Discourses on Strauss: revelation and reason in Leo Strauss and his critical study of Machiavelli / Kim A. Sorensen.

Introduction
Leo Strauss on the Permanent Problems
and the Predicaments of Modernity

Whether in his interest in medieval Jewish and Arabic philosophers, his early Zionist writings, his exegeses of ancient Greek philosophers, or his accounts of the moderns, the tension between revelation and reason as mutually exclusive but compelling responses to the predicaments of modernity is never far away in Leo Strauss’s oeuvre. The same is true for his numerous journal articles, lectures, book reviews, and private letters, especially those to Eric Voegelin. The revelation-reason question puts forward the two fundamental alternatives of religion and philosophy for understanding the good life. The elucidation of each alternative, that they are immiscible, and the path they both offer out of the morass of modernity are important themes for Strauss.

Central to the revitalization of political philosophy for Strauss is the effort to excavate the obscured bases of the serious understanding of political things. His “primary” interest as a scholar, David Bolotin notes, was “the history of political philosophy”; “he was too modest,” though, Allan Bloom points out, to describe himself as “a philosopher.”¹ In “Why We Remain Jews” Strauss stated, “Everyone is a specialist, and my specialty is (to use a very broad and nonspecialist name) social science rather than divinity.”² In “On the Interpretation of Genesis” he explained, “I want to begin with the remark that I am not a biblical scholar; I am a political scientist specializing in political theory.” He continued, “Political theory is frequently said to be concerned with the values
of the Western world. These values, as is well known, are partly of biblical and partly of Greek origin. The political theorist must, therefore, have an inkling of the agreement as well as the disagreement between the biblical and the Greek heritage.3 In “Jerusalem and Athens” Strauss posed this core issue of political theory in a candid manner: “We are confronted with the incompatible claims of Jerusalem and Athens to our allegiance. We are open to both and willing to listen to each.”4

Strauss himself was open and willing to listen to both Jerusalem and Athens. To explicate his openness, I focus on his critical study of Machiavelli’s teaching, in the final chapter of Thoughts on Machiavelli. That focus is not for brevity alone, nor is it because Thoughts on Machiavelli is a pivotal work in his corpus.5 The density of religious and philosophic themes in his critical study makes it a good example for an analysis of how Strauss dealt with the revelation-reason question.6 In this book I focus on that question; but to locate Strauss in his intellectual or scholarly milieu, it is helpful to examine how he has been, and continues to be, read, criticized, and understood in academe.

Strauss and his Critics

Whether critics or students, Strauss’s readers are compelled to come to terms with the gravity of his lifework.7 Readers necessarily ask, Who was Leo Strauss and what did he teach?8 Recent vociferous critics of the influence of his lifework, who reduce the range of their inquiries to the influence of his scholarly output on American conservativism, for instance, identifying him as the mastermind—“the Grand Inquisitor”—behind United States foreign policy and the war on Iraq,9 fail to understand him on his own terms. Yet, despite heated and often ad hominem debates about his work, an abiding interest with political philosophy is at the core of his oeuvre.

Shadia Drury claims in her Leo Strauss and the American Right that Strauss and his followers have given American neoconservatism “its sense of crisis, its aversion to liberalism, its rejection of pluralism, its dread of nihilism, its insistence on nationalism, its populism, its religiosity, and more.”10 Drury’s claim is convenient but simplistic; it misses the point of Strauss’s critique of modernity.11 In “Perspectives on the Good Society” Strauss claimed that the “ills” of America are its “tendency toward homogeneity or conformism, that is, toward the suppression by nonpolitical means of individuality and diversity.”12 “Liberal relativism,” he said in Natural Right and History, though it
preaches “tolerance,” “is a seminary of intolerance.” He continued: “Once we realize that the principles of our actions have no other support than our blind choice, we really do not believe in them any more. We cannot whole-heartedly act upon them any more. The more we cultivate reason, the more we cultivate nihilism: the less are we able to be loyal members of society. The inescapable practical consequence of nihilism is fanatical obscurantism.” 

According to Drury’s critique in her *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, described by Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper as a “bizarre splenetic,” Strauss felt contempt for morality; he believed the philosopher to be a near godlike being beyond good and evil and not subject to moral or legal norms. Thus for Drury, Strauss was a nihilist. Of the charge Emberley and Cooper level at Drury, Laurence Lampert explains, “Such mindless dismissals excuse their authors from facing the fact that Drury’s book contains many fine sceptical readings of Strauss’s texts and acute insights into Strauss’s real intentions.” But, Lampert concedes, Drury’s “own missionary tone” undermines her book.

For Stephen Holmes, a “mindset” of “non-Marxist antiliberalism” links Strauss with theorists such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Christopher Lasch, and Roberto Unger. That mindset can be traced back, Holmes says, to Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger, and to the “nineteenth century enemies of the Enlightenment,” Joseph de Maistre and Friedrich Nietzsche. “They all engage in *Kulturkritik*, for example, and their criticisms of modern culture follow a fairly standardized format whereby ‘disparagement of liberalism forms part of a general lamentation over the moral and spiritual degeneration of modern society.’” Holmes is quoting from Francis Coker, “Some Present-Day Critics of Liberalism,” an essay published in the March 1953 issue of the *American Political Science Review*. That Holmes uses the essay to describe Strauss is curious, for Coker did not mention Strauss; moreover, Coker concluded that criticism of liberalism is necessary. “Liberalism needs criticism. A liberal may have exaggerated notions of man’s capacity and disposition to think and act justly and intelligently. . . . Liberals should also recognize that in their open-mindedness they may have exaggerated notions of the possibilities of freedom and variety.”

Of Holmes’s claim that Strauss belongs to an antiliberal tradition of thought, Thomas Spragens remarks, “every group of bedfellows does not add up to a tradition.” It would be a mistake, Peter Berkowitz observes, to see Strauss as an out-and-out antiliberal: “Holmes’ decision to analyze Strauss as an antiliberal is a strange one. For—as Holmes grudgingly acknowledges in the very last footnote of his chapter on Strauss—the fact is that Strauss
defended liberal institutions.”21 In “Progress or Return?” Strauss wrote, “I share the hope in America and the faith in America, but I am compelled to add that that faith and that hope cannot be of the same character as that faith and that hope which a Jew has in regard to Judaism and which the Christian has in regard to Christianity.”22 Thus, Strauss was opposed to a modernity that began with Machiavelli, but was sympathetic to certain strands in modern thought—freedoms of speech, thought, and expression; Strauss regarded these liberal freedoms as necessary for a life of “attachment” to scholarship.23

To comment on Strauss’s legacy is to risk being accused of partisanship; to interject into heated debates about Strauss is to risk being branded a Straussian or an anti-Straussian. In some academic circles, to be a Straussian is to have a conservative, illiberal, and antidemocratic worldview.24 Against the charge of illiberalism, though, Gary Glenn argues that “a political program for today’s circumstances” could be “based on Strauss’ diagnosis” of the ills of liberalism. The program “would shore up liberalism” by “strengthening religiously based self-restraint on the passions” and by “promoting economic innovation and abundance,” for example. The program, then, would “preserve the practice of liberal democracy against the destructive practical consequences of its own principles.”25

