

Relativism: The Crux of Our Liberal Culture

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Leo Strauss's writings¹ consist mostly of interpretative commentaries on the works of major thinkers of past ages. Strauss thus comes to sight as a scholar of the history of thought. But he utterly transforms the meaning, the scope, and the significance of such study. His meticulous textual interpretations are intended to show that there are a few key books and authors from the past that can and should be studied as sources of powerful, even while clashing, claims to wisdom. These comprehensive teachings and their titanic disagreements we today, he contends, desperately need to try to fathom, to revivify, and to bring into strenuous debate—with a view to our judging among them. For as regards the pressing ultimate questions of human existence—What is the good life? What is the right or just way to live? What is the fulfilling purpose of human existence?—we in the late modern West have lost our bearings, Strauss insists: and to such an abysmal extent that we are in the process of becoming bereft of even the capacity to seriously pursue the quest for answers.

No doubt, we continue in some degree to share, and even heroically to defend, what we call “our basic common values.” But the very expression “our values” signals the deep problem. Under the influence of our most prestigious intellectual authorities, we no longer confidently believe in the rationally demonstrable, universal and permanent truth of the principles, purposes, and way of life that we share and defend. Still worse, or more fundamentally, we gravely doubt the very possibility that any principles, any purposes, any way of life can be shown by reason to be simply true: that is, truly right, truly good, for all

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¹ References to writings of Strauss will be by the abbreviations that follow: CM=*The City and Man*; HPP=*History of Political Philosophy*; HPW=*Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft*; LAM=*Liberalism Ancient and Modern*; NRH=*Natural Right and History*; NIPPP=*“On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy”*; OT=*On Tyranny*; PPH=*The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*; RCPR=*The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*; WIPP=*What is Political Philosophy?*

humanity as such.² We have become more and more resigned to the view that all evaluation and all basis for evaluation is irretrievably rooted in and limited by the deeply discordant, rationally inadjudicable “perspectives” of the diverse historical “cultures” or “worldviews” or “faiths” of the specific human beings doing the evaluating.³ Increasingly we find ourselves clinging to and asserting “our Western, liberal values” over and against alien, contrary “values” for no reason at bottom beyond the historical fate that has made them ours.

Yet the fact is that our specific “culture”—the modernity that culminates in the liberal and democratic “West”—has always defined itself and its highest purpose or object of dedication in universal and rational terms. Ours is the culture of “humanism” and of humanity’s “enlightenment,” to and through reason or rationalism. From the beginning,

² To take a prominent example from a leading spokesman for thoughtful contemporary opinion: Richard Rorty, while strongly siding with those who “persist in believing that a merely material and secular goal suffices: mortal life as it might be lived on the sunlit uplands of global democracy and abundance” (1995, 89), nevertheless follows what he claims is the view of Whitman and Dewey, that “a classless and casteless society—the sort of society which American leftists have spent the twentieth century trying to construct—is neither more natural nor more rational than the cruel societies of feudal Europe or of eighteenth century Virginia” (1998, 30; see also 27-28 and 1991, 190 and 195, where Rorty admits that he has “not tried to argue the question of whether Dewey was right” in the fundamental value judgment for democracy—with which Rorty agrees and urges his reader to agree).

³ Some have reacted to our situation by falling back from reason to revealed religion as the ground and source of basic moral norms, and have even welcomed the bankruptcy of normative reason as the proof of the radical insufficiency of unassisted human reason and thus as the victory of religious orthodoxy, or of some sort of “political theology” over and against political philosophy. Having observed this development in his own religious dispensation, Strauss recognized early in his thinking career that “the victory of orthodoxy through the self-destruction of rational philosophy was not an unmitigated blessing, for it was a victory, not of Jewish orthodoxy, but of any orthodoxy, and Jewish orthodoxy based its claim to superiority over other religions from the beginning on its superior rationality (Deut. 4:6)” (LAM, 256). Something very similar could of course be said of Christianity, especially insofar as so much of orthodox Christian political theology appeals to natural law, the law of reason, as something distinct from and presupposed by revealed divine law. For the orthodox Christian as for the orthodox Jew, the divine gift of rationality must be rigorously used as the cornerstone of faith: faith completes and thus is partly founded on normative reason. It follows that it is “not sufficient for everyone to obey and to listen to the Divine message of the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City”: in order to understand that message “as clearly and as fully as is humanly possible, one must also consider to what extent man could discern the outlines of that City if left to himself, to the proper exercise of his own powers”; “political philosophy is the indispensable handmaid of theology” (CM, 1). Yet it is surely not enough—and no thoughtful adherent of biblical orthodoxy ever supposed it to be enough—simply to assert or to reassert the existence of natural law or right. Such law or right must be rationally *proven* to exist. And in our time all the traditional proofs appear to have lost their cogency, because they apparently fail to meet the counter-evidence and proofs to the contrary that emerge from the new “experience of history”—our apparently new experience of the severely conflicting diversity as well as mutability of all cultural-historical norms. Our loss of confidence in normative reason includes or may even be said to be centered on a loss of confidence in the capacity of unassisted reason to demonstrate, on the basis of the available evidence about the human condition, the universal and permanent validity of any fixed code of rational laws or even moral principles. The resulting situation is captured in a nutshell by Jacques Maritain’s famous response to a query about the agreement achieved in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Yes, we agree about the rights but on condition that no one asks why” (Quoted and discussed in Glendon, 2001: 77).

modernity has championed the liberation of mankind, as a whole, from traditional, parochial “superstitions” and “prejudices.” Our culture has prided itself on being rooted in the objective normative truth for and about all of humanity: the “natural rights” of man, the “palpable truth” disclosed by reason or “the light of science.”⁴ It follows that this culture of ours cannot lose faith in reason, as the ground for universally evident and valid human norms discoverable in nature or human nature, without losing faith in itself, in its very core. As a consequence, we inhabit a culture slipping into spiritual disintegration and bewilderment (CM, 3).

Strauss does not hesitate to characterize this spiritual situation as “the crisis of our times,” or “the contemporary crisis of the West.” He stresses that we are confronted everywhere today with severe doubts as to the status of the specific, comprehensive conception of the collective and individual purpose of humanity that, up through the first half of the twentieth century, explicitly animated and guided the modern western nations in their apparently intensifying global leadership. This universal purpose “we find expressly stated,” Strauss notes (CM, 3-4), “in our immediate past, for instance in famous official declarations made during the two World Wars.” “These declarations,” Strauss adds, “merely restate the purpose stated originally by the most successful form of modern political philosophy.” Strauss summarizes the Enlightenment philosophers’ statements of purpose, using their own phraseology, as follows:⁵ “philosophy or science was no longer to be understood as essentially contemplative and proud but as active and charitable”; “it was to enable man to become the master and owner of nature through the intellectual conquest of nature.” Science, thus radically transformed, “should make possible progress toward ever greater prosperity,” and “thus enable everyone to share in all the advantages of society or life and therewith give full effect” to “everyone’s natural right to develop all his faculties fully in concert with everyone else’s doing the same.” This “progress toward ever greater prosperity would thus become, or render possible, the progress toward ever greater freedom and justice.” This “would necessarily be the progress toward a society embracing equally

⁴ A few days before the fiftieth anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence, Jefferson wrote, in a famous letter (to Roger C. Weightman, 24 June 1826; in Jefferson, 1984: 1516-17): “May it be to the world, what I believe it will be (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all), the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government. That form which we have substituted, restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.”

⁵ The phraseology Strauss uses is borrowed from Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, and Bacon, *Great Instauration*, Pref.; *New Organon* 1.129, 2.31; *Advancement of Learning* 1.5.11; see also Benjamin Franklin’s 1743 “Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge Among the British Plantations in America,” in Franklin, 1959-: 2.380-83.

all human beings: a universal league of free and equal nations, each nation consisting of free and equal men and women.” For “it had come to be believed that,” in order to “make the world safe for the Western democracies, one must make the whole globe democratic, each country in itself as well as the society of nations.”

By the second half of the twentieth century, Strauss submits, “this view of the human situation in general and of the situation in our century in particular” no longer “retains plausibility.” The most obvious, if not the most profound, reason is that the once supposedly triumphant West has undergone shattering experiences. We have witnessed in the very bosom of the West horrifying totalitarian police states based on slave labor and on mass exterminations—all engineered by a science under the tutelage of fantastic ideological faiths and dreams. The same science, which has proven to be compatible with all sorts of mutually hostile secular and religious extremism, continues to enable and even to inspire ghastly international races to invent and build weapons of mass destruction. Looming over us is the specter of increasing environmental destruction, and before us gleams the lurid dawn of genetic manipulation. Within us we feel the spiritual vacuum—even the guilt—left by the recognition of our loss of reverence for nature as a whole as well as for human nature in particular. These experiences have instilled or resuscitated a pervasive sense of unease and fear in the face of the ungovernable power that technology places in the hands of a human race that seems in no whit morally improved or even morally enlightened by its acquisition of domination over nature.

