ideas or words have their origin in common sense or in political life, but philosophy becomes politically useful when “political truth” is clouded by erroneous teachings. It is then necessary as a kind of apologetic that protects political action from the “infinitely more generous” utopian illusions about human nature by recalling the “limits of all human hopes and desires.”³⁷

Despite any apparent “shortcomings” on the part of Aristotle,³⁸ the common features among the ancients are by far more important than their differences, because it is nowadays more urgent to reinstate political philosophy as the queen of the social sciences than to settle the question of the relative importance of philosophy and religion.³⁹ Every one of the classic

trio (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle) had this in common, even Plato: they took their bearings from the perfection of human nature, or man's *telos*, and not from the basic nature of man, or from man as he mostly is. Since the conventionalists conflated human nature with hedonism, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle fought them in hedonistic terms, but that was not the core of their vision: they pointed to the ceiling or to human excellence.

A vision of man and man's nature is indeed the basis of classic natural right as a whole,⁴⁰ which in fact takes its bearings from what man may be at his best. But the Platonic teaching that points more clearly beyond the city to the philosophical life is superior because it supports the not unproblematic return of the philosopher to man's "cave," despite acknowledging the partially conventional nature of the *polis* and its laws. Strauss supports Socrates and Plato's presentation—to which he adds Stoic teaching—because only such a presentation addresses properly the objection of the conventionalists that the city exists by convention and not by nature, while Aristotle attempts to justify the *polis* by nature.

Since philosophy implies questioning, the philosopher must question (and thereby endanger) this ideal, only later to return to the "cave" of the city in a more thoughtful state of mind. In fact, Strauss consistently encouraged, albeit in a way that was no longer unquestioned and naïve, allegiance to home and country—yet without dismissing the tension between philosophy and the city.

This reading of Strauss's thought, conveyed by the "historical" studies in *Natural Right and History*, anticipated by the essays in this volume, assumes that he ultimately identified himself with the classical proposal, and Plato in particular, having dismissed the more generous modern utopianism. Political philosophy is absolutely necessary⁴¹ as a cure for political idealism, that is, to clearly point out the limits to changing political life through political means.

In short, the role of political philosophy in the modern view is very different from that of the Socratics and their classical and medieval followers which Strauss endorses:

[T]raditional political philosophy, or moral philosophy, frequently took on the form of exhortation, or moral advice. For if you do not believe that the perfect condition can be brought about by political action, you cannot hope for more than that one or the other of those in power might be induced, by moral appeal, by advice, by exhortations, by *sermons*, to do his best in

his station along the lines of decency and humanity. This approach was underlying one special genre of political literature in particular, the mirrors of princes.⁴²

Fostering human flourishing within the darkness of the cave that is political society but in the light of the superior standard represented by nature, and at the same time maintaining the decent standards seemingly inherent in the bonds of affection that exist between fellow citizens, was the way of Socratic-Platonic political philosophy. In that it does not prevent philosophical questioning, maintaining the bonds between humans is a truer account of political life than fostering human excellence or virtue as mere moral virtues by habituation, which was the way of Aristotelian political philosophy. However, despite Aristotle's sober approach, any considerations of the philosophers about the best regime can be incorporated in the polity only through some dilution or compromise of the standards of man's nature at its best.⁴³

The Historical Framework: Lessons from the Moderns

Now, even if the classics take center stage in *Natural Right and History*, one should not hastily dismiss Strauss's approach to modern philosophy as the mere presentation of the history of the decadence of ancient philosophy. There is no doubt that some kind of decay in fact took place in the modern development: "The founding fathers of modern philosophy, while being no doubt genuine philosophers, conceived of philosophy in such a way that a degeneration of philosophic thought became unavoidable." But there is much to learn from the modern venture.

The moderns in fact take up the second half of the 1953 book, where Strauss sketches the history of the modern rights of man. But both here and in the earlier (1946) lecture, he rejects the idea that modern natural right theory, a product of the seventeenth century, was radical in its secularization; for—as he recalls—the independence of natural right from theology was denied neither by ancient philosophers nor by medieval ones. Nonetheless, traditional conceptions of natural right were essentially conservative while modern ones were essentially revolutionary.