In a less vehement tone, the critiques of Strauss offered by both Robert Devigne and Ted McAllister provide a contrast to the bleak critiques penned by Drury and Holmes.26 Contemporary American conservatism, Devigne explains, does draw from Strauss’s diagnosis of the ills of America. That conservatism was a response to, and a reaction against, what in the 1980s and 1990s academe would label postmodernism. In a postmodern society, “political theories have lost all faith, not only in God, but in the human power of transcendence as well.”27 In the 1960s and 1970s, growing alarmed at the ascendency in the American academy, and in the wider social and political landscape, of the notion that politics is the will to action for its own sake, Straussians turned from their studies “to become political commentators and contributors to a new American conservative political theory.” Straussians and neoconservatives call for “public policies and institutions that conduce to public standards of a political and moral good and bad.”28

Shared concerns aside, one can question the specific influence of Straussians over conservatism. For André Liebich, “the relation” between them “is neither one of subservience nor of identity.”29 Steven Smith notes that, although “a number of Strauss’ students (or students of his students) went into government service during the Reagan and Bush years,” “to what extent” they “actively shaped” or “took advantage” of “the conservative agendas of their
respective governments” is “unclear.” McAllister claims that Strauss and Voegelin, through their critique of modernity and call for a return to the classics, gave American conservatism its intellectual underpinnings. Although McAllister concedes that Strauss and Voegelin were not active in the resurgence of American conservatism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he stresses that conservatives gave them “honorary memberships.” Yet, Steven McCarl says, rather than disclosing “the influence of Strauss and Voegelin on specific conservative thinkers,” McAllister “considers them to be vital philosophical critics of modernity and therefore sources of clarifying insight for conservatives.”

The Critique of Modernity

Leaving in abeyance the continuing debates over Strauss’s “conservative” influence, James Schall and others have focused critical appraisal on his core concern with the predicament inherent in modernity. According to Schall, Strauss’s “very project is to attack the roots of precisely the ideological structure of modern thought over against faith and reason.” Harry Jaffa reflects, “No one can guarantee happiness. But one can deserve it. If success could be guaranteed... no one would deserve it. To guarantee success means to abolish human freedom... . The abolition of the possibility of failure may be said to be the heart of the Machiavellian project. Strauss rejected this project with all his heart, and all his soul, and all his mind.” In a memorial article on Strauss, published in December 1973, Herbert Storing wrote, “Strauss’s constructive project was to recover sight of the ends of political life for a profession that had blinded itself to such considerations.” To reach those ends, “he opened up the great alternative of classical political philosophy.” His critique of modernity, Susan Orr explains, is a critique of the “malaise” produced by the collapse of political philosophy and “Western Civilization” into uncertainty, relativism, and nihilism. “Leo Strauss made his contribution to the field of political science by uncovering the roots of modern political science and the intellectual barrenness of the remains of the modern project.” Paradoxically, Orr implies that Strauss is an ally of the postmodernists insofar as he foresaw their critique of modernity.

It is beyond the scope of this book to determine whether, and if so, where, Strauss should be located within a tradition of crisis-thinking. Nevertheless, I would argue that his view of modernity—as marked by “decay,” “decline,” and “crisis”—should be, as Dante Germino remarks, looked at “from the inside” of his self-understanding. In the words of Strauss, “An adequate interpretation...
is such an interpretation as understands the thought of a philosopher exactly as he understood it himself.40 If one takes heed of his dictum, an effort to amplify Strauss’s self-understanding should guide discussion of his oeuvre. Encapsulating that understanding is what he called the “theological-political problem.”41 That “problem,” as will be seen in chapter 2, is the challenge of the fundamental alternatives, revelation and reason.

Reflections on the core problems of modernity, especially the blindness to the above problem, pervade Strauss’s corpus. The inadequacy of historicism and relativism, Hadley Arkes explains, “hovers over everything.”42 In Spinoza’s Critique of Religion, first published in German in 1930, Strauss’s effort in both parts of the work was to show as untenable the attempt by Spinoza (and others) at a historically minded critique of revealed religion; in Part I Strauss examined the historical study of the Bible and the predecessors to Spinoza—Uriel da Costa, Isaac de la Peyrère, and Thomas Hobbes; in Part II he examined Spinoza’s critiques of orthodoxy, Maimonides, and Calvin.43 In contrast to modern rationalism, medieval Jewish rationalism accepted that divine revelation is the defining mark of Jewish heritage, and set out to defend philosophy as sanctioned by the divine command to know—to apprehend the reality of—God.44 As Strauss wrote in 1935, in the introduction to Philosophy and Law, “To awaken a prejudice in favor of this view of Maimonides [that he stands for “the true natural model” of “rationalism”] and, even more, to arouse suspicion against the powerful opposing prejudice [of the Enlightenment], is the aim of this present work.”45 In “What Is Political Philosophy?,” a series of lectures he gave in December 1954 and January 1955 (published in 1959 as chapter 1 in the work of the same name), Strauss traced that prejudice to Machiavelli,46 that is, to his rejection of both biblical religion and classical political philosophy as false and inefficacious guides to life.47 Of this rejection as it relates to modernity as a whole, Strauss had stated in 1952, in Persecution and the Art of Writing, “The most fundamental issue—the issue raised by the conflicting claims of philosophy and revelation—is discussed in our time on a decidedly lower level than was almost customary in former ages.”48

Although the revelation-reason question underlies Strauss’s works on the ancients and the moderns, the “ancients versus the moderns” theme represents his entire corpus; the theme “is his way of organizing the history of political philosophy.”49 It is worthwhile to consider here the general features of modernity that Strauss outlined in mapping its terrain against the backdrop of western political thought. I say “general features” because in Parts Two and Three of this book I examine the “specific features” of Machiavelli’s founding of modernity,50 of how he anticipated and partly brought about the modern turn—or
flight—to this-worldly concerns. The core of modernity, Strauss proposed in “The Three Waves of Modernity,” is Machiavelli’s root-and-branch rejection of both biblical and classical morality as fundamentally untenable; Machiavelli and Hobbes initiated the first wave of modernity; Rousseau, the second; and Nietzsche, the third. “Machiavelli had completely severed the connection between politics and natural law or natural right.” The restoration of that connection, Strauss noted, was Hobbes’s contribution to modernity. “One can describe the change effected by Hobbes as follows: whereas prior to him natural law was understood in the light of a hierarchy of man’s ends in which self-preservation occupied the lowest place, Hobbes understood natural law in terms of self-preservation alone.”

Rousseau, in seeking to link the origin of society with a state of nature, opposed, Strauss explains, “the degrading and enervating doctrines” articulated by both Machiavelli and Hobbes. Rousseau’s own legacy is the idea of history as “a singular or unique process which is not teleological,” Strauss points out. “The concept of history, i.e., of the historical process as a single process in which man becomes human without intending it, is a consequence of Rousseau’s radicalization of the Hobbesean concept of the state of nature.” For Rousseau, only that habituation induced by “civil society” and “the general will” overcomes the basic irrationality of human nature. He is explicit in Book IV, Chapter 2, of the Social Contract: “The Citizen consents to all the laws, even to those passed in spite of him, and even to those that punish him when he dares to violate any one of them. The constant will of all the members of the State is the general will; it is through it that they are citizens and free.”