At the same time, late modern science has ever more explicitly discovered and proclaimed of itself—and of reason or rationality altogether—that it is constitutionally incapable of offering to humanity any ultimate guidance as to how the ever-increasing power that science brings into being is to be used rather than abused. Late modern science has sternly announced that it judges, and that it is only competent to judge, “facts,” not “values”—the “Is,” not the “Ought.” Science of course has to be directed by “values,” by someone’s “oughts”; but science as science cannot provide or validate the ultimate values that must direct it. Our science

may make us very wise or clever as regards the means for any objectives we might choose. It admits to being unable to help us in discriminating between legitimate and illegitimate, between just and unjust, objectives. Such a science is instrumental and nothing but instrumental: it is born to be the handmaid of any powers or any interests that be. . . . According to our social science, we can be or become wise in all matters of secondary importance, but we have to be resigned to utter ignorance in the most important respect: we cannot have any knowledge regarding the ultimate principles of our choices . . . (NRH, 4)

Late-modern science, as the supposedly most perfected form of the rational comprehension of human experience, looks upon political philosophy's claim to discover grounds for basic norms in nature or in the rationality of the historical process as a manifestation of grave misunderstanding of the scope and capacity of reason's analysis of experience or of "the empirical." Early modern liberal political philosophy's original normative appeal to human nature (that is, to "natural right" or "natural rights") is regarded no longer as science, but rather as "ideology"—meaning to say, some sort of "constructed," non-verifiable, quasi-mythic interpretation imposed upon or manipulative of the human phenomena. Science may show that humans cannot live without one or another such "ideology" structuring their existence; science certainly lends to any of the conflicting actual "ideologies" very great powers; but to which "ideology" *ought* science to lend, and to which *ought* it to refuse, its powers?—That question seeks an answer that is beyond the ken of the scientist as scientist. That, we are told, is not a scientific question. As Strauss puts it: through the power given by science, "modern man is a giant in comparison to earlier man"; but, given the nature of late modern science in relation to norms, one must add that insofar as this giant is "scientific" or is scientifically rational, there is no escaping the coda: "modern man is a blind giant" (RCPR, 239).

Late modern science unquestionably generates increasing economic prosperity and even, eventually, affluence. But, to say the least, "there is no corresponding increase in wisdom and goodness." In the so-called "developed nations," we now have considerable experience of prosperity and even affluence. That very experience—not least the way the "underdeveloped nations" have been treated by the "developed"—has made the West "doubtful of the belief that affluence is the sufficient and even necessary condition of happiness and justice: affluence does not cure the deepest evils" (RCPR, 239 and CM, 6).

On the more strictly political level, it has become evident that the urge to homogenize mankind and to unify the globe politically, even or especially on democratic premises, carries with it a new and unprecedented version of the threat of imperialism, and indeed of universal despotism—and not necessarily merely Tocqueville's "soft despotism" of paternalistic bureaucracy ruling a herd-like and childlike humanity. The far harsher threat of the late modern will to power has appeared most starkly in the reach for permanent terrestrial dominance by the Marxist-inspired Soviet Union, with the resultant Cold War.⁶

The experience of Communism, Strauss suggests, taught a deep and broad lesson. In its radical egalitarianism, in its thirst for technological "development" and accompanying economic growth and universal prosperity, in its aspiration to "liberate" all of mankind from everything "unscientific" or "irrational," in its historical-materialist progressivism and

⁶ For this and the next paragraphs, see CM, 3-5.

secularism, or its unqualified hope that mankind's deepest problems and longings could find a worldly, historical solution and satisfaction—above all, in its moral insistence on sacrificing everything to this ultimate common good of secular humanity or humanism, Communism confronted the West like a kind of nightmare sibling. For “it was impossible for the Western movement to understand Communism as merely a new version of that eternal reactionism against which it had been fighting for centuries.” “From the Communist Manifesto it would appear that the victory of Communism would be the complete victory of the West—of the synthesis, transcending the national boundaries, of British industry, the French Revolution, and German philosophy.” But Communism in fact was a monstrosity, whose monstrosity had to be recognized as no mere accident. The confrontation with Communism allowed or compelled the modern West to confront something deeply problematic and inadequate in itself, in its own project and fundamental principles.

For some time, and in many quarters, “it seemed sufficient to say that while the Western movement agrees with Communism regarding the goal—the universal prosperous society of free and equal men and women—it disagrees with it regarding the means.” But slowly it became clear that the disagreement over means was a disagreement over a core dimension of human existence—a dimension which cannot, however, be adequately understood or expressed on the basis of modern rationalism. From the perspective of “Communism, the end, the common good of the whole human race, being the most sacred thing, justifies any means.” Nay, “whatever contributes to the achievement of the most sacred end partakes of its sacredness and is therefore itself sacred”; and by the same token, “whatever hinders the achievement of that end is devilish.” Seeing what this meant, in action, compelled the liberal West to recoil, in a kind of abashed self-discovery: “it came to be seen that there is not only a difference of degree but of kind between the Western movement and Communism, and this difference was seen to concern morality, the choice of means.” For the Western movement, in opposition to Communism, the choice of means is not and cannot be decided solely by the answer to the question of what will most efficiently promote the goal which is shared with Communism. That goal—“the universal prosperous society of free and equal men and women”—does not adequately capture what the West still experiences as morally sacred, as placing sacred limits on human striving, even on the striving for universal freedom and prosperity. The liberal West was impelled to rediscover something that may be said to be of supreme and abiding, if sometimes hidden, importance for all humans in all times and places—something that had never ceased to be at work within the modern West, but which could not be adequately recognized or articulated by the modern Western principles, even in their most moralistic (Kantian) version. For what the modern West rediscovered was the natural human concern with political good and evil that cannot be explained in terms of the human quest for, and

understanding or misunderstanding of, rational power and freedom or autonomy. The evil manifested in Communism was at its core a perverted or fanatic expression of this natural and inevitable civic concern for the sacred, which includes a sacrificial civic duty or call to identify and to fight, as evil, as devilish, that which always threatens the sacred; and this means to say that the natural concern for the sacred is a permanently high and mighty source of antagonistic political diversity. The experience and the expression of good and evil as it thus characterizes human nature cannot be expected to dwindle away in the course of—instead, it can explosively take over—the apparently ever more enlightened march toward universal freedom and prosperity. This, I believe, is what Strauss has in mind when he writes that, from the experience of Communism, “in other words, it became clearer than it had been for some time that no bloody or unbloody change of society can eradicate the evil in man: as long as there will be men, there will be malice, envy and hatred.”

On the politically temporary level, the Cold War compelled the liberal West to recognize that “even if one would still contend that the Western purpose is as universal as the Communist, one must rest satisfied for the foreseeable future with a practical particularism.” But as this wording suggests, Strauss sees the West as being forced to wonder, at the level of principle, whether one could still contend that the West should aim at a purpose as universal as the Communist. Has not the confrontation with the evil of Communism, has not the rediscovery of the sacred and its perversions—the rediscovery of good and evil in their full meaning—made it necessary to qualify or to moderate, by recognizing the incompleteness of, the liberal principles themselves? Hence Strauss immediately adds: “the situation resembles the one which existed during the centuries in which Christianity and Islam each raised its universal claim but had to be satisfied with uneasily coexisting with its antagonist.” But “all this amounts to saying,” Strauss concludes, “that for the foreseeable future, political society remains what it has always been: a partial or particular society whose most urgent and primary task is self-preservation and whose highest task is self-improvement”; and “as for the meaning of self-improvement, we may observe that the same experience which has made the West doubtful of the viability of a world-society has made it doubtful of the belief that affluence is the sufficient and even necessary condition of happiness and justice.”

This analysis of the late-modern West’s confrontation with radical evil, instantiated obviously in Communism, and of the attendant glimpses of the possibility of basic truths about the human condition that draw into question the adequacy of modern liberal political universalism and rationalism, begins to help us to understand the peculiar depth and unprecedented nature of the contemporary spiritual crisis of the West. For if or insofar as we become penetrated by the suspicion that modern liberal rationalism and political universalism must be tempered, regulated, governed, by some higher norms or standards,

we confront the question: can *reason* supply such standards or norms? Is there—and if so, where is there—a trans-liberal, trans-modern normative rationalism that can fill this bill? Or do we here stand on the brink of the discovery of reason’s limitations, of the inescapable ultimate partiality, hence dependency, and hence historical relativism, of reason? What is unprecedented about our culture’s spiritual crisis, what makes it unlike any previous known cultural crisis, is our pervasive relativism—our attempted abandonment, growing somehow out of our having trusted to reason, of the possibility of reason’s arriving at trans-cultural or trans-historical norms. This attempted abandonment constitutes a new, never before seen, way of trying to understand our humanity that, Strauss contends, stifles self-critical thinking, and unconsciously promotes a passive conformism—doing so more effectively than any other way of thinking that has appeared in history.⁷

I. Deepening Our Understanding of Contemporary Relativism

Strauss outlines the deeper⁸ meaning, for us Americans, of historical or cultural relativism in the introduction to his most synoptic book, *Natural Right and History*. That work opens with a solemn invocation of the Declaration of Independence’s proclamation of the “self-evident truths” that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Strauss goes on to observe that “the nation dedicated to this proposition has

⁷ See OT, *Introd.*, end (p. 27): “The manifest and deliberate collectivization or coordination of thought is being prepared in a hidden and frequently quite unconscious way by the spread of the teaching that all human thought is collective independently of any human effort directed to this end, because all human thought is historical.”