There is nonetheless a negative lesson to be learned from the moderns' ultimate failure:

By erecting the proud edifice of modern civilization, and by living within that comfortable building for some generations, many people seem to have forgotten the natural foundations, not dependent on human will and not changeable, which are buried deep in the ground and which set a limit to the possible height of the building.⁴⁴

Modern philosophy is philosophy nonetheless. If the question of the ancients and the moderns is still “a *question*,” according to Strauss it follows that we cannot take either answer for granted. The modern solution was not a small feat and was successful for a long time (at a price); and it is still Hobbes who provides the best argument for democracy to Strauss. Hobbes is the originator of modern philosophy, which is based in a “historical” account alternative to the biblical account of the origins of society. Strauss’s final note in the last text in this volume avers that the character of modern natural right is related to its conception of the state of nature: whereas, for Plato and Aristotle, human nature is defined in reference to human perfection, modern political theorists define human nature in terms of the naturally possessed—basic or universal—traits of man. The latter conception obviously lends itself to setting a more easily achievable political goal, or at the least it so seemed to them, as to most contemporary liberals.⁴⁵

Moreover, as he avers in 1949,

Today natural right is frequently rejected as reactionary. In the 19th century natural right was rejected by continental reactionaries as revolutionary . . . [but] natural right is and always has been revolutionary in the most fundamental sense . . . For this reason, we were forced to pay some attention to the tremendous effort that was required so that the very idea of natural right could emerge.⁴⁶

Which leads to the core of his philosophical teaching in *Natural Right and History*: the idea of nature and science as seen by man.

The Philosophical Teaching in *Natural Right and History*

Natural Right and History unwinds as a compelling narrative of political thought that should be read as an apology for the philosophical life within a

political-historical framework. While it is the case that Strauss wrote a history of political philosophy, as opposed to a history of metaphysics or epistemology,⁴⁷ one should not hastily infer from this that the whole of Strauss's thought excluded such reflections. He himself warns against mistaking the starting point for the substance of someone's thought.⁴⁸

Some thoughtful scholars have argued that because the human good can flourish only in the best political setting, Leo Strauss, focusing only on political philosophy as the introduction to philosophy proper,⁴⁹ dispensed entirely, or at least did not deal thematically, with natural philosophy or metaphysics (or what was in fact prior to the modern break a kind of natural theology), and that those interested in such matters should continue their search "after Strauss," i.e., look beyond his thought.

This decoupling of the cosmic and human realms is sometimes understood to be the deepest meaning of his concentration upon⁵⁰ and even identification with "the change in thought that was effected by Socrates."⁵¹ Following this line of argument still further, Strauss, like Socrates, is said to have been unconcerned with "first principles" (*archê*) of nature.

Since he claimed that no consistent explanation of Plato's theory of ideas had ever been presented,⁵² it has been inferred, for example, that in Strauss's interpretation, Plato's "world of ideas" was not something to be taken seriously. Plato himself, according to Strauss, did not believe in the world of ideas. But this interpretation is patently refuted by Strauss's unambiguous statements, e.g., in his 1957 course on the *Republic*, where he explains at length why Plato thought it reasonable to infer the existence of something like true ideas.⁵³ Even in *The City and Man*, although he almost ignores the final part of books 6 and 7 of the *Republic* and the famous images of the sun, the divided line, and the cave, he asserts that "the part of the *Republic* which deals with philosophy is the most important part of the book."⁵⁴

But one should expect no more than hints of Strauss's deepest philosophical thought from *Natural Right and History*—exactly as one should not expect Plato's deepest philosophy in his presentation of the political-minded gentleman, who is, after all, "not identical with the wise man [but merely] the political reflection, or imitation, of the wise man."⁵⁵ It is easy to see, for this reason, why the book appealed to traditionalist "gentlemen," as the success of Strauss's own lectures testifies. But as Nathan Tarcov's essay makes clear in commenting on Strauss's claim, even in a political setting it is impossible to disregard a philosophical view of the cosmos. True prudence

is equated with obeying the law of the cosmos ruled by God, which is the only true city.⁵⁶

Strauss's Negative Philosophical Teaching: Dispelling Erroneous Theories

What if any philosophical teaching is consistently conveyed by the “historical” studies in the book, as seen under the light of these essays and drafts? Despite the complexities inevitable in deciphering Strauss's philosophy, it is clear that he was no positivist or historicist.⁵⁷ One way, then, of explaining his distinctive philosophical approach is to contrast it with the empiricism or positivism present in today's philosophy departments. Leo Strauss notes that the rejection of natural right is made in the name of History and on behalf of the distinction between facts and values.⁵⁸

Positivism is barely mentioned in the 1953 book. It is described in passing as “the school which held that theology and metaphysics had been superseded once and for all by positive science or which identified genuine knowledge of reality with the knowledge supplied by the empirical sciences. Positivism proper had defined ‘empirical’ in terms of the procedures of the natural sciences.”⁵⁹ The lectures presented here leave no doubt that Strauss was not a positivist, but they also leave no doubt that he was not unwilling to countenance the “demarcation” between or separation of philosophy and science. “One may try, and people did try, to seclude from the realm of philosophy the questions which do not seem to permit of a universally acceptable answer, but in doing so, one is merely *evading* the questions, not answering them.”⁶⁰ Consequently, Wittgenstein and those responsible for all the elucubrations of the Vienna Circle, which are the foundation of modern analytical philosophy, are dismissed by Strauss as so many species of intellectual indolence.