The modern study of history, as it emerged in the third wave of modernity, rejects philosophy and religion as inimical to the use of history for life. Strauss explains, “Just as the second wave of modernity is related to Rousseau, the third wave is related to Nietzsche.” This Nietzschean wave had “a new understanding of the sentiment of existence: that sentiment is the experience of terror and anguish rather than of harmony and peace, and it is the sentiment of historic existence as necessarily tragic.” Thus, Nietzsche “ushered in the second crisis of modernity—the crisis of our time.” The difference between the second and third waves of modernity is shown by “the discovery of history; the century between Rousseau and Nietzsche is the age of historical sense.” In a “secularized” version of Christianity, Hegel perceived history as “rational,” “progressive,” and moving toward “a peak and end.” But to Nietzsche, Strauss then noted, “The insight that all principles of thought and action are historical cannot be attenuated by the baseless hope that the historical sequence of these principles is progressive or that the historical process has an intrinsic meaning.”
History and Philosophy

Strauss’s concern with modernity and history, and especially with the Nietzschean–Heideggerian wave of modernity, is evident in the introduction to *The City and Man*, published in 1964, twelve years after *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. “It is not self-forgetting and pain-loving antiquarianism nor self-forgetting and intoxicating romanticism which induces us to turn with passionate interest, with unqualified willingness to learn, toward the political thought of classical antiquity. We are impelled to do so by the crisis of our time, the crisis of the West.”59 According to David Lowenthal, “Strauss certainly does want to help guide the ‘practice’ of the modern world. But what motivates him is the wish not simply to do this, or even to save the West: it is to discover the true principles required for the guidance of human life generally—principles that must necessarily be related to an understanding of realities beyond human life.”60

It is instructive to remember here that Strauss devoted the latter years of his life to exegeses of Aristophanes, Aristotle, Plato, Thucydides, and Xenophon. “The mature Strauss’s lifework [on those thinkers] . . . seems,” Gregory Smith notes, “to be built around the attempt to recover the [natural] experiences out of which philosophy initially grew.”61 In the main, commentators recognize that an abiding concern with this approach to history, namely, the necessity of painstakingly studying the classics, is an important leitmotif in Strauss’s oeuvre.62 His views emerged through lifelong reflection, and did not take the form of a complete, final, absolute philosophy of history. That philosophy maintains that the role of the historian is to elucidate the causes of historical phenomena and to discover patterns in, and laws of, history.63 “The term ‘philosophy of history,’” Karl Löwith explains, “was invented by Voltaire, who used it for the first time in its modern sense, as distinct from the theological interpretation of history. In Voltaire’s *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations* the leading principle was no longer the will of God and divine providence but the will of man and human reason.”64

Strauss’s own idea of history is akin to a “critical” philosophy of history, insofar as he critically questions the speculative approach to history. Perhaps that is the point Jaffa is making when he states, “To put Leo Strauss among those who thought that history was primarily a subject of thought, and not at all one of action, would be to put him among those who held a view of history like that of Marx.”65 By using the term, *idea of history*, I do not mean to place Strauss in the company of R. G. Collingwood. Strauss took issue with the underlying concept of modern thinking on history in Collingwood’s 1946
The deficiencies of Collingwood’s historiography can be traced to a fundamental dilemma. . . . [He] rejected the thought of the past as untrue in the decisive respect. Hence he could not take that thought seriously, for to take a thought seriously means to regard it as possible that the thought in question is true.  

Regardless of whether one speaks of Strauss’s idea of history or of his critical philosophy of history, they are terms he did not use to describe his lifework. According to his well-known dictum, one must seek to understand thinkers as they understood themselves. Yet, it is appropriate to use the term idea of history, for Strauss did have such an idea; he regarded the turn to history, to the attentive reading of the history of political philosophy, as critical in the effort to counter modernity. I will argue, then, that he had an idea of what history is and how and why one studies it. At times, that argument may seem less of an argument than a statement of the obvious, of the surface of the matter. However, as Strauss said in Thoughts on Machiavelli, “There is no surer protection against the understanding of anything than taking for granted or otherwise despising the obvious and the surface. The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things.” Strauss’s point here is that readers who delve too far into the depths of a text without also explicating that which first comes to sight in a text—its surface, its form—may fail to grasp the scope, import, and substance of the author’s meaning.

Studying Strauss “Between the Lines”

Studying Strauss’s own texts presents the reader with a “twofold problem.” As Orr has explained, “His writing is usually in the form of a commentary on a given text, written to bring the ideas within that text to life. It is, therefore, difficult at times to distinguish between his elucidation of any given text and his own thought, to separate the philosopher being analyzed from the analyzing philosopher.” Orr continues, “The second problem is the one for which Strauss and his school have been most excoriated: his teaching on esotericism, or reading between the lines.”

M. F. Burnyeat likewise maintains that there are “two ways” to read Strauss; but he recommends neither of them. The first is to read Strauss’s “fourteen books and a multitude of learned papers”; the second is to “sign up for initiation with a Straussian teacher.” Burnyeat proceeds then to heap further scorn upon Strauss’s rediscovery of the exoteric-esoteric distinction: “It was Maimonides who started it. It was from him that Strauss drew his idea of ‘esoteric
literature.’ . . . Strauss’s fantastical supposition is that, whether we are dealing with the allusiveness of Machiavelli and other Renaissance writers, . . . or with the dialogues of Plato and Xenophon, in each case Maimonides’ instructions to his twelve-century readers will unlock a secret teaching.  

Like Burnyeat, Orr regards esotericism as an important theme for Strauss. Orr says the idea is part of “his appeal.” However, unlike Burnyeat, Orr does not take Strauss to task for the idea: “Strauss consistently showed his contemporaries that in their failure to read texts carefully they had, in fact, misunderstood many philosophers. . . .” Orr goes on, “Fundamental to Strauss’s teaching on reading between the lines is that only a few will be sufficiently intelligent and diligent enough to discover any hidden meaning in a text. As he states in *Thoughts on Machiavelli,* ‘to speak the truth is sensible only when one speaks to wise men.’ Elsewhere, Strauss says that in modern times, from Lessing and Kant onwards, “the question of esotericism seems to have been lost sight of almost completely.” The key word here is “almost”—Strauss, too, had great interest in the same “question”; for instance, he dealt with it in his critique of modern historical writing and in his own approach to hermeneutics and the art of writing.