⁸ Relativism as Strauss confronted it most immediately, in the 1950’s and 1960’s, especially in the Anglo-American world, was widely advocated and expressed in terms of a scientific positivism that sought to construct a “value-free” social science that would express a neutral, non-evaluating objectivity—a kind of life raft on which philosophy and social science could save itself from the maelstrom of the collapse of normative reason. Strauss engaged this scientific positivism vigorously, but he always stressed that despite its temporary predominance, especially in the social sciences, it was bound essentially to collapse—and therefore would sooner or later in fact collapse—into the philosophically more serious, humanistic form of historicist or cultural relativism which denied the possibility of “value free” objectivity. This prediction has been fulfilled. Positivism and its hope or dream of a value-free social science has gone out of fashion, even among its erstwhile prophets in academic political science. The leading theorists of our time are no longer positivists but rather historical and cultural relativists: not only the “postmodernists,” and pragmatists (led by Richard Rorty: see esp. 1989: 115-16, 195-97; 1991: 190-95; 1998: 27-30), but also John Rawls (most explicitly in his later writings, esp. 1985, but already evidently in 1971: see 21, 46-50, 579-80, and above all 548, the culmination of the argument that provides the sole “Grounds for the Priority of Liberty” provided by the Rawlsian theory of justice—“We have to concede that as established beliefs change, it is possible that the principles of justice which it seems rational to choose may likewise change”; see also 4, 19, 35; but contrast 515-16). I will therefore focus on Strauss’s engagement with this deeper, historicist relativism that has come to prevail in our time and largely ignore Strauss’s refutations of the shallower scientific positivism that was so pervasive in his immediate time.

now become, no doubt partly as a consequence of this dedication, the most powerful and prosperous of the nations of the earth.” Having thus reminded us of the enormous practical, or indeed existential, importance for America of its dedication to this proposition, Strauss raises trenchantly the question whether the nation in its maturity still cherishes “the faith in which it was conceived and raised.” He proceeds to make clear how frail this “faith” in “natural rights” has become, and how deleterious are the consequences of this desuetude—due, he suggests, to the “imposing” on America of the alien “yoke” of “German thought,”⁹ which “created the historical sense,” and “thus was led eventually to unqualified relativism.”

“The majority among the learned who still adhere to the principles of the Declaration of Independence,” Strauss submits, “interpret these principles not as expressions of natural right but as an ideal, if not as an ideology or a myth.”¹⁰ What Strauss means in this context by the reduction of the principles of the Declaration of Independence to a mere “ideal” becomes clearer in the second paragraph, which Strauss begins by declaring that “the need for natural right is as evident today as it has been for centuries and even millennia.” For “it is obviously meaningful, and sometimes even necessary, to speak of ‘unjust’ laws or ‘unjust’ decisions.” And “in passing such judgments we imply that there is a standard of right and wrong independent of positive right and higher than positive right: a standard with reference to which we are able to judge of positive right.” “Many people today hold the view” that “the standard of right and wrong” is “in the best case nothing but the ideal adopted by our society or our ‘civilization’ and embodied in its way of life or its institutions.” Now “if principles are sufficiently justified by the fact that they are accepted by a society,” then any and every society is equally justified in whatever it is dedicated to.

⁹ John Dewey is a leading example of what Strauss has in mind (see Strauss’s review of Dewey’s *German Philosophy and Politics*, republished in WIPP, 279-81): the pervasive and decisive influence on Dewey of German philosophy of history and philosophy of science is well known. Writing in 1942, Dewey appealed against Nazism, and the deplorable “German heritage” Nazism embodied, to what Dewey still viewed as the superior German “experimental philosophy of life”: “That such an experimental philosophy of life means a dangerous experiment goes without saying,” but “the question of the past, of precedents, of origins, is quite subordinate to prevision, to guidance and control.” It remains the case, Dewey avers, that “Germany is a monument to what can be done by means of conscious method and organization. An experimental philosophy of life in order to succeed must not set less store upon methodic and organized intelligence, but more. We must learn from Germany what methodic and organized work means.”—1942: 46-47, 140-42.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Dewey, 1939: 155-57: referring to “Jefferson’s faith” in “the inherent and inalienable rights of man,” Dewey declares that “the words in which he stated the moral basis of free institutions have gone out of vogue”: we “forget all special associations with the word *Nature* and speak instead of ideals and aims.” Yet Dewey adds that this must, somehow, be “backed by something deep and indestructible in the needs and demands of humankind.” This absolutely crucial addition is never adequately explained or even investigated by Dewey (and is rudely and dismissively jettisoned altogether by Dewey’s leading contemporary disciple today, Richard Rorty—1989: 195-98): Strauss’s entire project might be summed up, not too misleadingly, as the interrogation and clarification of what this addition means.

Moreover, “if there is no standard higher than the ideal of our society, we are utterly unable to take a critical distance from that ideal.” No one within “our” society has any ground other than personal preference for breaking allegiance to “us.”¹¹ By the same token, no individual has any ground other than personal preference for espousing or remaining loyal to any ideal. But if personal preference is the highest standard for an individual, without a higher and fixed standard to which every individual preference ought to bow, then “everything a man is willing to dare will be permissible.” If one asks, “what is there that puts moral limits on what any and all humans can will and do?”—the answer is: “nothing.” And this is *nihilism* plain and simple: “the contemporary rejection of natural right leads to nihilism—nay, it is identical with nihilism.”

Strauss thus commences the book by responding to, and encouraging in his readers, a strong patriotic hope mixed with or growing out of a sense of alarm. If or insofar as the disinterment of natural right from history or from historical relativism leads to a reinvigoration of the possibility of rationally reaffirming the truth of natural right, will this not contribute, not only to the overcoming of nihilism, but to the resuscitation of that specific “faith” that is the original, the inspiring and life-giving, dedication of the American nation? Moreover, by placing at the threshold of his discussion a dual long epigraph from the Bible (2 Samuel 12 and 1 Kings 21), Strauss responds to and encourages even further-reaching hopes: will there not be found an important connection between the Bible’s teaching and the Lockean teaching of a rationally demonstrable “Creator” who has “endowed all men” with “certain unalienable Rights?”

Precisely if or because these hopes are truly strong, or express strength of soul, the hopes scorn to be coddled by illusions. Strauss thus continues to speak to these hopes when he signals in the fourth paragraph the deeply disconcerting complication. Despite the nihilistic outcome, “generous liberals” in America “view the abandonment of natural right not only with placidity but with relief.” And this Strauss explains without further reference to “the yoke of German thought.” This posture of “generous liberals” arises as a consequence of a “particular interpretation of natural right, according to which the one thing needful is respect for diversity or individuality.” “*Liberal* relativism,” Strauss finally declares, “has its roots in the natural right tradition of tolerance or in the notion that everyone has a natural right to the pursuit of happiness as he understands happiness.”

But wait: is this not the very natural right tradition which finds expression in the previously quoted lapidary passage from the Declaration of Independence? Indeed. What then has happened, in history, to this tradition?

¹¹ Consider Rorty, 1989: 195-97 (“we are under no obligations other than the ‘we-intentions’ of the communities with which we identify”).

The original doctrine of natural rights—seen, in its classic form, we later hear (Chapter Five of NRH), in the treatises of John Locke above all—placed on the respect for individuality and diversity “absolute” limits. These limits were dictated by what were understood to be rational insights into natural (i.e., universal and unchanging) right or rights, as well as rational insights into what is by nature good and bad for human beings, in all times and places. From the very beginning, however, these claimed insights were accompanied by, or even based upon, prominent and emphatic denials that there exists anything that can be known to be *intrinsically* right, or anything that can be known to be *intrinsically* and universally—and not merely instrumentally or relatively—good or enjoyable.¹² It is this latter cornerstone of the original doctrine that provides the jumping-off point for the subsequent development. Today’s “generous liberals,” Strauss says, “appear to believe that our inability to acquire any genuine knowledge of what is intrinsically good or right compels us” to “recognize all preferences or all ‘civilizations’ as equally respectable.” This compulsion, Strauss stresses, has been presented as a demand of reason: “only unlimited tolerance is in accordance with reason”; “all intolerant or all ‘absolutist’ positions” are “condemned because they are based on a demonstrably false premise, namely, that men can know what is good.”

Yet this characterization of contemporary liberal relativism as an austere demand of reason does not get to the animating heart of the matter. For this does not explain the indignant “passion” with which “generous liberals” express their “condemnation” of “all ‘absolutes.’” Liberal relativism is, paradoxically, a righteously censorious moralism. Strauss therefore adds: “at the bottom of the passionate rejection of all ‘absolutes,’ we discern the recognition of a natural right or, more precisely, of that particular interpretation of natural right according to which the one thing needful is respect for diversity or individuality.” It is on the basis of this overriding imperative of respect for diversity or individuality that liberal relativists in effect claim a “rational or natural right” to “condemn” all “‘absolutist’ positions.”

But, once it is made explicit, this particular version of rational or natural right stands exposed in its questionable coherence. “There is a tension between the respect for diversity or individuality and the recognition of natural right.” For what about the many diverse cultures and individuals who are “absolutists,” and even intolerant? On what ground do they, or the fervent and deeply held beliefs that define them, deserve less than equal respect? In other words, even “the most liberal version of natural right” turns out to

¹² Cf. NRH, chap. 5, concluding para. (pp. 249-50) with John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 1.3.6 and 12, 2.20.2-3, 2.21.55 (and contexts); see also Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Thomas Law, June 13, 1814; “nature has constituted utility to man the standard and test of virtue” (see the context; but see also Letter to William Short, October 13, 1819).

contain at its heart an “absolutism” that excludes from equal respect the majority of humanity—all who are not liberal; all who do not embrace the tolerant, liberal notion of natural right.

The intellectual impasse, and the consequent astoundingly self-contradictory contortions, into which the recognition of this inescapable “absolutism” leads even or precisely intelligent and thoughtful liberal relativists Strauss illustrates in the case of his “famous contemporary,” Isaiah Berlin. In Strauss’s essay titled “Relativism,” he focuses on Berlin’s well-known monograph, *Two Concepts of Liberty*,¹³ where Berlin attempts to provide a relativistic defense of the liberal idea of liberty and tolerance, in what Strauss terms “a characteristic document of the crisis of liberalism.”