Strauss is no more forgiving when it comes to historicism, and the thrust of his argument has important consequences for the philosophy of science, especially social science, and the philosophy of nature. The historicist reasons thus: natural law should be universally recognized by human reason, but the social sciences—i.e., history, anthropology, sociology—show that there is a great variety of conceptions of right, and that there are, therefore, no immutable principles of justice.⁶¹ Strauss goes to the point of saying that this reasoning is “irrelevant”: in other words, if natural right implies a pro-

cess of discovery by reason, it is one thing to assert that there is perhaps no principle of justice that has not been denied in some society or culture at some point in time, and a totally separate thing to show that this denial is justified or reasonable.⁶² This is precisely the main purpose of the first section of the Walgreen Lectures as he asserts it in 1949:

I tried to show that contrary to a widespread view, the strictly historical evidence, the evidence based upon the indefinitely large variety of notions regarding right and wrong in different countries and at different times, is utterly irrelevant as far as the possibility and the existence of natural right is concerned.⁶³

According to him, the critique of natural right presented by positivism and historicism has deep philosophical roots—a disbelief in the very possibility of a knowledge of any immutable principles. *Nolens volens* positivism and historicism require a denunciation of reason that proves the impossibility of any access to metaphysics or ethics. The authority of positive science, the critical philosophy that continues that of Hume or Kant, leads to skepticism,⁶⁴ to the idea that all ideas are arbitrary; but radical historicism ups the ante by adding that all ideas are not only arbitrary but derive from a specific context, which limits the validity of any principles.⁶⁵ The modern opponents of natural right are also the enemies of philosophy, since they reject the very possibility of capturing something that is perennial, because every thought is seen as historical.

Obviously, the rejection by Strauss of important contemporary philosophical theories is not the same as conveying a consistent philosophical theory and a coherent explanation of the world, man, and God. It is certainly much more difficult to capture the core of his philosophical teaching in *Natural Right and History* in a few lines, if only because Strauss refused to conflate philosophy with any “system of philosophy.”⁶⁶ But an indication that his “negative teaching” is not his entire view is that it is on metaphysical grounds that he rejects Aristotle’s teaching: “I am not an Aristotelian since I am not satisfied that the visible universe is eternal, to say nothing of other perhaps more important reasons.”⁶⁷ Strauss’s preference for Plato among the ancients, and not Aristotle, is based not merely on a single page of the *Ethics*, but on his interpretation of Aristotle’s philosophy as a whole, that taking each level of being as having a consistency in itself defuses the tension between nature and the city.⁶⁸ Again, these lectures and early

drafts shed some light on the core philosophical message of *Natural Right and History*.

Strauss's Positive Philosophical Teaching: Awe toward Nature

To grasp the full import of what the opponents of natural right have wrought, let us turn to Strauss's idea of nature. In a text presented here, Strauss claims that "‘nature’ is *the* fundamental philosophic discovery. Truth, Being, even World, and all other terms designating the object of philosophy are unquestionably older than philosophy, but the first man who used the term ‘nature’ . . . was the first philosopher."⁶⁹ There is, therefore, a fundamental political concept that is of purely philosophical origin: the idea of natural right. Philosophy and with it the discovery of nature changed the landscape. The idea of nature is at the center of Strauss's philosophical inquiry. But the idea of nature would be devoid of content if it were not opposed to divine and man-made things. Moreover, nature is the concept that allows a philosopher to examine political notions and man's nature without conflating history and the eternal. There is much left to be explained, as Nathan Tarcov notes. The difference between philosophy and common sense is substantial because Strauss assumes knowledge of human nature that arises from seeing political things "*sub specie aeternitatis*"—in contrast to what is "essentially perishable."⁷⁰