The attendant obstacles in studying Strauss represent a Gordian knot: should one unravel it or cut through it in one clean sweep? Kenneth Green advises, “In unraveling the mysteries of Leo Strauss, we may perhaps be quite well-advised to proceed first through the obvious perplexities.” Critics who accuse Strauss of harboring Machiavellian views on religion and morality, and critics who dismiss him as a godfather of the American conservative revolt against modernity, cut through the Gordian knot; but they neglect the core of his project, namely, his contemplation of the revelation-reason question. Condemning Strauss as a closet Machiavellian, or as an “authoritarian antidemocratic,” is to “use [the tactic of] guilt by dubious association.” That tactic has more in common with reductio ad absurdum than a reasoned attempt to do full justice to his oeuvre.

According to David Novak, a reader encounters a thinker as a disciple, student, or opponent. “The disciple believes that everything (or almost everything) this thinker says and writes is the truth,” whereas “[t]he student . . . believes that some of what the thinker says and writes is true and some of it is not true. Even what the student does not believe is true in the words of the thinker is still respected as a challenging alternative that calls for a respectfully reasoned response.” However, “there is the opponent who believes that nothing or almost nothing that the thinker says or writes is true. The response of the opponent is usually one of dismissal, often involving personal ridicule or
“Indeed, Conal Condren remarks, “Leo Strauss, distressed at the decadence of the modern world, stood togaed for a generation in the image of a latter-day Cato and bemoaned the abandonment of classical political theory.” Shadia Drury says that “proclivities” of “purposeful obfuscations, cold-blooded lies, and fearful mediocrity” characterize “Straussian scholarship.” Among Straussians, Novak continues, “there are disputes over what exactly is true in Strauss’s teaching and can be accepted, and what is not true in it.”

Of the intra-Straussian “disputes,” Orr explains, “The split between the West Coast and the East Coast Straussians is much more than a geographical division. It is a dispute over ideas, over the legacy of Leo Strauss.” According to Orr, “His East Coast students, such as Allan Bloom and Thomas Pangle, have collapsed the distinction between ancient and modern philosophy, claiming that the real dispute is between philosophy and poetry, poetry being simply the code word for the spiritual realm or revelation.” Orr aligns herself with Jaffa, a West Coast Straussian. “For Jaffa, Strauss may have been a skeptic, but he was anything but a dogmatic skeptic...” There are passages in Strauss’s work that suggest that Jaffa’s interpretation is correct.” Shortly afterwards, and alluding to the limited usefulness of the East-West Straussian typology, Orr admits, “we cannot turn to Strauss’s students—at least immediately—to obtain an accurate understanding of him.” To understand Strauss one must read his works “carefully,” paying particular attention to “what he writes, the order in which he considers items, and what he fails to mention... . Only then can we hope to understand what Strauss himself can teach us.” Orr echoes what Bloom says of the effort to understand Machiavelli: “One must constantly stop, consult another text, try to penetrate another character, and walk around the room and think. One must use a pencil and paper, make lists, and count. It is an unending task.”

**Re-reading Strauss**

In its approach to understanding Strauss’s contemplation of the revelation-reason question, this book is divided into three parts. Part One addresses the “obvious perplexities” in Strauss, that is, about his thoughts on history and his contemplation on religion and philosophy. I will propose that his idea of history has two main aspects: the speculative and the analytical; the former pertains to what the truth of history is; the latter pertains to practical concerns of how to study it. I will then examine how Strauss depicted the fundamental
alternatives as mutually exclusive; paradoxically, he said that an adherent of one alternative must be open to the challenge of the other alternative.

Parts Two and Three of this book take up Strauss’s critical study of Machiavelli’s teaching—on religion and on morality and politics. To examine one or the other or both of these teachings is to travel over well-worn ground. Yet, no work hitherto written has examined Strauss’s critical study to learn how Strauss himself grappled with the revelation-reason question. Part Two examines Strauss’s critical study of Machiavelli’s teaching on religion. I will treat Machiavelli’s critique of Christianity (that it has made men weak and servile) and his reflections on biblical/Christian theology (for instance, on the doctrines of divine providence and creation ex nihilo) before probing the core of his general hostility to religion. Apart from his instrumental views on the limited usefulness of religion, Machiavelli’s judgments on cosmology and the utility of religion demonstrate a fundamental opposition not to Christianity alone but to all religion; he replaces God with Fortuna as the divine being and, in turn, replaces Fortuna with mundane chance.

Part Three turns to philosophical matters. Strauss regards Machiavelli as having defined his notion of virtue against the classical conception of moral virtue. Whereas Aristotle defined virtue as the mean between the extremes of too much and too little, Machiavelli spoke of a mean between virtue and vice that varies with the exigencies of the times. A further examination of Machiavelli’s notion of what virtue is and how it shapes human action will show that he directs the common good and governance not toward a higher—viz., transcendent and otherworldly—good but toward man’s own will and desires.

Strauss’s critical study of Machiavelli’s teaching serves to elucidate Strauss’s religious and philosophical “presuppositions” and casts light on his understanding of modernity. Strauss’s inclination to the “old-fashioned” view of Machiavelli, as “evil,” “immoral,” and “irreligious,” is, George Mosse says, “based upon certain philosophical presuppositions.” Felix Gilbert observes, “According to Mr. Strauss Machiavelli indicates through The Prince that he is a new Moses, bringer of a new code, and through The Discourses that he wants to destroy the authority of the Bible and is imitating Jesus.” Gilbert concludes, “The question left—and it is a question that makes Mr. Strauss’s book significant—is to explain why Mr. Strauss arrived at this strange interpretation of the meaning of the writings of the great Florentine.” For Robert McShea, the answer to that question can be described thus: Strauss offers “not so much a study of Machiavelli” as he does “the exemplification of an ideology”; his presuppositions or “assumptions” point to an “ideological quintessence.” But, though Strauss is concerned with the crisis of modernity and with
examining, indeed with recovering, the fundamental problems, he does not claim to present concrete solutions or ideological answers for the modern abandonment of revelation and reason; he seeks understanding of the fundamental problems, and commitment to an ideology would foreclose genuine awareness of the problems.

By closely examining Strauss’s critical study of Machiavelli’s teaching one learns how Strauss dealt with the revelation-reason question. This position agrees with Orr’s succinctly stated view: “The key question for the serious student of Strauss to answer is whether or not he held the door open to revelation.”92 Although I agree overall with both Jaffa and Orr, particularly with their conclusions that Strauss the political philosopher was open, not closed, to the possibility of revelation, this book takes its own exegetical, interpretive, and thematic path to that conclusion. Strauss, as Shadia Drury notes, is “a man of ideas”; and he offers, as Charles Larmore explains, a “root-and-branch criticism of modern thought.”94 However, the Strauss that emerges from the critical study is not a man of atheistic, nihilistic, or ideological ideas who poses a radical challenge to Western civilization; he is a philosopher who, in response to the crisis of modernity, seeks to help his contemporaries to return to the fundamental alternatives, to the very origins of Western civilization.95
PART ONE

Approaching Leo Strauss

What has taken place in the modern period has been a gradual corrosion and destruction of the heritage of Western civilization. The soul of the modern development, one may say, is a peculiar “realism,” the notion that moral principles and the appeal to moral principles—preaching, sermonizing—is ineffective.

—Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return?”
Leo Strauss’s Idea of History

It would be no exaggeration to say that Strauss felt impelled to guide his perplexed contemporaries away from unbelief in moral norms and towards reconsidering the possibility of both revelation and reason—the two fundamental alternatives that disclose knowledge of the good life. To guide his contemporaries, he needed an idea of history.1 This idea contains two aspects: the speculative and the analytical. One can speak of a speculative aspect, for reflection on the truth or very meaning of history pervades Strauss’s critique of the ontology of historicism. In that critique, he does not dwell upon actions committed in fulfillment of the ends or problems of history; instead, he dwells upon the truth of history. One can speak of an analytical aspect, for his hermeneutic advice is concerned with the proper and necessary study of the history of political philosophy.2

Historicism on the Meaning of History

Modern reflection upon history encompasses issues of historiography and ontology. The former issue, Michael Murray explains, “is possible only for an historical being such as man.” The latter issue is about historicity—which “has its existential condition of possibility in the temporalizing of temporality”—and a fundamental concept of History—of “Being-as-History.” Murray goes
on, “the academic conflation of history with historiography…we shall call historicism. Epistemologically expressed, historicism claims that all serious philosophical questions about history can be reduced to questions about the methods and disciplines of historiography.”3 Debates about historiography or methodology, Barry Cooper notes, invariably turn into debates about its ontology; and “Strauss compressed the two dimensions of the question. Historicism, he said, is ‘the assertion that the fundamental distinction between philosophical and historical questions cannot in the last analysis be maintained.’ ”4 Historicism, though, is more than an “assertion”; it is a doctrine of the close relation of reason, knowledge, and existence to time-bound history.5

When Strauss dealt with historicism, which he defined as the doctrine that the ground of thought is not nature but history,6 his intent was not to provide a full account of its genesis and development, but to elucidate its tenets and lay bare their inadequacies. Nor was it his intent to examine at length the metaphysics of historicity. In a letter to Eric Voegelin dated 17 March 1949 he remarked, “Your surmise regarding my article ‘Political Philosophy and History’ is correct: the article is to be thought of as one of the introductory chapters of a publication on classic principles of politics.” Strauss’s article, a précis of historicism and modern political philosophy, was published in the January 1949 issue of the Journal of the History of Ideas and was reprinted in 1959 as chapter 2 in What Is Political Philosophy? In the letter Strauss continued, “But heaven only knows if I will manage with this publication: on the decisive questions, there are no preliminary studies, so that one would have to first lay the groundwork through a series of specialized investigations.”7

Strauss would go on to lay such groundwork in Natural Right and History.8 At the end of its introduction he stated, “Present-day social science rejects natural right on two different, although mostly combined, grounds; it rejects it in the name of History and in the name of the distinction between Facts and Values.”9 Although Strauss elsewhere spoke of Popper and his “washed-out, lifeless positivism,”10 Strauss’s “primary opponent” is “a historicism he believed to be the spirit of our time, and a historicism he identified as the forgetting of eternity.”11 In chapter 1 of Natural Right and History, shortly after having said that “[t]he genesis of historicism is inadequately understood,” Strauss observed, “The historical school emerged in reaction to the French Revolution and to the natural right doctrines that had prepared that cataclysm.”12 Historicism has its roots in the historical school’s perception of “the need of preserving or continuing the traditional order.” The original inspiration of “the founders” of the “school” was the effort to protect the belief that knowledge of “universal principles” is possible. Thus, they claimed that the
“actual here and now is more likely than not to fall short of the universal and unchangeable norm.” Strauss then states (again not naming names) that “the eminent conservatives who founded the historical school were, in fact, continuing and even sharpening the revolutionary effort of their adversaries.” In his chapter 6 essay on Edmund Burke, Strauss explains that Burke articulated his principles in response to the wake of the French Revolution; Strauss, however, did not mention “historicism” or its “derivatives.”

This shift or weakening of faith in knowledge, Strauss explains in chapter 1, modified the notion of the natural held by the French revolutionists. That notion had equated nature with individuality, but had situated the rights of the individual within “local and temporal variety” to avoid the dangers of “antisocial individualism and unnatural universalism.” The modification of the historical school was its argument “that the local and the temporal have a higher value than the universal.” This argument would prove to be problematic. Strauss states, “By denying the significance, if not the existence, of universal norms, the historical school destroyed the only solid basis of all efforts to transcend the actual.”

In its effort to formulate “historical principles” that would be “objective” yet “relative to particular historical situations,” the historical school turned to “historical studies.” These studies, Strauss explains, “assumed” that every nation is characterized by its own “folk minds[et],” that historical changes proceed by “general laws,” or “combined both assumptions.” When those “assumptions were abandoned, the infancy of historicism came to its end.” “Historicism now appeared as a particular form of positivism,” as it eschewed “theology and metaphysics” for “positive science.” Positivism, past and present, is not entirely empirical, though. Of its metaphysics of historicity, Strauss notes in “Why We Remain Jews,” “the object of science is everything that is—being. The belief admitted by all believers in science today—that science is by its nature essentially progressive, and eternally progressive—implies, without saying it, that being is mysterious.” Early historicism, he continues in chapter 1 of Natural Right and History, did not turn to “the methods of natural science” for empirical knowledge of reality. It turned to “history,” to “knowledge of what is truly human, of man as man,” not to natural science, in which historicism saw the dubious assertion of universality. Early historicism began by aping the methods of science but later disavowed the purpose and premises of science.

Early historicism was itself, however, riddled with problems. There was a marked disjunction between its assumptions, aspiration, and results. Its aspiration to educe “norms from history” was a failure. Strauss points out,
“no universal principle will ever sanction the acceptance of every historical standard or of every victorious cause: to conform with tradition or to jump on ‘the wave of the future’ is not obviously better.” For “the unbiased historian,” the course of history is shown by “the meaningless web spun by what men did, produced, and thought”; one sees in history “only standards . . . of a purely subjective character.” Yet, to affirm thus a subjective basis to history renders impossible, Strauss retorts, “the distinction between good and bad choices. Historicism culminated in nihilism.”

Strauss means that early historicism led to nihilism but was not itself wholly nihilistic. He notes in chapter 1 that early historicism, though it declaimed universal standards, lingered over the idea that progress underpins the course of history. Here Strauss implies that laws of progress are a latent tendency to view nature in a theistic or deistic manner. In chapter 2, however, he explains that “the historical school . . . had tried to establish standards that were particular and historical indeed, but still objective. . . . It is the recognition of timeless values that distinguishes Weber’s position most significantly from historicism.” Tied to that recognition, according to Strauss, is Weber’s apprehension that revealed religion conveys truth about what it means to be.

By claiming that history is the ground of all thought, early historicism had replaced belief in universal norms with belief in the experience of history. Strauss states, “The historicist thesis is self-contradictory or absurd. We cannot see the historical character of ‘all’ thought—that is, of all thought with the exception of the historicist insight and its implications—without transcending history, without grasping something trans-historical.” The “radical historicist” is characterized by his adamant denial of “the trans-historical character of the historicist thesis” and by his recognition of “the absurdity of unqualified historicism as a theoretical thesis.” The “radical historicist” Strauss has in mind is Nietzsche. Referring to his Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben (written in 1873, published in 1874), Strauss explains that Nietzsche’s denial of the theoretical focus of early historicism signals the emergence of radical historicism.