II. Isaiah Berlin as Paradigmatic of the Dilemma of Liberal Relativistic Theory

Berlin defends what he calls the “negative” concept of liberty, or “freedom *from*.” Associated with thinkers like John Stuart Mill, this “negative” concept of liberty calls for (in Berlin’s words) “a maximum degree of noninterference compatible with the minimum demands of social life.” The threat to this latter liberty Berlin sees coming from what he calls the “positive” concept of liberty (or “freedom *to*”)—associated with “Kant and the rationalists of his type.” The “positive” concept of liberty requires that the individual “be his own master,” or participate in the social control to which he is subject. This latter, “positive” concept of liberty is linked to the notion that true liberty is the liberation of a “true self,” which is not the same as “our poor, desire-ridden, passionate, empirical selves.”¹⁴ Berlin spotlights, and his whole position is animated by his fear of, the danger that (as Strauss puts it in his paraphrase¹⁵), “positive freedom” has “to a higher degree the tendency to be understood as freedom only for the true self and therefore as compatible with the most extreme coercion of the empirical selves to become something that their true selves allegedly desire.”

Yet Berlin admits and even stresses that negative liberty also requires that some minimal but strict coercive limits be placed on individual “freedom to live as one prefers.” Strauss quotes the following words of Berlin: “there must be some frontiers of freedom which nobody should ever be permitted to cross”; those frontiers must be “absolute”—

¹³ Berlin, 1958; Strauss’s essay (originally published in 1961) is reprinted in RCPR, and the analysis of Berlin is in pp. 13-18.

¹⁴ Berlin, 1958: 8-9, 11, 15-16, 32, 38n., 46.

¹⁵ Strauss is paraphrasing *Ibid.*, 19.

Different names or natures may be given to the rules that determine these frontiers: they may be called natural rights or the word of God, or Natural law, or the demands of utility or of the “deepest interests of man”; I may believe them to be valid a priori, or assert them to be my own subjective ends, or the ends of my society or culture. . . . Genuine belief in the inviolability of a minimum extent of individual liberty entails some such absolute stand. (ibid., 50)

Yes, but which stand? And what is the ground on which the liberal takes this stand? And how does he defend that ground rationally, with argument for and evidence of its validity? As Strauss protests, what Berlin is saying here is that “the demand for the sacredness of a private sphere needs a basis, an ‘absolute’ basis, but it has no basis; any old basis, any ‘such absolute stand’ as reference to my own subjective will or the will of my society will do.”

But it gets much worse.

For in this same passage Berlin declares that what these absolute “rules or commandments” defining the sacredness of the liberal private sphere “will have in common” is, “that they are accepted so widely, and are grounded so deeply in the actual human nature of men as they have developed through history, as to be, by now, an essential part of what we mean by being a normal human being.” And yet on the very next page (ibid., 51-52) Berlin is driven to grossly contradict himself: now he declares that “freedom from” and “freedom to” are “two profoundly divergent and irreconcilable attitudes to the ends of life,” each of which “makes absolute claims,” which “cannot both be fully satisfied,” but each of whose “satisfaction” is “an ultimate value” that “*has an equal right to be classed among the deepest interests of mankind*” (my italics). Berlin desperately wants to defend liberal tolerance as a natural right, as an expression of what is “essential” to a “normal human”; but something strangely powerful possesses him to such a degree that he feels compelled to acknowledge the “equal right” (as an expression of “the deepest interests of humanity”) of the *rejection* of liberal tolerance—in the name of its “irreconcilable” antagonist, “positive liberty.”

III. The Slide into Liberal Obscurantism

Keeping this vivid example afforded by the self-contradictory incoherence of Isaiah Berlin before us, if we now return to Strauss’s presentation, in the fourth paragraph of the Introduction to *Natural Right and History*, of the unfolding drama of liberal relativism, we find Strauss remarking that when, or insofar as, liberals have reacted to their recognition of this sort of contradiction (that we find illustrated in Berlin) by totally abandoning even the most minimal absolutes of natural right, and choosing “the uninhibited cultivation” of diversity and individuality, then “tolerance appeared as one value or ideal among many,

and not intrinsically superior to its opposite.” Since absolute, universal and unchanging, “natural,” standards have been abandoned, there are no rational grounds left for contending that the “values or ideals” entailing intolerance are not “equal in dignity to [those entailing] tolerance.”

Indeed, there are no longer any rational grounds left for rejecting or choosing any ideal—tolerant or intolerant, humane or hateful: all ideals, as ideals, are equal in the eyes of reason; all have equal, or indeed the same, “grounds”—that is, the same absence of grounds. The only remaining basis for allegiance to any ideal is a groundless choice, or a groundless surrender to an ingrained preference for one’s own fated tradition, culture, or civilization.

“But,” Strauss continues, “it is practically impossible to leave it at the equality of all preferences or choices.” If “the unequal rank of choices cannot be traced to the unequal rank of their objectives, it must be traced to the unequal rank of the acts of choosing”; and “this means eventually that genuine choice, as distinguished from spurious or despicable choice,” is identified as “nothing but resolute or deadly serious decision” (this terminology evokes Heidegger). But such a decision “is akin to intolerance rather than to tolerance.” The “liberal relativism” that is the outgrowth of the Lockean “natural right tradition of tolerance,” or “the notion that everyone has a natural right to the pursuit of happiness as he understands happiness” becomes “a seminary of intolerance.”

Thus we find even Isaiah Berlin, in the culmination of his argument, endorsing the following chilling and quasi-Heideggerian asseveration that he attributes to “an admirable writer [scil., Joseph Schumpeter] of our time” (*Two Concepts*, 57): “to realize the relative validity of one’s convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian.”¹⁶ Strauss comments: “Berlin cannot escape the necessity to which every thinking being is subject: to take a final stand, an absolute stand.” But what is this stand that Berlin winds up taking? It is this: only those relativists who are resolute or “unflinching” in their commitments (to whatever they may be committed, as relativists), are “civilized”; as for everybody else—for instance, the irresolute and hesitant or searching, or, on the other hand, the non-relativists who believe themselves to have discovered the truth—they are to be regarded as “barbarians.” As Strauss points out, this would imply that “every resolute liberal hack or thug would be a civilized man, while Plato and Kant would be barbarians.”

¹⁶ Richard Rorty (1989: 46) emphatically reiterates and applauds Berlin’s endorsement of this discriminatory definition of who are the “civilized” and who are the “barbarians.”

Of course, Berlin, and those “generous liberals” who follow or adopt something like his position, never intend this conclusion that is necessarily entailed by their argument; all the more amazing and disconcerting is it that such intelligent and good-willed people wind up in such a dark and darkening corner.

Naturally, it is impossible for relativists to live with the nihilism into which their reasoning inevitably drags them. In the fifth or central paragraph of the introduction to *Natural Right and History*, Strauss reveals that “nihilism” is not, in fact, the truly ultimate *practical* outcome of relativism. For nihilism contradicts life and especially political life, because it contradicts moral responsibility and wholehearted loyalty to one’s society: therefore nihilism is not humanly tenable in the long run. Yet nihilism is the logical outcome necessarily and irresistibly deduced by reason from relativism, and specifically from our liberal society’s reigning commitment to unqualified respect for diversity or individuality. “The more we cultivate reason, the more we cultivate nihilism.” So: since life itself rejects nihilism, “in order to live, we have to silence the easily silenced voice of reason.” That is, “the inescapable practical consequence of nihilism is fanatical obscurantism,” i. e., the desperately moralistic flight from reasoning—or from what reason reveals—about the apparent groundlessness of our moral and civic being. As Strauss put it in another study:

The result is visible in practically every curriculum and textbook of our time. One has the impression that the question of the nature of political things has been superseded by the question of the characteristic “trends” of the social life of the present and of their historical origins, and that the question of the best, or the just, political order has been superseded by the question of the probable or desirable future. (WIPP, 59)

Everything possible is done to hide from ourselves and our students the radical, genuinely liberating but necessarily frightening, questions about how we are to evaluate and judge our society as a whole and its historical trajectory.

IV. The Danger Lurking in the Reaction Against Liberal Relativism

In the sixth paragraph of the Introduction to *Natural Right and History*, Strauss adds the surprising and disturbing warning that precisely our indignant aversion to this outcome may “lead us to embrace natural right in a spirit of fanatical obscurantism.” The embrace of natural right, without a full and certain rational proof of its validity—the embrace of natural right especially in a spirit of indignation against “the nihilists,” or even against the “fanatical obscurantists”—could well be itself the expression of a fanatical obscurantism. Such an embrace could constitute nothing less than the betrayal or “destruction of

reason”—and would be thus an implicit expression of, rather than an escape from, nihilism.¹⁷

Let us pause to observe that Strauss thus begins his most synoptic work with a very prominent warning against what might be called “Straussianism.” This was by no means Strauss’s sole such warning (see esp. Tarcov 1991). Yet Strauss also insisted that the problem of philosophic “sectarianism” was much more complex than is usually realized today. The history of classical philosophy, which did full justice to the fact that “the philosopher is as philosopher in need of friends” (since philosophy “is not wisdom but quest for wisdom”), proves that “philosophy, as distinguished from wisdom, *necessarily* appears in the form of philosophic schools or sects.” Strauss emphatically agreed with his Hegelian opponent Alexandre Kojève’s observation that “the danger cannot be avoided by abandoning the sect in favor of” the consensus generated by so-called “respectable intellectual opinion,” or what the French call “the Republic of Letters.” For “the first article of the constitution of the Republic of Letters stipulates that no philosophic persuasion must be taken too seriously.” In other words, “a certain vague middle line, which is perhaps barely tolerable for the most easy-going members of the different persuasions if they are in their drowsiest mood, is set up as The Truth or as Common Sense; the substantive and irrepressible conflicts are dismissed as merely ‘semantic.’” This means to say that “whereas the sect is narrow because it is passionately concerned with the true issues, the Republic of Letters is comprehensive because it is indifferent to the true issues.” It follows that “if we have to choose between the sect and the Republic of Letters, we must choose the sect.” But Strauss insists that this does not exhaust the options, for this does not yet do justice to the possible meaning of a philosophic “school” in the classic sense. —