In Strauss's eyes, as stated in *Natural Right and History*, the transformation carried out by Socrates was a return to sobriety after the madness of his predecessors, because Socrates did not separate wisdom from moderation. In modern language, it was a return to common sense. Disregarding opinions about the nature of things (and especially of human things) amounted to abandoning the most important source of access to reality, which is in opinions or common sense. The starting point is the shape or form or character of a thing, its *eidos*, that which is first visible to us and not that which is intrinsically. The art of ascending from opinions to the nature of things is the friendly art of conversation, dialectic.⁷¹ Strauss puts Plato's contention in more general terms: "All knowledge, however limited or 'scientific,' presupposes a horizon, a comprehensive view within which knowledge is possible. All understanding presupposes a fundamental awareness of the whole: prior to any perception of particular things, the human soul must have had a vision of the ideas, a vision of the articulated whole."⁷² These are almost the same words used to refer to the "frame of reference,"⁷³ whose

meaning was clarified in the text included in this volume: such a frame of reference is “a conceptual scheme that mirrors or articulates the essential structure of society as such, and therefore of every possible society. This essential structure would be defined by the purpose of society, or by the natural hierarchy of its purposes.”⁷⁴

What is Strauss’s vision of the articulated whole? In his later lectures on the “Socratic problem” Strauss gives a more thorough exposition of “noetic heterogeneity”⁷⁵ and the natural articulation of the cosmos, but the core of his approach is already summarized in the center of the 1953 book. One thus returns to the real meaning of the Socratic turn to human things: when Socrates raises the question “What is X?” (courage, justice, etc.), he is forced also to raise the question of the *ratio rerum humanarum* and to approach the study of human things as such, which in turn requires understanding the essential difference between human things and divine or natural things, which finally presupposes an understanding of divine or natural things as such.⁷⁶ “The thing itself, the completed thing, cannot be understood as a product of the process leading up to it.”⁷⁷ On the contrary, the process can be understood only through its *telos* or accomplishment. It was this principle that the positivists and historicists eschewed.

In short: one needs to start from opinions or the “shape” of things as they appear to man. Strauss later made clear that this indeed implied what some may call “metaphysical claims.” According to him, unlike Heidegger, being for Plato was not the same as “being always.”⁷⁸ “Being” is not univocal; there are many ways of being. Strauss’s philosophy of science, and especially of the science of man, rests, on the one hand, on noetic differences or the “many” articulated shapes of things, and, on the other, on the avoidance of every kind of reductionism, from Freud and Darwin or the sociology of knowledge to the mechanistic view of the atomists or Epicureans—a reduction that would entail explaining the higher by reference to the lower. Now, something that cannot be found explicitly anywhere in Plato’s dialogues⁷⁹ but that certainly clarifies Strauss’s own view is that “Plato, as it were, says: Take any opinion about right, however fantastic or ‘primitive,’ that you please; you can be certain prior to having investigated it that it points beyond itself, that the people who cherish the opinion in question contradict that very opinion somehow and thus are forced to go beyond it in the direction of the one true view of justice, provided that a philosopher arises among them.”⁸⁰

“Philosophical Anthropology” at the New School and Strauss’s Distinctive Proposal

As an essay in this volume points out, in the New School Strauss co-taught several courses in “philosophical anthropology.” Strauss’s sober metaphysical claims in the texts paving the way to the Walgreen Lectures and in *Natural Right and History* are indeed deep enough to provide him with a distinctive “anthropology.” In our time, ethics and social or political philosophy must initially consist in a Socratic examination of the classical works that constitute the history of philosophy because they are the sources of our confused, contradictory current opinions.⁸¹

Strauss stresses that for all the classics, including Plato, man is by nature a social animal. He is constituted in such a way that he cannot live well without other men, because it is *logos*—speech or reason—that distinguishes him from the other animals and this presupposes communication.⁸² In fact, man is so much more radically social than the other animals that sociability is humanity itself, i.e., all actions—social and antisocial—refer to others, not from a calculation of the pleasures to be derived from association, but because the mere association is pleasurable. All members of the same species are related, but in man this relationship is deepened by his radical sociability. Procreation is only partly a way to preserve the species; there is no relation between men that is totally free, and everyone is aware of this. Men differ from brutes through speech or reason (*logos*), so the good life is the life of reason or the examined life. Man is by nature social and cannot live well except when living with others; he refers to others in every human act. Love, affection, friendship, and piety are as natural for him as his own self-interest. Men are free but have a sense that the unrestrained exercise of that freedom is not right.

No Naked Human Nature and the Nature of Values

Man, however, as stated before, cannot, with rare exceptions, reach perfection except in the best civil society, or in the city, and “the city is the only whole within the whole or the only part of the whole whose essence can be wholly known,”⁸³ which is why Strauss wrote a history of political philosophy and not, say, a history of epistemology. Perhaps, after all, Strauss’s most important teaching is the need for political philosophy.