Nietzsche asked readers of his essay to think about the thesis: “The unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture.” Insisting that history must serve life, he identified three ways to study and to use history. The monumental way sees in history monuments of great deeds, by men of action, that instruct men in the present who desire to be great but have no teachers to guide them. The antiquarian way protects the past as a source of identity for the masses, who lack the strength of mind and will to be inspired by the present. The critical
-way also seeks to serve life, but fulfills that aim by laying bare the truth of existence, namely, its violence and instability.\textsuperscript{29} Nietzsche warned, however, against a surfeit of reflection on the meaning of history. Following on from his précis about the uses of history, he wrote, “modern man drags around with him a huge quantity of indigestible stones of knowledge.”\textsuperscript{30} The target of his ire, Thomas Howard points out, was the “\textit{a priori} claims of knowledge among theologians and philosophers alike.”\textsuperscript{31}

For Nietzsche, the purpose of the historian is not to form self-forgetting laws of history. Countering Plato’s “mighty \textit{necessary lie}” of an eternal order of nature with the “necessary truth” of history, he claimed that one is without life or cannot live a full life if one fails to recognize the chaos of existence; “genuine life,” he said, is “the basis of culture.”\textsuperscript{32} The “excess of history,” however, prevents that recognition. The remedy for that excess is the interplay between science, on the one hand, and art and religion, on the other hand. Science lauds scientific knowledge and knowledge of “things historical,” not art, religion, or “things eternal.” Science “hates forgetting, which is the death of knowledge, and seeks to abolish all limitations of horizon and launch mankind upon an infinite and unbounded sea of light whose light is knowledge of all becoming.” Nietzsche doubted the efficacy of that scientific aspiration. He insisted that life must rule over science, not science over life; knowledge belongs within the ambit of life, of existence. “Thus science requires superintendence and supervision.”\textsuperscript{33}

While Strauss regarded Nietzsche as the originary radical historicist, he emphasized the role of Heidegger in determining the shape and substance of radical historicism. In a letter to Karl Löwith dated 15 August 1946 Strauss stated, “With Heidegger, ‘historicity’ has made nature disappear \textit{completely}, which however has the merit of consistency and compels one to reflect.”\textsuperscript{34} In a letter to Kojève dated 24 March 1950 Strauss asked, “Have you seen Heidegger’s \textit{Holzwege}? Most interesting, much that is outstanding, and on the whole bad: the most extreme historicism.” In a letter to Kojève dated 26 June 1950 Strauss remarked, “I have once again been dealing with Historicism, that is to say, with Heidegger, the only \textit{radical} historicist.”\textsuperscript{35} In these letters Strauss describes Heidegger in a concise but abrupt manner as both original and presenting a radical challenge to Western thought. In chapter 1 of \textit{Natural Right and History} Strauss elaborates this epigrammatic thread of the critique of Heidegger—as radical—he made the epistolary medium. He states, “The most thoroughgoing attempt to establish historicism culminated in the assertion that if and when there are no human beings, there may be \textit{entia}, but there cannot be \textit{esse}, that is, that there can be \textit{entia} while there is no \textit{esse}. There is
an obvious connection between this assertion and the rejection of the view
that 'to be' in the highest sense means 'to be always.' Strauss does not name
Heidegger as the author of that "attempt," though he likely had Heidegger in
mind. In the words of Heidegger, "There is no time when man was not, not
because man was from all eternity and will be for all eternity but because time
is not eternity and time fashions itself into a time only as a human, historical
being-there." Strauss clearly was preoccupied with the fate of philosophy in modern
times. Yet it would be a mistake to argue, as Hwa Yol Jung does, that due to
that preoccupation Strauss failed to grasp the import of Heidegger's onti-
ology; namely, its "disclosure of Being." Heidegger's "great achievement,"
Strauss stated in his lecture "Existentialism," was the coherent exposition of
Existenz. . . . Kierkegaard had spoken of existence within the traditional hori-
zon, i.e. within the horizon of the traditional distinction between essence and
existence. Heidegger tried to understand existence out of itself."

In his effort to understand the meaning of Being, Heidegger stressed the
historicity of man. In his essay "The Anaximander Fragment" he argued,
"What can all merely historiological philosophies of history tell us about
our history . . . if they explain history without ever thinking out, from the
essence of history, the fundamentals of their way of explaining events, and
the essence of history, in turn, from Being itself?" In other words, history
should be understood in an existential, not historiological, manner; disci-
plines of history, philosophy, and theology fail to grasp the meaning of Being.
The question of Being, Heidegger explained in Existence and Being, "fixes its
attention on the one thing that is the mark of 'truth' of every kind."

Several themes underlie Heidegger's answer or approach to the question of
Being. First, he bases truth and the meaning of Being in human temporality,
not in general representations of beings. Second, he depicts human tempo-
rality as the horizon formed by the putting into time of both past events
and futural possibilities upon the flux of the here and now. Third, he sees in
finitude the peak and facticity of human existence. And fourth, he replaces
philosophy in the classical sense—the quest for knowledge of first principles—
with a philosophy of Being—an ontology about the history-bound, worldly
character of all thought and all life.

Historicism forgets eternity and claims that the ground of human thought
is history, not nature. "Thought," Peter Gordon explains for Heidegger, "is
no longer the origin of temporality but is itself awash in the temporality
that makes thought possible." The classics did not, Strauss explains, recog-
nize "a 'field,' a 'world'" of existence called "History" that was separate and
superior to “that other ‘field,’ ‘Nature’”; nor did the classics recognize “‘His-
tory’ as an object of knowledge.” As Heidegger put it, “even Nature is histor-
ical. It is not historical, to be sure, in so far as we speak of ‘natural history’; but 
Nature is historical as a countryside, as an area that has been colonized or 
exploited.” Strauss took issue with historicism, for he defended the challenge 
of the philosophic quest for knowledge and truth. Through the act of interpret-
ing past thinkers, he defended philosophy: “We cannot be passionately 
interested, seriously interested in the past if we know beforehand that the 
present is in the most important respect superior to the past.” Strauss 
defended the quest for truth, but he was not an absolutist. He regarded abso-
lutism as foreign to the philosophic quest, and described the attempt to steer 
a path between absolutism and relativism as “sufficient” for identifying “a uni-
versally valid hierarchy of ends” of moral and intellectual perfection. He 
claimed, however, that such a path “is insufficient for guiding our actions.” The 
philosopher seeks knowledge of the whole, but stops far short of claiming, 
in a dogmatic manner, possession of complete or final knowledge of the whole. 
One can, then, to echo Strauss’s view of what philosophy is, describe the 
speculative aspect of his idea of history as neither relativistic nor absolutist.