Philosophy as such is nothing but genuine awareness of the problems, i.e., of the fundamental and comprehensive problems. It is impossible to think about these problems without becoming inclined toward a solution, toward one or another of the very few typical solutions. 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 his ‘subjective certainty’ of a solution become stronger than his awareness of the problematic character of that solution. At that moment the sectarian is born. The danger of succumbing to the attraction of solutions is essential to philosophy which, without incurring this danger, would degenerate into playing with the problems. But the philosopher does not necessarily succumb to this danger, as is shown by Socrates, who never belonged to a sect and never founded one. And even [Strauss pregnantly and Delphicly adds] if the philosophic friends are compelled to be members of a

¹⁷ Cf. Strauss’s comment in RCPR, 19: “A Marxist writer, Georg Lukács, has written a history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century German thought under the title *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* [*The Destruction of Reason*]. I believe that many of us Western social scientists must plead guilty to this accusation.”

sect or to found one, they are not necessarily members of one and the same sect: *Amicus Plato*” (WIPP, 114-16).¹⁸

To return to the Introduction to *Natural Right and History*: in the next or seventh paragraph Strauss deepens his admonition by cautioning that the uncovering of the genealogy of the idea of natural right will, “contrary to a popular notion,” “aggravate rather than remove the difficulty of an impartial treatment”—or of what Strauss previously characterized as the needed “cautious,” “detached, theoretical, impartial discussion” of the “problem of natural right” (NRH, para. 6, pp. 6-7).

Strauss is certainly at pains to remind the reader whose strong uneasiness and hopes he is arousing that that anxiety and those hopes seek something that transcends even patriotism: the “need for natural right,” the need that is “as evident today as it has been for centuries and even millennia,” includes the human need for liberation from spiritual slavery to the ideal of our own society; “the mere fact that we can raise the question of the worth of the ideal of our society shows that there is something in man that is not altogether in slavery to his society, and therefore that we are able, and hence obliged, to look for a standard with reference to which we can judge of the ideals of our own as well as of any other society” (NRH, para. 2, p. 3).

V. Strauss’s Troubling Questions

The first seven paragraphs of the Introduction to *Natural Right and History* thus quietly but insistently pose, for the attentive and questing reader, the following cascade of disquieting questions. To what extent is the historical outcome, in our time, of the specifically modern natural rights doctrine that inspires and finds expression in the Declaration of Independence *necessary*, or inevitable—thereby revealing a lack of solid grounds for that doctrine from its inception? Or, alternatively, to what extent is this historical development a very unfortunate accident, or series of forgetful mistakes—from which we might recover, by retrieving the pristine original, by re-elaborating the cogency of the rigorous and comprehensive argumentation from truly “self-evident” premises that proves conclusively the truth of the Lockean natural rights doctrine? What is the decisive series of forgetful mistakes, or what are the unanswered (unanswerable?) needs, that in the course of modern history has eventually rendered the Lockean doctrine of natural right—of the natural (universal and fixed) rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—unsustainable, and, what is worse, ultimately productive of nihilism, or of fanatical

¹⁸ The last two Latin words refer us, I believe, to reflection on the relationship between the Aristotelians and the Platonists (see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096a11-16).

obscurantism, and hence of the abandonment of reason or of rationalism altogether? Most specifically, why are the contemporary progeny of Locke, “the generous liberals,” impelled, out of some kind of awe or shame before “diversity or individuality,” to disown their belief in the rationally knowable, unchanging and universal, goodness or rightness even of tolerance? What power radiates from “diversity or individuality,” to shake so profoundly the late-modern West, driving “generous liberals” to conceive of their tolerance merely as an “ideal” of our own particular historical culture or civilization? What is the allure of “diversity and individuality” that makes the late-modern heirs to the “faith” in Lockean natural rights forsake that faith, to “welcome with relief” the “yoke” of “German thought,” consisting in the imposition of historical relativism? And why is it all-too-likely that even or precisely the renewed embrace of natural right, in reaction, will itself be an expression of fanatic fear—rather than love or acceptance—of the truth disclosed by reason? Precisely what is it about this truth, about *the* truth, that makes it so profoundly disconcerting? Is it really the truth that is bad or ugly? Or is the problem at bottom our unhealthy reaction to the truth, a reaction due to some terrible weakness or confusion of ours—either historically acquired (and hence, we might hope, perhaps historically curable), or lamentably intrinsic to the human condition? If the last, is the weakness or confusion inescapable by all—or is it only ubiquitous among us?

VI. Plumbing the Depths of the Crisis

It is now obvious that Strauss does not understand our crisis, this crisis of our universal “culture” of normative reason or science, to be caused by moral lapses or weaknesses of character—by our loss of will, or by our self-indulgent permissiveness, or by our failure of fidelity to our “Great Tradition.” In Strauss’s diagnosis, these are all symptoms or effects, not causes. The causes lie deep within the problematic character of our “Great Tradition.”

Our Great Tradition as it is handed down to us is riven, Strauss contends, by two throbbing tensions that have been often and in many ways buried, masked, or denied but have never been resolved. These discords Strauss terms (borrowing from illustrious predecessors) “the Quarrel Between the Ancients and the Moderns,” and (with a bow to Spinoza’s felicitous formulation) “the theologico-political problem”—meaning, more expansively, “the conflict between the Biblical and the philosophic notions of the good life.”

“The Quarrel between the ancients and the moderns” is the term some of the great protagonists gave to the vast philosophic, scientific, political, and cultural struggle that took place in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the previously reigning

authority of classical rationalism (above all Aristotle) was overthrown and replaced with a new, antagonist modern rationalism—whose eventual historical development has culminated in our crisis.

“The theologico-political problem” Strauss articulates, in a nutshell, as the “fundamental question,” whether “men can acquire that knowledge of the good without which they cannot guide their lives individually or collectively by the unaided efforts of their natural powers, or whether they are dependent for that knowledge on Divine Revelation.” “No alternative,” Strauss continues, “is more fundamental than this: . . . a life of obedient love versus a life of free insight.” And, he adds, “In every attempt at harmonization, in every synthesis however impressive, one of the two opposed elements is sacrificed, more or less subtly but in any event surely, to the other” (NRH, 74-75). The fundamental problem of human existence is a “*theologico-political*,” and not merely a “theological” problem because its most important meaning and bearing is not only theological but political: at stake is the ultimate source of our norms of justice or righteousness, the norms by which we guide our lives as citizens, ultimately citizens of the world, obligated to one another, and not merely concerned with and for our poor individual selves.

The contested alternative that is the “theologico-political problem” is more fundamental than the contested alternative “ancients vs. moderns.” For at the heart of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns Strauss finds a quarrel over the proper philosophic response to the theologico-political problem. Ever since the dawn of the modern “Enlightenment,” the West has been in large part captivated or dominated by an increasingly desperate attempt to assert and to believe that the theologico-political problem—the tension that is at the very heart of the West, the tension between “Jerusalem and Athens”—has been or can be adequately disposed of, if not overcome, in a way and to a degree undreamed of by the ancient philosophers and their medieval heirs. I believe Strauss understands the crisis of our times to represent nothing less than the eruption into broad daylight of the ultimate and complex historical consequences of the modern West’s long incubating self-doubts in this crucial regard.

This means to say that Strauss understands “the crisis of our times” as “the crisis of the West.” Ours is a crisis that exposes the untenability of the Western tradition in its historically developed, present form. Truly to understand the gravity of the crisis of our times is to see the absurdity of trying simply to reinvigorate, and to re-dedicate ourselves to continuing, our Western tradition, as it has been given to us. The Western tradition as it has nurtured and shaped us has become bewildered and bewildering. But we cannot simply jettison what the West has become or has made us into; we cannot magically reconstitute ourselves or try to leap out of history. Neither can we leap back, over this history, to some

earlier epoch, be it medieval or ancient, or early modern. For the early “moderns” were not without impressive grounds for their acute dissatisfaction with the “ancient” (and the medieval) responses to the “theologico-political problem”; and the later moderns were not without impressive grounds for their acute dissatisfaction with their earlier modern predecessors. We cannot simply return to “the ancients”: we have to re-open the “quarrel between the ancients and the moderns.” We have to retrieve, to rethink, to re-live that quarrel, at its deepest philosophic level, in its unfolding complexity, and without any *parti pris*.

Gripped by the crisis of our times, we have to launch a strenuous struggle for self-critical understanding of what has become of the West and why—in a search for the possibility of salvaging what can and should be salvaged, as the core of a genuinely reasonable life, based on and resigned to the knowable limits of our powers. We can take heart from the paradoxical and initially mysterious watchword of all authentic Socratic rationalism: *human wisdom is knowledge of ignorance*. As Strauss explains, Knowledge of ignorance is not ignorance. It is knowledge of the elusive character of the truth, of the whole. Socrates, then, viewed man in the light of the mysterious character of the whole. He held therefore that we are more familiar with the situation of man as man than with the ultimate causes of that situation. We may also say that he viewed man in the light of the unchangeable ideas, i.e., of the fundamental and permanent problems.