Strauss asserts that only modern natural right is conceived of as completely independent from any positive right, and therefore as something to be expounded comprehensively and systematically, something whose tenets can be precisely and absolutely enumerated. The alternative, however, is not a comprehensive and systematic exposition of premodern natural right principles as independent of conventional right. Such an exposition would be conducive to a parochial view of what is by nature just, conflating the “natural man” with any present view of man as eternal. (This is the reason why no other book followed the Walgreen Lectures with such an exposition.)

But man is never outside all cultural frames of reference. We should not discard the existence of such a thing as human nature, as Strauss asserts in the essay “Historicism,” but all that can ever be found are the variants of the “text of man”; we cannot lay bare the text of man. This is the additional reason for engaging in historical studies in a philosophical vein, which Leo Strauss maintained as his primary task until the end.

The bonds of society can exist “on the most different levels: on the level of Indian caste society, of China, of Sparta, of Venice, of Britain,” and, according to Strauss, it is also clear that a polity based on oppression is not “as good as the social cohesion and durability of a free society.”⁸⁴ Of course, today the very idea that there is a hierarchy of goods and a hierarchy of societies (even that liberalism is preferable to cannibalism) is disturbing, so ingrained is the idea that all values are equal. Obviously, as he asserts in 1949,

The distinction between values and facts would not have found the wide acceptance which it did find if there were not some foundation for it. It is akin to the old distinction between questions of fact and questions of right, and similar distinctions. What we have to wonder about is whether the circumstance that the distinction between facts and values is reasonable within the certain limits justifies the radical separation of disciplines, at least to the extent that social science is declared to be fundamentally limited to the study of facts.

According to Strauss, however, values are not something we “posit,” our own creations beyond the power of reason. Quite the contrary, value judgments belong together with any reasonable description of man’s affairs,⁸⁵ for we are not condemned to wholesale madness.⁸⁶ As Strauss keeps repeating later, there is no “good reason for abandoning the attempt to acquire clarity

about what is preferable or less preferable”—that is, the possibility of evaluating man’s ends or distinguishing between goods. For even “[i]f one cannot say which of two high mountains covered by clouds is higher, we could still say that a mountain is higher than a molehill.”⁸⁷

This contention carries the consequence that even if fire burns the same in both Persia and Greece, while justice, or burials, or human sacrifices, or the answer to who should rule is not the same everywhere, reason is not as powerless as most social sciences and active politicians tend to think.

New Vistas: The Discovery of Natural Right and Its Character

Natural Right and History remains controversial to this day. To begin with, any interpretation of Strauss’s teaching clashes with the repeated assertions by scholars that Strauss had no philosophical teaching *per se*. There is more than a grain of truth in this assertion, since, as Strauss himself says in one of the texts in this volume, Philosophy is at best possession of clear knowledge of the *problems*—it is not possession of clear knowledge of the *solutions* to the problems. The basic questions in all branches of philosophy are as unsolved today as they were at all times; new questions have been raised from time to time, the interest has shifted from one type of question to others, but the most fundamental, the truly philosophic questions remain unanswered.⁸⁸

One cannot leave it at that, however, because he adds almost immediately: “Deeper study shows that this impression is misleading. It would be absurd to say that deeper study shows us all political philosophers in perfect agreement; it does show us however that there was a tradition of political philosophy whose adherents were in agreement as regards the fundamentals”—that is, as he says in another essay, despite specific differences among their teachings.⁸⁹

Moreover, it is not unreasonable, considering both his constant return to the problem of natural right in different contexts and through different approaches, to infer that despite his initial disclaimer that the need for natural right does not imply its existence, he does, in the Walgreen Lectures, uphold the possibility of real knowledge of natural right: “the concept of a natural law, or of a natural order, is coeval with philosophy itself.” Moreover, he continues, this is the “very soul of Plato’s and Aristotle’s political philosophy, whose primary and guiding purpose is to discover that ‘constitution,’ that order of civil society, which is ‘natural.’ Even if such perfect

order is never found in any actual order, it is the object of the wish ‘of all decent people.’”

Such knowledge of natural right, however, is not the kind that can be expounded *more geometrico*, as a system or a set of rules, as in modern natural right; rather it is the kind upheld by the classics. Strauss chose to present it within what appears to some as an “idiosyncratic” *précis raisonné* of natural right, his fourth presentation of such a history since 1931.⁹⁰

Now the idea of natural right, according to Strauss, may surprise those who think it necessarily supports a “conservative” view of society. As he states in 1949:

If we approach the issue of natural right in an impartial manner, we note that . . . the very idea of natural right presupposes the doubt of all authority; that is to say, man’s inner independence of all authority.