Turning to History

Strauss conveyed his hermeneutic advice, which comes to sight as advice on how to study the history of political philosophy, in a pointed manner. In 
a letter to Voegelin dated 29 April 1953 he wrote, “there is a fundamental 
distinction between the technique of true philosophy and that of modern phi-
losophy.” He then noted that he had “explained” that distinction in his essay, 
“Persecution and the Art of Writing.” The essay was published in the 
November 1941 issue of Social Research and was reprinted in 1952 as chapter 2 in the work of the same name. In the essay Strauss summarized thus the 
different literary and philosophic techniques of premodern and modern 
thinkers: “Modern historical research . . . has counteracted or even destroyed 
an earlier tendency to read between the lines of the great writers.”

According to Paul Cantor, “Strauss’s theory of interpretation resulted from 
a great leap of historical imagination.” That leap was the thesis that writers and philosophers in past eras who lived under “illiberal and intolerant regimes” 
concealed the true import of their writings to avoid persecution and punish-
ment. Paul Bagley explains that when the esoteric is different in “form or content” from the exoteric, that is, from the teaching a writer presents in
public, the esoteric may be identified by whoever has access to the esoteric text. When the esoteric resides within the form or content of the exoteric, only initiates will be able to identify the teaching, even if access to the esoteric text is available to non-initiates; initiates alone are able to identify the secret teaching of the text. For Brague, though, the “originality” of Strauss’s theory of interpretation “does not lie in the claim that there is a difference between (a) levels of readers, more or less gifted and acute, and (b) levels of meaning, more or less superficial. Neither is this originality to be looked for in his asserting that some texts are esoteric.” His originality consists in the fact, as Brague sees it, that Islamic and Jewish views of revelation underpin his views on esotericism. Esotericism is not simply a response to “merely exterior causes,” such as persecution. “It corresponds to inner features of the Islamic conception of Revelation, that is, to the way it conceives of the basic relationship of man to the Absolute. First, Revelation in Islam is a mere fact, a factum brutum. . . . Second, its content is a text, a written text, a book. The phenomenon of the Sacred Book is far more peculiar to Islam than to Christianity.” Of that difference between Islam and Christianity Brague notes, “Judaism stands midway: Unlike Christianity and like Islam, it does not admit an incarnation, and what is revealed is a law; unlike Islam, however, its sacred writings are not immediately present but mediated through the very process of their reception, discussion, and interpretation.”

The approach to exegesis that esotericism connotes raises certain questions: “Do we need seven seals to keep an uninspired majority in the dark,” asks Kenneth Seeskin, “and at what point does esotericism keep even the inspired minority guessing about the real meaning of the text?” To answer his questions, Seeskin offers to define esotericism in two ways: “normal” and “deep.” The former “applies to a book that deals with a complex and demanding subject and requires intense concentration to be appreciated. Although the uninspired majority may not be able to follow it, the book contains no booby traps, blind alleys, or concealed doctrines—at least none that the author has put there intentionally.” The latter “applies to a book in which the author hides the true meaning behind hints, clues, or cleverly constructed diversions.” I would add, then, that numerology, with its religious or Cabalistic stress upon reading between the lines and divining the significance of numeric patterns, would seem to be an important way to uncover the true meaning of a text. Of the numerological aspect of Strauss’s “rules for reading,” it suffices to say here that numerology was an ancillary way by which he cast light on the esoteric teachings of past thinkers.
James Rhodes, although he does not use the terms “normal” and “deep” esotericism, would say that Strauss combines the two types of esotericism: “At first, his analysis of irony [in The City and Man] seems straightforward. As one reads further into his work [see also Persecution and the Art of Writing], however, one realizes that he writes esoterically about esotericism. Therefore, his account of its purposes is difficult to understand.” While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to determine whether Strauss’s esotericism is “normal,” “deep,” or both, I would argue that he aims to understand thinkers as they understood themselves. His esotericism, however understood, is inextricably linked to his close reading of books, of their intentions, surface tensions, and drifts in argument. That he writes at times in an elliptical manner places logographic—as well as philosophic and theological—demands on the reader to understand the texts at hand. In his way, he helps to equip the reader with a sense of cognitive and textual appreciation for the philosopher’s unremitting quest for knowledge.

Strauss did not claim an absolute insight into the meaning of history, as some critics would say; for they insist that his hermeneutic advice is a doctrine, or even an ideology. By his own account, Strauss did not “possess and present a comprehensive doctrine”; he described his “own hermeneutic experience” as “very limited.” Although one must, he says, recognize “the trans-temporal truth” of the “fundamental problems,” he stresses that “history of philosophy is endangered if the historian starts from the acceptance of any solution of the fundamental problems: if he knows in advance that a given philosophic doctrine which he is studying is false, he lacks the incentive for studying that doctrine with sympathy or care.”

Notwithstanding its religious import, hermeneutic activity, to Strauss, is a movement toward philosophy or is philosophy itself. In his lecture “Existentialism” he observes, “The scholar faces the fundamental problems through the intermediacy of books. If he is a serious man through the intermediacy of the great books. The great thinker faces the problems directly.” Of how one faces the problems, Strauss explains elsewhere that one moves from interpretation to explanation—interpretation is the careful, exact commentary of a book; explanation aims to impart critical insight about its intent, teachings, and influence. Strauss clearly is drawing a distinction between literary and philosophic questions, but he does not mean to say that those questions are heterogeneous. Instead, he means that only when one has considered the literary question of the author’s presentation of the matter at hand can one properly consider the fundamental problems.
Strauss’s call for a return to the classics, to their texts and “signposts,” seems diagnostic and palliative. “The signposts which guided the thinkers of the past,” he says, “must be recovered before they can be used.” The study of history has “philosophic significance,” for by that study the perplexed of the modern era will find their way to the “fundamental problems,” to “the natural horizon of human thought.” The return to the classics is not a nostalgic return; it is philosophical. Strauss is explicit in “What Is Liberal Education?”: “No deliberation about remedies for our ills can be of any value if it is not preceded by an honest diagnosis—by a diagnosis falsified neither by unfounded hopes nor by fear of the powers that be.” Yet in this diagnosis, “we must not mistake palliatives for cures. . . . Liberal education of adults must now also compensate for the defects of an education which is liberal only in name or by courtesy. Last but not least, liberal education is concerned with the souls of men.”

The analytical or, as one could thus put it, educative aspect of Strauss’s idea of history is inextricably linked with his critique of “the crisis of our time.” His 1964 lecture of the same title “tried,” he said in the accompanying lecture, “The Crisis of Political Philosophy,” “to trace the crisis of our time to the crisis of political philosophy, and I suggested that a way out of the intellectual difficulties with which we are beset is a return to classical political philosophy.” (According to John Gunnell, one should not forget that “concrete” problems accompanied those difficulties; perhaps Gunnell means to say that Strauss gave the two “Crisis” lectures at a time of domestic unrest and struggles against Western colonial powers.) Apart from several brief mentions of Oswald Spengler, Strauss in his first lecture did not cite any historian, philosopher, or thinker who was, like Spengler, drawing attention to the “crisis” and “decline” of the West. The decline consists, Strauss says, of the West’s doubt in its once strongly avowed purpose of universal society, and of its skepticism about an original purpose of modernity—Hobbes argued that conquering nature relieves the estate of man from the uncertainty of life in the state of nature. Contemporary social science doubts the efficacy of those purposes of modernity; it claims, Strauss explains, “that no distinction between good or bad values is rationally possible.”