This last sentence begins to take us into Strauss’s highly controversial interpretation of the true, hidden and lost, meaning of the famous and apparently dogmatic–metaphysical Platonic “doctrine of ideas.” On the basis of his controversial new interpretation of the Platonic dialogues, Strauss utterly rejects today’s universal scholarly assumption that Plato was a “Platonist.” Before we launch into even a preliminary introduction to Strauss’s revolutionary Plato-reinterpretation (and its critical importance for our world), we need to listen to the cautionary admonitions Strauss issues at the outset of the voyage he invites us to undertake with him.

For Strauss emphatically warns that our journey cannot have any successful outcome if we fall prey to the natural temptation to insist that we must, come what may, return with the answers for which we seek. One “is not likely to return to the shores of our time as exactly the same man who departed from them” (NIPPP, 331). In the course of the voyage, Strauss predicts, our very questions may well undergo a metamorphosis. Whatever answers we find, if they are to be true and not merely another set of temporarily comforting illusions or excuses for thinking, must be answers that arise from the truth of the matters that we discover and not from our passionate wishes. Our discoveries must chastise our wishes. We cannot be sure that the crisis which propels us into this struggle is a crisis capable of being surmounted. We may finally discover the truth of what the singularly

intransigent as well as profound thinker of this crisis, Heidegger, calls the angst-ridden uncovering of “the nothing” or *nihil* into which and out of which all humans are “thrown” by Destiny or Being—and about which we as humans in this epoch are given the dubious privilege of becoming self-conscious. Strauss offers no certainty and no promise in this regard (NRH, 6-7). What he offers is no more and no less than this: a path, the sole path, that can be taken by anyone who, as a necessary consequence of seriously facing our predicament, in honesty or intellectual probity as well as prudence, has no choice but to seek to overcome this crisis—or to understand that and why it cannot be overcome.

To avoid misunderstandings, it is essential to add at once that Strauss does not suppose that the most profound contradiction at the heart of the “Great Tradition” of the West—the conflict between philosophic reason (or science), and prophetic scriptural revelation—in and of itself renders the Western tradition untenable, or even weak. On the contrary. The key perennial practical as well as theoretical challenge the West has always faced is, how and whether the custodians of the Great Tradition, in each epoch, keep alive this titanic controversy. We too in our time are called to this task, although the reigning relativism that is our dying version of the Western tradition tries to deny this challenge and this call. In Strauss’s words, “it seems to me that this antagonism must be considered by us in action.” As he proceeds to make clear, the “action” he has in mind is argumentation, rigorous dialogue: That is to say: “the core, the nerve, of Western intellectual history, Western spiritual history, one could almost say, is the conflict between the Biblical and the philosophic notions of the good life,” which has “showed itself primarily, of course, in arguments—arguments advanced by theologians on behalf of the Biblical point of view and by philosophers on behalf of the philosophic point of view.” On this level of argumentation, it seems to me that this unresolved conflict is the secret of the vitality of Western civilization. The recognition of two conflicting roots of Western civilization is, at first, a very disconcerting observation. Yet this realization has also something reassuring and comforting about it. The very life of Western civilization is the life between two codes, a fundamental tension. There is therefore no reason inherent in Western civilization itself, in its fundamental constitution, why it should give up life. But this comforting thought is justified only if we live that life, if we live that conflict. (RCPR, 270)

In the opening of a chapter which he contributed to an undergraduate textbook that he edited, Strauss gives a more specific indication of what it means to “live that conflict”; he does so by providing a pointer to the thinkers and the texts that should initially spur and guide the argumentation:

Men often speak of virtue without using the word but saying instead “the quality of life” or “the great society” or “ethical” or even “square.” But do we know what virtue is? Socrates arrived at the conclusion that it is the greatest good for a human being to make everyday speeches about virtue—apparently without ever finding a completely satisfactory definition of it. However, if we seek the most elaborate and least ambiguous answer to this truly vital question, we shall turn to Aristotle’s *Ethics*. There we read among other things that there is a virtue of the first order called magnanimity—the habit of claiming high honors for oneself with the understanding that one is worthy of them. We also read there that sense of shame is not a virtue: sense of shame is becoming for the young who, due to their immaturity, cannot help making mistakes, but not for mature and well-bred men who simply always do the right and proper thing. Wonderful as all this is—we have received a very different message from a very different quarter. When the prophet Isaiah received his vocation, he was overpowered by the sense of his unworthiness: “I am a man of unclean lips amidst a people of unclean lips.” This amounts to an implicit condemnation of magnanimity and an explicit vindication of the sense of shame. The reason is given in the context: “holy, holy, holy is the lord of hosts.” There is no holy god for Aristotle and the Greeks generally. Who is right, the Greeks or the Jews? Athens or Jerusalem? And how to proceed in order to find out who is right? Must we not admit that human wisdom is unable to settle this question and that every answer is based on an act of faith? But does this not constitute the complete and final defeat of Athens? For a philosophy based on faith is no longer philosophy. Perhaps it was this unresolved conflict which has prevented Western thought from ever coming to rest. Perhaps it is this conflict which is at the bottom of a kind of thought which is philosophic indeed but no longer Greek: modern philosophy. It is in trying to understand modern philosophy that we come across Machiavelli. (HPP, 296-97)

The quest which Strauss thus adumbrates is a Socratic quest or *skepsis* (though it is of course a late-modern quest, and thus not a quest that Socrates himself was ever required or enabled to undertake). In order to consider whether to follow Strauss in this search or *zetesis*, it is of the utmost importance that we try to begin to understand better the chasm that separates non-absolutist “zetetic skepticism” (as Strauss terms it) from the relativism that is the core of our crisis.

VII. Socratic “Zetetic Skepticism” vs. Late-Modern Relativism

Relativism comes in a range of forms. At a lower reach of the range there is the more common, less thoughtful type: the relativism that views all ultimate “values” as radically subjective and hence equal. The practical consequence of this more vulgar variant is a shallow nihilism that is unlivable and that therefore always in one way or another becomes self-contradictory and fanatically obscurantist. But there is a far more sophisticated and sternly intransigent type of relativism, growing out of the German idealist tradition and reaching its culmination in Nietzsche’s thought, radicalized by Heidegger.

This relativism looks down with contempt not only on scientific positivism, but on liberalism and on the individualistic and egalitarian expressions of relativism. Strauss circumscribes as follows the core of this deeper and more grimly challenging relativism.

In response to contemporary science's claim to deal with "facts," and thus to find an island of non-evaluating objectivity that is insulated from contaminating determination by "subjective values," historicism counters that "every understanding, however theoretical, implies specific evaluations." For science is "said to be a body of true propositions." But these propositions are all "are answers to questions." What a valid *answer* consists of "may be determined by the rules or principles of logic"; "but the *questions* depend on one's direction of interest, and hence on one's values," which are "subjective" or, more adequately expressed, are "dependent on the society" to which and in which the science and its human practitioners belong (WIPP, 25-26).

For "values" are not purely individual creations or choices, the radical historicist insists. They are rather choices and creations of individuals living within and shaped by diverse, conflicting, and ever mutating specific historical-cultural matrices. More than that. "Values," the radical historicist contends, are a manifestation of radically temporal and contingent "life" or "existence"—whose universal contours can, to some limited but crucial extent, be grasped, in varying degrees in various epochs and cultural "horizons." Our epoch is one that is paradoxically privileged in this regard. Ours is the dis-illusioned epoch, the epoch of the decisive insight and hence the greatest danger but also the greatest promise. In recognizing this, one sees that all "values" are far from being equal in dignity, and that the claim that values are equal in dignity is merely the expression of a peculiarly impoverished or lifeless and hence inferior "horizon." The equalization of values is the greatest danger. Values and cultures can and must be ranked in accordance with the degree of resoluteness or seriousness with which the basic values are held or advanced, and in accordance with their depth or shallowness, their comprehensiveness or narrowness, their honesty or hypocrisy, their communal responsibility or irresponsibility, their degree of veneration for their past and of revolutionary creativity looking to their future.

Yet none of these and kindred criteria, one by one or all together, constitute an adequate account of what is humanly good, high, or right—or bad, low, or wrong. Criteria such as those just mentioned, the radical historicist insists, allow no more than a kind of formal and preliminary ranking. None of these criteria allow us to speak of human "nature" in more than a very loose sense. There is not "the" good society, or "the" human condition, or even "the" (permanent) human problems or alternatives. The general or universal characteristics of "values" and of the problems they pose for living humans always require completion through unique and essentially temporal or impermanent specification. (For example, one can speak of the necessity for "family values" in any healthy culture, and one

can even specify certain essential features of family values, such as respect for parents and the nurturing of children, etc.; but these family values must be made much, much more specific to attain their concrete meaning—because the human family, as is obvious from the least survey of rich and profound historical cultures, is distinguished by incalculably diverse and antagonistic forms of matriarchy or patriarchy, of monogamy or polygamy, of linkage to monotheisms or to polytheisms, of postures toward homosexuality, etc., etc.) “The crucial issue,” Strauss writes in summarizing this “thoughtful historicist” position (WIPP, 26-27),

concerns the status of those permanent characteristics of humanity, such as the distinction between the noble and the base, which are admitted by the thoughtful historicists: can these permanencies be used as criteria for distinguishing between good and bad dispensations of fate? The historicist answers this question in the negative. He looks down on the permanencies in question because of their objective, common, superficial and rudimentary character: to become relevant, they would have to be completed, and their completion is no longer common but historical.

The grim political implication becomes clear when Strauss adds: “It was the contempt for these permanencies which permitted the most radical historicist in 1933 to submit to, or rather to welcome, as a dispensation of fate, the verdict of the least wise and least moderate part of his nation while it was in its least wise and least moderate mood, and at the same time to speak of wisdom and moderation.”