Natural right is a standard higher than all authority, a standard by which all authority is to be measured, and this standard is in principle accessible to man as man . . . The present-day discussion of natural right suffers from the fact that the idea of natural right is taken too much for granted by its adherents as well as by its opponents.⁹¹

We acknowledge that, its tentative character notwithstanding, this afterword may come off as rather polemical or sometimes even slapdash, and in the process simplifies positions that are really much more sophisticated. It is therefore appropriate for more than one reason, considering Strauss’s initial allusions in the Walgreen Lectures to Lincoln’s words, to close this volume of essays by assuring the reader that it is presented “with malice toward none, with charity for all,” but also with no “firmness in the right”—on the contrary, with merely a reminder of how tempting all forms of polemic are—and in the hope that it will not only contribute to giving *Natural Right and History* the place it deserves in the canon of great philosophical works, but also foster studies of the book as a whole.

Notes

1. All previous quotations are taken from H 1941 in this volume, pp. XXX–XX.
2. See WCL.
3. See Tanguay’s essay in this volume.

4. *TOM*, 37. Leo Strauss in *TOM* acknowledges, “The titles of Machiavelli’s two books are most unrevealing in this respect. The same is almost equally true of the chapter headings . . . We have noted that the chapter headings of the *Discourses*, to say nothing of those of the *Prince*, reveal hardly anything of the daring quality of his thought,” therefore suggesting the way to grasp “the daring quality” of his own thought.

5. Note to *TOM*, 36.

6. OSCPP. See *NRH*, 127. Susan Shell states in her unpublished lecture “Natural Right in the Face of History” that “the work expresses itself less in outright dissembling and self-contradiction—let alone obscurely coded riddles—than in a studied ambiguity or imprecision, which resolves itself to the degree that Strauss is read with adequate attention. Precision is the prize or offshoot of reader alertness, or what Strauss elsewhere calls being wide awake.”

7. Cf. Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy*, 7.

8. NR 1946.

9. See *NRH*, 15n, 20, 43, 60n, 77, 96n, 182n, 193–94, 255n, 263n, 279, 316. But “[t]hat justice in contradistinction to courage and moderation cannot be misused is an important ingredient of the first paragraph of the text of Kant’s *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*—Cf. *Republic* 491 b7–10 and *Meno* 88 a6–e4” (“On the *Euthydemus*,” *SPPP*, 76n8). See Susan Shell, introduction to Leo Strauss’s Kant Seminars (unpublished).

10. Or maybe in Christian terms as understood by Hegel. Cf. NR 1946.

11. Cf. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* in *Kant: Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Rawls, “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory,” in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 303–58, as well as its criticism in Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

12. NR 1946.

13. WCL. See also Susan Shell, “Taking Evil Seriously,” in *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, ed. Kenneth Deutsch and Walter Nicgorski (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), 175–93.

14. WCL.

15. NR 1946.

16. Cf. *NRH*, 150n24.

17. NR 1946.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. *NRH*, preface.

21. *WIPP*, 41–47.

22. NR 1946.

23. On this crucial connection between the best regime and natural right, cf. Strauss’s comments on Plato in “Natural Law” in Sills, *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 11: 80: “Natural right in Plato’s sense is in the first place the natural order of the virtues as the natural perfections of the human soul (cf. *Laws* 765E–766A), as well as the natural order of the other things that are by nature good. But assigning to each what

is good for him by nature is impossible in any society. Such assigning requires that the men who know what is by nature good for each and all, the philosophers, be the absolute rulers and that absolute communism (communism regarding property, women, and children) be established among those citizens who give the commonwealth its character; it also requires equality of the sexes. This order is the political order according to nature, as distinguished from and opposed to the conventional order (*Republic* 456B, C; cf. 428E). Thus natural right in Plato's sense also determines the best regime, in which those who are best by nature and training, the wise men, rule the unwise with absolute power, assigning to each of them what is by nature just, i.e., what is by nature good for him. The actualization of the best regime proves indeed to be impossible or at least extremely improbable; only a diluted version of that political order which strictly corresponds to natural right can in reason be expected."

24. *NRH*, 138

25. *NRH*, 144.

26. *NRH*, 144. Strauss contends "that the predominance of that belief prevents the emergence of the idea of natural right or makes the quest for natural right infinitely unimportant: if man knows by divine revelation what the right path is, he does not have to discover that path by his unassisted efforts" (*NRH*, 90).

