

The essays contained in this volume are all intended as a contribution to the understanding of the philosophy of Leo Strauss. They do not purport to provide a comprehensive overview of Strauss's life and work, much less an evaluation of the influence of his teaching and the creation of a school of political thought bearing his name. They do attempt to examine what I consider the central and most enduring theme of Strauss's legacy, namely, what he called the "theologico-political problem," which he also referred to metaphorically by the names Jerusalem and Athens.

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University of Chicago

Leo Strauss taught at the University of Chicago in the 1950's and 60's.

Who was Leo Strauss? Strauss was a German-Jewish émigré, the product of the pre-World War I *Gymnasium* who studied at several universities, finally taking his doctorate at Hamburg in 1921. He

was a research assistant at an institute for Jewish research in Berlin before leaving Germany in 1932 to settle first in England and later in the United States, where he taught principally at the New School for Social Research in New York and later the University of Chicago. It was during his period in Chicago that Strauss had his greatest influence. He was, by most accounts, a compelling teacher, and like all good teachers everywhere he attracted students, many of whom came to regard themselves as part of a distinctive school. By the time of his death in 1973 Strauss had written (depending on how one counts them) more than a dozen books and around one hundred articles and reviews.

Strauss's works were highly controversial during his own lifetime. When he joined the faculty at the University of Chicago he was the author of two books published in Germany that were long out of print: a slim monograph on the political philosophy of Hobbes, and an even briefer commentary on a minor dialogue by Xenophon. The future trajectory of his life's work would by no means have been obvious. In the autumn of 1949 he gave a series of lectures under the auspices of the Walgreen Foundation, titled *Natural Right and History*, that was to set his work on a new and distinctive path. It was, literally, his way of introducing himself to the world of American social science from the seat of a major university. The book of the same title was published four years later, in 1953. What exactly did Strauss set out to do?

Strauss offered a deliberately provocative account of what might be called the "modernity problem" that had been widely debated in prewar European circles, but which was still relatively unknown to

Americans of that era. Prior to Strauss, the most important current of twentieth-century American political thought was John Dewey's "progressivism." Against the view that the advance of science, especially the modern social sciences, was bringing about the progressive triumph of freedom and democracy, Strauss rang an alarm bell. Strauss argued by contrast that the dynamics of modern philosophy and *Wertfrei*, or value-free social science, were moving not toward freedom and well-being but to a condition he diagnosed as nihilism. In Strauss's counternarrative of decline, the foundations of constitutional government as understood by the American framers were gradually being sapped and eroded by the emergence of German-style historicism according to which all standards of justice and right are relative to their time and place. All of this was presented as the outcome of a densely detailed history of political thought in which all the trappings of German scholarship were on full display. His analysis was bold, audacious, and learned. The ensuing controversy pitted those advocates of American progressivism against Strauss, who regarded modernity as a mixed blessing that required certain premodern classical and biblical teachings to rescue modernity from its own self-destructive tendencies.

People on the outside often think of Straussianism as some kind of sinister cult replete with secret rites of initiation and bits of insider information-much like a Yale secret society. Straussians are often believed only to associate with other Straussians and only to read books written by one another. Some actually believe that Straussianism requires the subordination of one's critical intellect

to the authority of a charismatic cult leader. Others regard it as a political movement, often allied with "neo-conservatism," with a range of prescribed positions and ties to conservative think tanks and policy centers. The liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger deplors the influence of what he calls Strauss's "German windbaggery" and compares it to the deleterious influence of Hegel on earlier generations. "Strauss," Schlesinger continues, "taught his disciples a belief in absolutes, contempt for relativism, and joy in abstract propositions. He approved of Plato's 'noble lies,' disliked much of modern life, and believed that a Straussian elite in government would in time overcome feelings of persecution." None of these beliefs could be further from my own experience.

There is no doubt that the influence of Strauss-or at least his purported influence-is greater now than at any time since his death more than thirty years ago. Of course, Strauss is widely regarded today as a founding father, perhaps the Godfather, of neo-conservatism, with direct or indirect ties to the Bush administration in Washington. The last few years have witnessed a virtual hostile takeover of Strauss by the political Right. "The Bush administration is rife with Straussians," James Atlas has written in the *New York Times*. Never mind that the Bush administration, like all administrations, is rife with people of all sorts. The association of Strauss with neo-conservatism has been repeated so many times that it leaves the mistaken impression that there is a line of influence leading directly from Strauss's readings of Plato and Maimonides to the most recent directives of the Defense Department. Nothing could be more inimical to Strauss's teaching.

Early readers of *Natural Right and History* like Walter Lippmann saw in the book a support for the belief that the growing debility of modern democracy was due to its loss of faith in the natural law tradition. Straussians have always advocated a strong national government against the crabbed conservatism of "states rights" fundamentalists or the reactionary defenders of a purely federal reading of the Constitution. A textbook on American political thought compiled by two students of Strauss was dedicated to the memory of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Felix Frankfurter and "to the noble employment of the power they once wielded." The editors of the collection commend FDR for expanding the powers of government beyond securing the bare rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to a "higher and grander" conception of the modern welfare state. What distinguished the Straussian approach to politics was the focus on the "philosophic dimension" of statecraft, often at the expense of mass behavior or interest-group politics that attracted the attention of mainstream of political science. Straussians typically studied not only the deeds, but the words of singular political leaders and statesmen, but without any particular ideological pique or animus. Straussians might be either liberal or conservative, although there was a bias toward those who sought to anchor their policies in a reading of the principles of the American founding. Even recently a distinguished student of Strauss served as a prominent member of the first Clinton administration, advising on matters of domestic policy.