Over and against “the historicist contention” stands the Socratic self-vindication, as Strauss resurrects it (NRH, 32, 35-36). Historicism, Strauss charges, not only fails to prove, it does not really even *argue* for the validity of the unprecedented, late-modern, so-called “experience of history” (that is, the purported “experience” of the historical mutability of *all* human thought). “In the transition from early (theoretical) to radical (‘existentialist’) historicism, the ‘experience of history’ was never submitted to critical analysis.” Instead, “it was taken for granted” that this “is a genuine experience and not a questionable interpretation of experience.” The “question” was not even “raised,” “whether what is really experienced does not allow of an entirely different and possibly more adequate interpretation”—the indication of which interpretation is perhaps the deepest intention of Strauss in *Natural Right and History* (not to mention all his other writings on modernity, and his discovery of esoteric writing). Above all, the so-called definitive “experience of history” does not, Strauss insists, “make doubtful the view that the fundamental problems, such as the problems of justice, persist or retain their identity in all historical change, however much they may be obscured by the temporary denial of their relevance and however variable or provisional all human solutions to these problems may be.” “No more is needed,” Strauss continues, “to legitimate philosophy in its original, Socratic sense:

“philosophy in the full sense of the term” is “possible” if, and “only if man, while incapable of acquiring wisdom or full understanding of the whole, is capable of knowing what he does not know, that is to say, of grasping the fundamental problems” —and, therewith, “the fundamental alternatives regarding their solution,” which “are, in principle, coeval with human thought.”

Yet here we encounter one of the most enigmatic aspects of Strauss’s self-definition as a Socratic. For Strauss goes on to acknowledge that “if political philosophy is limited to understanding the fundamental alternative [sing.], it is of no practical value.” It would be “unable to answer the question of what the ultimate goal of wise action is.” It would “have to delegate the crucial decision to blind choice.” Now, Strauss observes, “the whole galaxy of political philosophers from Plato to Hegel, and certainly all adherents of natural right, assumed that the fundamental political problem is susceptible of a final solution.” Strauss obviously provokes the question (which would of course be asked at once by his historicist dialectical interlocutor): what if anything is the ground for this momentous “assumption” that pervades and characterizes all genuine political philosophy?

Strauss answers: “this assumption ultimately rested on the Socratic answer to the question of how man ought to live.” And what is that answer? Strauss replies: “by realizing that we are ignorant of the most important things, we realize at the same time that the most important thing for us, or the one thing needful, is quest for knowledge of the most important things or quest for wisdom.” But how does this answer amount to a “final solution” to “the fundamental political problem?” Strauss shows that he is acutely aware of, and even means to provoke in the reader, this question, as he cryptically replies: “that this conclusion is not barren of political consequences is known to every reader of Plato’s *Republic* or of Aristotle’s *Politics*.” Now what does this remark mean? While “every reader” of these works can recognize that they are “not barren” of political consequences, it is hardly the case that “every reader” discerns, in either or both of the works to which Strauss here refers, the “final solution” to “the fundamental political problem.” Moreover, even some rather competent readers (e. g., Hegel), who seem to have found in Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Politics* a cornerstone of what they understood to be the complete solution, seem to have disagreed deeply with Aristotle and with Plato (or his Socrates) as to the character of that solution. But did even those rather competent readers have the requisite patience and docility to figure out the political consequences that Plato and Aristotle intended to teach? Did they take seriously enough the pervasiveness of Platonic and Socratic irony? Or were they among the “many interpreters of Plato” who “do not sufficiently consider the possibility that his Socrates was as much concerned with understanding what justice is, i. e., with understanding the whole complexity of the problem of justice, as with preaching justice?” For “if one is concerned with understanding

the problem of justice, one must go through the stage in which justice presents itself as identical with citizen-morality, and one must not merely rush through that stage”—a “stage” which Strauss identifies as depicted above all by Socrates’ conversation with Polemarchus in Book One of the *Republic*. That conversation, Strauss indicates, must be estimated and studied in light of the passage in the *Phaedrus* which informs us that Polemarchus is one of the very few characters in the Platonic dialogues who in Socrates’ opinion made the transition from citizen youth to philosophic youth (NRH, 150n.). This much is indisputable: Strauss could not have made it clearer that our coming to understand what he means by the “Socratic answer” depends on our following with care and then imitating on our own Strauss’s detailed interpretations of Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Politics*—as well as his interpretations of the great medievals, the Jew Maimonides, the Muslim Farabi, and the Christian Marsilius, each of whom upheld the adequacy of the classical “solution” in the face and context of the revealed religions of Scripture. Those interpretations are provided, however, only in part by Strauss’s essays devoted to those works; those essays must be supplemented by the ubiquitous reference to Plato and Aristotle that pervades all Strauss’s other works; they must be supplemented, above all, by Strauss’s extensive and detailed interpretations of the Socratic writings of Xenophon. But this only means to say that Strauss’s interpretations that answer or resolve the puzzle we have identified are in largest part available only to the readers who put together for themselves Strauss’s didactically subtle interpretations.¹⁹

The grave puzzle that we are now focusing upon intensifies as Strauss goes on to concede that “the perennial conflict between the Socratic and the anti-Socratic answer” (to the question how man ought to live) “creates the impression that the Socratic answer is as arbitrary as its opposite, or that the perennial conflict is insoluble.” Those who are under the spell of this impression are led to the unSocratic but also unhistoricist position that Strauss finds expressed at the most serious level of Max Weber’s thinking, which is representative of a scientific relativism that transcends vulgar relativism and, in at least one—or even the crucial—respect, stands closer to Strauss and to Socratism than anything found in Heidegger or radical historicism.

Strauss confronts Max Weber as an impressive representative of all those “who are not historicists,” because they “do admit the existence of fundamental and unchanging alternatives,” but nevertheless “deny that human reason is capable of solving the conflict between these alternatives.” For Weber, “the ultimate values are as timeless as the principles of logic”; and “it is the recognition of timeless values that distinguishes Weber’s position most significantly from historicism” (NRH, 36 and 39). But why, according to

¹⁹ A most helpful and penetrating supplement to Strauss’s own writings on Plato and Socrates is Bruell, 1999; see also Bruell, 1994, and Bolotin, 1979.

Strauss, was Weber impelled to the unSocratic conclusion that “the conflict between ultimate values cannot be resolved by human reason” (ibid., 64)? Strauss gives the following answer (ibid., 72-4).

Weber agreed with Socrates that “science or philosophy” is “the way toward freedom from delusion; it is the foundation of a free life, of a life that refuses to bring the sacrifice of the intellect and dares to look reality in its stern face.” But Weber identified “science or philosophy” with contemporary, late-modern science or philosophy—in itself and in its manifest consequences for the whole of our contemporary historical existence. Weber saw that “the thought of the present age is characterized by disenchantment or unqualified ‘this-worldliness,’ or irreligion”; “but he was certain that all devotion to causes or ideals has its roots in religious faith and, therefore, that the decline of religious faith will ultimately lead to the extinction of all causes or ideals.” He “despaired of the modern this-worldly irreligious experiment, and yet he remained attached to it because he was fated to believe in science as he understood it.” And “the result of this conflict, which he could not resolve, was his belief that the conflict of values cannot be resolved by human reason.”²⁰

In other words: Weber shares with historicism the false assumption that reason as it expresses itself in today’s science and philosophy is the perfection of reason and “the perfection of man’s natural understanding of the natural world.” He and all our contemporaries fail to appreciate fully the degree to which modern reason is historically and thus epistemologically derivative. They fail to recognize the degree to which, in the course of the derivation, an absolutely crucial foundation has been buried and lost. Our science and philosophy is the product of a four centuries old tradition that has more or less deliberately sought to transform existence and thus has covered over the truly natural human world and consciousness. The late-modern “scientific understanding of the world emerges by way of a radical modification, as distinguished from a perfection, of the natural understanding.” Modern science and philosophy has lost sight of what is required to establish the ground of science or philosophy, through a lucid and continuous ascent from the “pre-scientific” world—“the world in which we live,” the world of “common-sense” (NRH, 79). Yet the genuine “common-sense” world is of far less easy access than is generally recognized.

The “natural world” is “the world in which we live and act.” It is thus “not the object or the product of a theoretical attitude; it is a world not of mere objects at which we detachedly look but of ‘things’ or ‘affairs’ which we handle.” But: “as long as we identify the natural or pre-scientific world with the world in which we live, we are dealing with an abstraction.” For “the world in which we live is already a product of science, or at any rate

²⁰ Weber’s most forceful statement of the conflict is found in the dramatic and famous close of his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

it is profoundly affected by the existence of science.” In order “to grasp the natural world as a world that is radically pre-scientific or pre-philosophic, one has to go back behind the first emergence of science or philosophy.” One of course cannot do this through “anthropology,” for that is to impose immediately the interpretive categories of the science of anthropology—i. e., of modern science or of modern philosophy—on the phenomena; and it is precisely those modern categories which are in question. The only satisfactorily liberated access to the natural world that we possess is through the texts of classical philosophy supplemented by the scriptures. “The information that classical philosophy supplies about its origins suffices, especially if that information is supplemented by consideration of the most elementary premises of the Bible” (NRH, 79-80).