27. Cf. *PAW*, 126ff.

28. On these minimum conditions for living in a polity, Strauss refers to Aristotle: "If this interpretation is correct, natural right is that right which must be recognized by any political society if it is to last and which for this reason is everywhere in force. Natural right thus understood delineates the minimum conditions of political life, so much so that sound positive right occupies a higher rank than natural right. Natural right in this sense is indifferent to the difference among regimes, whereas positive right is relative to the type of regime—positive right is democratic, oligarchic, etc. (cf. *Politics* 1280a8–22)." "Natural Law," in Sills, *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 11: 140. Yet "Aristotle concludes his laconic statement on natural right, 'one regime alone is by nature the best everywhere.' This regime, 'the most divine regime,' is a certain kind of kingship, the only regime that does not require any positive right (*Politics* 1284a4–15; 1288a15–29). The flooring and the ceiling, the minimum condition and the maximum possibility of political society, are natural and do not in any way depend on (positive) law." (*Ibid.*)

29. *NRH*, 130.

30. Cf. H 1941.

31. WCL.

32. As Strauss explains elsewhere: "Is all right conventional (of human origin), or is there some right which is natural (*physei dikaion*)? This question was raised on the assumption that there are things which are by nature good (health, strength, intelligence, courage, etc.) . . . Yet the conventionalists could not deny that justice possesses a core that is universally recognized, so much so that injustice must have recourse to lies or to 'myths' in order to become publicly defensible. The precise issue then concerned the status of that right which is universally recognized: is that right merely the condition of the living together of a particular society (i.e., of a society constituted by covenant or

agreement, with that right deriving its validity from the preceding covenant), or is there a justice among men as men which does not derive from any human arrangement? In other words, is justice based only on calculation of the advantage of living together, or is it choiceworthy for its own sake and therefore 'by nature'?" "Natural Law," in Sills, *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 11: 80.

33. *NRH*, 139–44. Devin Stauffer seems to make a similar point. "On 'Classic Natural Right' in *Natural Right and History*," 140 and ff.

34. *NRH*, 135.

35. I thank Susan Shell for her comments on this question. See "An Introduction to Natural Right (1931)" in Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion*.

36. But cf. *SPPP*, 139.

37. WCL.

38. OSCPP. See, however, *PAW*, 28 and ff., on the exoteric nature of Aristotle's presentation of Plato's teaching. I thank Timothy Burns for calling my attention to this problem.

39. See this idea expanded and clarified in Leo Strauss, "An Epilogue," *Essays on The Scientific Study of Politics*, ed. Herbert Storing (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1962), 305–27.

40. But see John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), vi.

41. See "Why Political Philosophy Is Absolutely Necessary," Leo Strauss Papers, box 18, folder 9.

42. WCL. Despite being a mere footnote in the book (*NRH*, 150n24), Stauffer, "On 'Classic Natural Right' in *Natural Right and History*," made a similar passage central to his essay on chapter 4 of *NRH*.

43. An indication of this preference is that Strauss almost completely ignores the first book of Aristotle's *Politics* in the text of *NRH*.

44. WCL.

45. Cf. *NR* 1946.

46. WL, lecture 1.

47. Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 55.

48. Cf. *NRH*, 120–21.

49. Cf. *WIPP*, 93.

50. Cf. *NRH*, vii.

51. *NRH*, 120.

52. See *CM*, and *HPP*, 53.

53. Cf. *HPP*, 53 and ff. Elsewhere Strauss also asserts leisurely: "The subject matter is very difficult and presupposes an understanding of the doctrine of ideas as a whole. By this I mean this simple thing on which we got into troubles—that Plato introduces the whole discussion by saying that what is intelligible (476c2–480a13). Then he goes on to say that everything that is intelligible" (139). And later: "But let me give you a much better example. There was a being which the Greeks called Victory. Now there was a victory at Marathon and many other places, but there was also Victory with a capital V. Now Glaucon would immediately understand that Victory with a capital V is something

different from the victory at Marathon. He would understand without any difficulty that Victory herself or itself would be something quite different from this statue of Victory. And if he were still more clever, he could even see that Victory herself, the Goddess of Victory, is something altogether different from all statues everywhere. All statues are only imitations of that. If you can presuppose that, then it is clear that such a man would understand immediately what an idea is. We do not have such gods, for example Victory, whose every inch, every finger and so on is victory. If you look at such a statue you see that. Once you can presuppose such a thing, it is no longer difficult to understand the thought of ideas . . . Plato's ideas are really meant to take the place of the gods. I think this is safe to say." Seminar on the *Republic*, Spring 1957, p. 163. <https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/republic> (accessed May 8, 2016).