Strauss, then, declined to examine at length the “fact-value distinction.” His concern was “with a somewhat broader issue”: how social science today can and must acquire an adequate understanding of “political things.” Indeed, as John Hallowell said in 1950, “Western civilization is in its Time of Troubles. It is beset on all sides by challenges which threaten to destroy it. It is the kind of response which we make to those challenges, however, rather than the
challenges themselves, which will determine the outcome.”64 Strauss’s concern is visible in his earlier examinations of the fact-value distinction. In his essay on Max Weber in chapter 2 of Natural Right and History he argued, “value-free social science was neither possible nor desirable.”65 (In an implicit recognition that Weber was no mere positivist, Strauss nowhere in chapter 2 used the word “positivism.”) In “What Is Political Philosophy?,” Strauss spoke of the necessity to “all political action” of an adequate understanding of “the good life.” Having then defined political philosophy as the “quest” for truth about “political things,” he described contemporary political thought as diametrically opposed to that goal and its “very possibility.”86

To cast light on that opposition, Strauss identified in positivistic social science a cluster of problems.87 First, one cannot “study social phenomena, i.e., all important social phenomena, without making value judgments.” Second, an unproven assumption underlies the fact-value distinction. “The rejection of value judgments is based on the assumption that the conflicts between different values or value-systems are essentially insoluble for human reason.” Third, due to its assumption “that scientific knowledge” is the “peak of human knowledge,” positivism blinded itself to “the whole political or politico-social order” in which “political facts” belong. Fourth, “Positivism necessarily transforms itself into historicism.” That is, because positivism claims that distinctive social, historical, and political phenomena underpin all eras, it must view itself as a phenomenon; but to take that view “leads to the relativization of social science and ultimately of modern science generally.” Indeed, rejecting faith in “the authoritative character of modern science,” radical historicism claims that science is but “one form,” not the highest form, of human knowledge.88

In speaking of the pressing facts of his time, Strauss, like Spengler, raises a Zeitgeist of crisis; but unlike Spengler, he deals with and admits the possibility of transcendent, eternal truth; he does not suggest, as Spengler did, that the core of philosophy is the history—and the history alone—of philosophy.89 Contemporary political science cannot, Strauss stated in “The Crisis of Our Time,” gain an adequate understanding of “political things” by surveying “the history of political philosophy.” An example of the survey-like approach is “that famous work”—A History of Political Theory—“by Sabine.” According to Strauss, “It is, strictly speaking, absurd to replace political philosophy by the history of political philosophy”; and yet Sabine “replace[s] a doctrine which claims to be true by a survey of errors.”90 The method of “logic” claims that the works of thinkers in the past abound in blunders because they conflated “factual judgments” with “value judgments.” In line with “the demands of logical positivism or behavioral science,” the “new” way of
studying politics “is concerned with discovering laws of political behavior and, ultimately, universal laws of political behavior.”

According to Strauss, in its attempt not to confuse the political thought of a past era with another past era or with the present era, “[t]he new political science thus becomes dependent upon a kind of study which belongs to the comprehensive enterprise called universal history.” The enterprise, which dates back to ancient Greek, Jewish, and Roman historiography, seeks to describe the history of the world, especially the rise of civilization and of the nation state, from beginning to end. Whereas ancient historiographers sought to elucidate in a teleological fashion the course of history, modern historians replace the metaphysical search for transcendent order in history with an empirical effort to discover laws of, and stages in, history. The scope of universal history, Löwith points out, “is universal in a very limited sense only…. We do not ask for the meaning of heaven and earth, the stars, the ocean and the mountains… Our quest seems to be restricted to ourselves and to history as our history.”

Strauss goes on to explain that, to differentiate its own era from past eras, and to understand the political teaching of its own era as a transformation of an original teaching, a teaching it deems inferior to its own teaching, the new political science must be able “to grasp the original teaching as such.” The new political science must study classical political philosophy, because in reflecting on its own background and premises, it “must at least consider the possibility that the older political science was sounder and truer than what is regarded as political science today.” The return to the classics, then, “is both necessary and tentative or experimental.”

Not in any sense tentative is the reason for the return. In a letter to Voegelin dated 9 May 1943 Strauss wrote, “An authentic beginning in the social sciences is impossible before the fundamental concepts are clarified, which means an awareness that the fundamental concepts—the very term ‘political,’ for example—are of Greek, and in particular of Greek philosophic origin.” That awareness, Strauss explained elsewhere, will occur only if study of the classics is “accompanied by constant and relentless reflection on the modern principles, and hence by liberation from the naive acceptance of those principles.”

Strauss’s judgment that the return to the classics is tentative echoes his equivocal affirmation of classical cosmology—as carrying partially “false” or outmoded ideas about nature and the world. In Philosophy and Law Strauss stated, “[O]f Aristotle it is the case that everything he says about the world below the lunar sphere is undoubtedly true, while his views about the upper world, especially about the separate intelligences, are in part only probable, and in part
actually false.” However, in “What Is Political Philosophy?” Strauss refuted the charge that the return to the classics is impossible because of its “antiquated cosmology,” explaining, “Whatever the significance of modern natural science may be, it cannot affect our understanding of what is human in man.” He went on:

To understand man in the light of the whole means for modern natural science to understand man in the light of the sub-human. But in that light man as man is wholly unintelligible. Classical political philosophy viewed man in a different light. It was originated by Socrates. And Socrates was so far from being committed to a specific cosmology that his knowledge was knowledge of ignorance. 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. . . .

This understanding of the situation of man which includes, then, the quest for cosmology rather than a solution to the cosmological problem, was the foundation of classical political philosophy.

Strauss's approach to the problem of cosmology in modern times entails, then, a defense of the possibility of cosmology. He defends Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato in their respective cosmological accounts, though he suggests that the possibility of cosmology, because it is a possibility, “an open question,” does not necessarily conflict with modern, non-teleotheological views of nature, history, and the whole of human things.

Leo Strauss's Idea of History is an idea of what history is, how one studies it, and why it is important to do so. The speculative and the analytical aspects of his idea of history correspond to the two levels on which he examined historicism: the ontological and the methodological. For Strauss, history cannot be defined in purely temporal terms; the meaning of history is not revealed by the historicist exploration or ontology of Being. In laying bare the faults of historicism and “the crisis of our time,” he raised the hermeneutical issue of how to approach texts written by past thinkers. In raising this issue, he sought to recover knowledge of the good life. He drew attention to transcendent meaning in history, but did not claim an absolute insight into the meaning of history; nor did he analyze the structure of history. Overall, Strauss's idea of history is practical rather than speculative, for in elucidating the meaning of history and directing attention to the fundamental alternatives, he was responding to a particular “historical” problem, namely, “the crisis of our time.”