For it is no exaggeration to say that the chief and pervasive intention of the Platonic and Xenophontic Socrates’ political philosophizing, as disclosed by Strauss’s interpretations, is to preserve, in order to show the evident necessity of the ascent from, the pre-scientific world, including above all “the most elementary premises of the Bible” (premises which are not of course the theme of the Bible). Historicism as well as the Weberian belief in the irresolvable conflict of timeless ultimate values “may blur, but they cannot extinguish, the evidence of those simple experiences regarding right and wrong which are at the bottom of the philosophic contention that there is a natural right” (NRH, 31-32). The painstaking clarification of what is implied in these “most elementary experiences,” as they are expressed in the opinions of thoughtful and experienced people who are pre-philosophic and pre-scientific, is the core of the Socratic way to the “solution”—by way of a “philosophy of the human things,” i. e., “the just and noble things.”

This carries an important and controversial implication, which defines one of the most distinctive features of Strauss’s understanding of classical political philosophy as Socratic political philosophy.²¹ Strauss denies that the primary theme of classical political

²¹ The quotations in what follows are from NRH, 145-46, and, above all, PPH, 143-46 and 153 (=HPW, 138-40 and 148). The latter statement, in his book on Hobbes, is Strauss’s first sustained adumbration of his decisive discovery concerning the nature of Socratic philosophy—clarified by its opposition to Hobbes and to all modern thought growing out of Hobbes. The statement is, in Strauss’s words, “only a first attempt in this direction, and needs elaboration in every respect” (PPH, 150=HPW, 145); but it is one of the most illuminating statements in this regard that Strauss ever penned—while maintaining his meticulous sense of responsibility as a writer. I would only add that in his statement in NRH, chap. 4, esp. pp. 148ff., Strauss brings out more clearly the fact that our primary opinions about justice in the full sense include the implication that justice exists “only in a society in which everyone does what he can do well and in which everyone has what he can use well”; that “justice is *identical* with membership in such a society and *devotion to* such a society” (my italics); and that it follows that a “society is just if its living principle is ‘equality of opportunity,’ i. e., if every human being belonging to it has the opportunity, corresponding to his capacities, of deserving well of the whole and receiving the proper reward for his deserts,” with the awareness that “the only proper reward for service is honor” (here at p. 148 Strauss has a footnote that refers us to—among other

philosophy is human nature, let alone that classical political philosophy begins from specific assumptions about human nature. Classical philosophy moves to, or issues in, an account of human nature, but it begins from and is based, even centered, on a conversational questioning of authoritative and widespread or universal moral opinion (“common sense”): “human nature is one thing, virtue or the perfection of human nature is another. The definite character of the virtues and, in particular, of justice cannot be deduced from human nature”; “virtue exists in most cases, if not in all cases,” in “speech rather than in deed.” “Plato does not,” in other words, “oppose to materialist-mechanistic physics a spiritualist-teleological physics (*Phaedo* 100c-e), but keeps to what can be understood without any far-fetched ‘tragic’ apparatus, to what the ‘Athenians’ say (cf. *Meno*, 75b-d with 76d-e; cf. further, *Phaedo*, 100c-e).” But “what men say” is “*contradictory*.” The “contradictions make necessary an investigation into which of the conflicting assertions is true.” The result is, that “one of the conflicting *endoxa* [“common sense” opinions] must be given up, the opposed *endoxon* [“common sense” opinion] must be maintained.” Thus the latter ceases to be simply “common sense,” and becomes “truly paradoxical”: “*but by making unanimity and understanding of each with himself and with others possible, it proves itself true*”²² (cf. *Republic*, 457b and *Crito*, 46d-e) [my italics]. And “the art of the truth-revealing discussion [*mit-einander-sprechen*], of *dialectic*, is nothing else but directing the discussion in the right way and at the right time to the true *endoxon* [“common-sense” opinion] which is to be maintained.”

Now “the most obvious contradictions which underlie every contention and every enmity, concern the just, the beautiful, and the good (*Euthyphro* 7b-d, and *Phaedrus* 263a; cf. *Republic* 523a-524c)”; and “yet men are in greater accord as regards the good than as regards any other subject, and in such a fashion that *this real concord is the ultimate ground of all possible concord* [my italics].”²³ For “all say of the good that they really wish it.” And “that means that they want the truly good [*das Gute selbst*] and not merely the appearance of good (*Republic*, 505d-e and *Theaetetus*, 177d; cf. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, i, 7, #36-7; cf. *Theaetetus*, 167; *Euthydemus*, 286bff., and *Cratylus*, 385eff.)”—“and further that they wish to have it, to possess it; they pursue it, they desire it, they know, therefore, that they lack it (*Symposium* 204a and 204e-205d; cf. *Meno* 77c-d, *Gorgias*, 468d, *Euthydemus*, 278e-280b, *Hippias Major*, 291d-c and 294a).” Only “a moment’s reflection shows that

texts—Cicero’s *Republic* Bk. 3, sec. 11, a passage that he has previously cited at p. 134n: “justice is that virtue which, beyond others, is entirely devoted and applied to the utility of others”; a bit later, in 152n, Strauss asks us to reconsider this passage in conjunction with *Republic* Bk. 6, sec. 29).

²² “. . . aber Einstimmigkeit und Verständigung eines jeden mit sich selbst und mit den anderen allererst ermöglichenden und so sich als wahr erweisenden Sinne festgehalten werden.” Strauss’s earlier reference is to be consulted at this point also: “cf. *Republic*, 457b and *Crito*, 46d-e.”

²³ “. . . diese wirkliche Einigkeit der letzte Grund jeder möglichen Einigkeit ist.”

what men usually conceive of as good—wealth, honours, and so forth—is not the same good as they *mean*; for they mean by ‘good’ what is in every respect the contrary of evil, that which is completely free from evil.” But “men also say: that the good is virtue and wisdom/insight [*Einsicht*]”; and “it is precisely of this better understood good that what men say of misunderstood good holds: that only by partaking of the true external *transcendent* good as such, which is the ground of their virtue and wisdom/insight, are men virtuous and wise/insightful [*einsichtig*].”²⁴ Such “true virtue” differs from “pseudo-virtue” or “apparent virtue [*Scheintugend*]”²⁵ in this, “that true virtue has as its basis a complete change of objective or orientation [*Blickrichtung*],” whereas apparent virtue “is based entirely on ordinary human aims and interests.” True virtue as opposed to apparent virtue “is the result of ‘divinely inspired madness’, a ‘purification’ of the soul, a conversion of the *whole* soul. It is essentially wisdom/insight (*Phaedo*, 68c-69c; *Phaedrus*, 244d and 256e; *Symposium*, 203a; cf. *Republic*, 518c and 521c).”

“One gains the clearest conception of the antithesis,” between true and apparent or pseudo-virtue, “if one compares the life and fate of a truly just man, who has no appearance of justice, whose justice is *hidden*, with the life and fate of a truly unjust man, who enjoys a reputation for justice and whose injustice is hidden (*Republic*, 365aff.)” For “Socrates-Plato,” it is crucial that one “compares the just and the unjust, and not the *courageous* man and his opposite,” even or precisely because “no virtue seems more brilliant (*N. Ethics*, 1177b16ff.), more worthy of reverence, than courage.” And “yet it is the lowest virtue (*Laws*, 630c-631c; cf. 963eff.)” As such, it is the virtue that least reveals the heart of the matter. The reason comes to sight when one scrutinizes courage “not in its archaic form, in which its sense is, as it were, narrowed and limited by obedience to law” (cf. *Protagoras*, 342b, with *Republic*, 429c-430c), but rather “apart from this limitation, in itself.” Then we see that “courage, as it is usually understood, is the virtue of the *man*, his capacity, without fear or effeminacy, to help himself, to protect himself from injustice or injury, to assert and save himself.” But “according to this ideal, the perfect man is the *tyrant* (*Meno*, 71e; *Gorgias*, 469c, 483a-b, 491b, 512d; *Republic*, 549d-550a),” who is “the most seductive and therefore the most revealing form of the popular ideal of courage”—“and thus challenges to searching criticism of that ideal.” This “ideal” is “nothing more noble, and nothing else, than a disguise of man’s natural self-love, of man’s natural hedonism (cf. *Protagoras*, 349d, with 351bff. as well as *Gorgias*, 492cff.)” Therefore “it is not courage which is the

²⁴ “This is admitted at least by virtuous *youths*, when they seek teachers of virtue, seek to *become* virtuous, and thus express that they have not virtue. What the youths confess of themselves is true of *all* men, if one is only *exact* [*genau*] enough, if one only considers accurately/exactly [*nur genau genug*] what speech means by virtue—virtue as completely unalloyed with vice. The virtue which is not found in the *works* of men is found in *speech* alone, in the divinatory, ‘supposing’ and ‘founding’ knowledge incorporated in speech.”

highest virtue—self-mastery stands higher, and higher still than self-mastery stand wisdom/insight, and justice.” The result of the sustained and soul-purifying critical meditation on justice, in relation to insight or wisdom, Strauss states as follows. “In itself wisdom stands supreme,” but “for humans, justice [*für den Menschen jedoch die Gerechtigkeit*]”: “however much the philosophers, assimilating themselves to God, transcend human limitations, they are, and remain, men, and thus form only one species of men among others, and are thus under allegiance to the *laws* of the State, which has as its aim the maintenance of the whole and not the happiness of the parts.” The “law of the ideal State *compels* the philosophers to take thought for other men and to watch over them and not ‘to turn whither each will’ (*Republic*, 519d-520c).”

Yet at the start, certainly, and especially when we have not yet ourselves begun to taste and fully to experience the soul-transforming effects of the Socratic dialogue, properly understood, we must regard the entire attempt to recapture this true Socratic “solution” as tentative and experimental. Prior to the full “reconsideration of the most elementary premises of philosophy,” Strauss stresses, “the issue of natural right can only remain an open question” (NRH, 31).

²⁵ Strauss refers us to: “*Symposium*, 212a; *Theaetetus*, 176c; *Republic*, 536a.”

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