54. *CM*, 123; *HPP*, 59; see Seth Benardete, "Leo Strauss' *The City and Man*," *Political Science Reviewer* 8 (1978): 20. Seminar on the *Gorgias*, Winter 1957, p. 199. <https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/node/113> (accessed May 8, 2016). In his seminar on the *Gorgias* in 1957, Strauss explains: "What does Plato's idea mean? [In *Republic* X] [i]t is a model, a model which cannot be in the way in which this [tangible] chair is. The human soul is distinguished from the soul of brutes by the fact that, in mythical language, the human soul has seen the ideas prior to birth. In nonmythical language, it is [that] man, prior to making any sense perception, has already [some] understanding of these forms. Otherwise, he would not have sense perception in a human way. In present day language, one could state this, perhaps, as follows: there is never pure sense perception; sense perception is always interpreted; the categories precede the perception. Plato does not speak of categories, but of ideas. The ideas, we can say, are the natural framework in which everything is perceived. This is in the essence of man . . . The philosopher is concerned with the ideas as ideas, but every human being has some understanding of the ideas."

55. *NRH*, 142.

56. See Tarcov's essay in this volume with *NRH*, 150.

57. But we must not underestimate the importance and influence of Heidegger. See the letter to Löwith where Strauss "takes Heidegger's side." Strauss to Löwith, March 15, 1962, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3: 686; also December 13, 1960, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3: 684–85.

58. *NRH*, 8.

59. *NRH*, 16.

60. *H* 1941.

61. *NRH*, 9.

62. *NRH*, 10.

63. *WL*, lecture 2, p. 1.

64. *NRH*, 20.

65. Cf. Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1957): "Are generalizations confined to periods?" (89 and ff.).

66. See Strauss to Gadamer (February 26, 1961): "In passing, I note that your rendering of Aristotle's understanding of time is decisively incomplete. Strictly speaking time is not the cause of decay rather than of the opposite (*Physics* 222 b25–26); time can be said

to be with equal justice the discoverer or a good helper of knowledge (EN. 1098 a 22–26).” Strauss adds: “I would speak of a negatively absolute situation: the awakening from *Seinsvergessenheit* belongs to the *Erschütterung alles Seienden*, and what one awakens to is not the final truth in the form of a system but rather a question which can never be fully answered . . .” “Correspondence concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*,” *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1978), 7.

67. Strauss to Kuhn in *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1978): 5.

68. The most comprehensive examination of why Strauss was not an Aristotelian can be found in Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy*, 144–66.

69. WCL.

70. WCL.

71. *NRH*, 124.

72. *NRH*, 125.

73. *NRH*, 26.

74. FRSS.

75. “The Origin of Political Science and the Problem of Socrates: Six Public Lectures,” *Interpretation* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 171, 177.

76. *NRH*, 122.

77. *NRH*, 123.

78. See chaps. 4 and 5 of Catherine H. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), as well as Richard Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy: On Original Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

79. This is not to deny that this is the fundamental thrust of every Platonic dialogue.

80. *NRH*, 125. Some may be disappointed by the commonsensical character of Strauss’s metaphysics. But let us listen to a man who never eschewed simple common sense, Thomas More, commenting on “scholasticism”: “I wonder, by Jove, how these petty adepts ever reached the conclusion that those propositions should be understood in a way no one on earth but themselves understands them. Those words are not technical terms on which these men can claim a monopoly . . . Such expressions are actually common language . . . They have borrowed words from the public domain, they abuse public property.” Thomas More, *Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 15: *In Defense of Humanism: Letters to Dorp, Oxford, Lee, and a Monk*, ed. Daniel Kinney (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 35.

81. I thank Catherine Zuckert for this remark.

82. *NRH*, 129.

83. *CM*, 29.

84. NR 1946.

85. See seminar on natural right, 1962, lectures 1–4.

86. *NRH*, 4.

87. Quoted from Strauss’s 1962 seminar on natural right, session 2. Cf. also *WIPP*, 23.

88. See WCL; cf. also *WIPP*, 115–16.

89. See H 1941.

90. On natural right in Strauss as a problem, see Victor Gourevitch, "The Problem of Natural Right and the Fundamental Alternatives in *Natural Right and History*," in *The Crises of Liberal Democracy*, ed. Kenneth Deutsch and Walter Soffer (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 30–47; and Stewart Umphrey, "Natural Right and Philosophy," in Deutsch and Nicgorski, *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, 275–295.

91. WL, lecture 1.