

## Why Leo Strauss?

*Four Answers and One Consideration Concerning the Uses and Disadvantages of the School for the Philosophical Life*

**Heinrich Meier**

There are good reasons to study Leo Strauss. Philosophical, existential, and political reasons. Those reasons existed before Strauss's star rose on both sides of the Atlantic on the media horizon, and those reasons will continue to exist even after the interest the name Leo Strauss currently finds among a wider public has died out, along with the talk of the "grandfather of the Bush administration." In short, long after the quarrel over Strauss's alleged influence on the foreign policy of the only remaining world power has become a thing of the past. I do not want to go further into this quarrel here. Instead, I want to give an answer to the question "Why Leo Strauss?"—a question that can definitely be separated from the recent Strauss boom. In fact, I was asked the question long before Strauss was on so many people's lips; I have encountered it as long as I have seriously studied his work and his thought.

The question "Why Leo Strauss?" can be the expression of either dismissive surprise or open-minded wonder. First of all and most often it is the result of insufficient knowledge. Strauss, who was born in Kirchhain, Germany in 1899 and died in Annapolis, USA in 1973, was long the great unknown among the thinkers of the twentieth century. During his lifetime he doubtless drew far less attention to himself than Martin Heidegger or Ludwig Wittgenstein, Carl Schmitt or Karl Barth. Yet his not having been well-known is

not the whole story. Often I was asked by students of Strauss's and by students of his students in the U.S. during the 1980s and 1990s why I confronted Strauss so intensively, and often that question was followed by another, namely who had pointed me to Strauss and told me to read his books carefully. The second question tacitly assumes that a careful reading of Strauss's oeuvre is very unlikely without someone else's guidance, if not to say authoritative instruction. An intensive confrontation with Strauss's thought, the question implies, could hardly grow solely out of an encounter with his books. Members of a school are all too inclined to regard as absolutely indispensable what for them was of enormous significance, and thus to overvalue personal contact, the teacher's example, the oral tradition, in a word: everything to which the school gives rise, everything it preserves and passes on. This may explain in large part the fact, which seems at first glance to be paradoxical, that in the orbit of the school precisely the books of the teacher are not believed to be capable of achieving what is ascribed to the books of other philosophers—provided they are great philosophers and provided theirs are great books: the ability to win over, on their own merits, unknown readers in unknown places in an unknown future, to challenge them seriously, to teach them to read, to move them to think, and, in the best case, to lead them to the philosophical life.

The institution of the school plays an important role in the history of philosophy, and the current quarrel over Strauss would not even exist without the school. Thus I shall return to the school later. But first I leave it behind in order to answer without further ado the question of why I study Strauss. Well, for the same reasons I study other philosophers: To enter into a dialogue about the most important questions that move us. To gain clarity on the fundamental alternatives of human existence. To explore the possibilities that philosophy holds in store for thinking the whole. To

further self-knowledge. I did not know Strauss personally. I was never the student of one of his students. I was never told by anyone to study his writings. I read his books as I read the books of Rousseau or Plato, Nietzsche or Lucretius. Though I soon came to read these authors differently than I had read them before. The confrontation with Strauss gave me a new access to them. Through nothing and no one have I learned to read better, more attentively, more fruitfully than through reading Strauss.

In saying that, I have already arrived at my answer to the question “Why Leo Strauss?” in the precise sense. Namely, the answer to the question of what distinguishes Strauss, what is his special place in the history of philosophy, what original insight he holds in store, what is to be found in him, or what discloses itself to us more easily in him that otherwise would be difficult to find. I shall divide my answer into four answers, which in the end you may put together into one.

### *First Answer*

*Leo Strauss opens up a new historical and a different philosophical access to the history of philosophy.* The cause that more than anything else was long associated with the name Leo Strauss was the exoteric-esoteric art of writing. The discovery of the way in which for more than two millennia philosophers have communicated different things to different addressees of their writings and have given them different things to think about is of fundamental significance for the proper understanding of the history of philosophy. It makes one fully aware of a fact that had increasingly fallen into oblivion after the French Revolution, namely that the philosophers of the past wrote under conditions of censorship and persecution—even if this was by no means the only reason why they availed themselves of the

exoteric-esoteric distinction—a situation that every interpretation has to take into account that wants to do historical justice to its object. An adequate understanding of the philosophical tradition therefore presupposes an in-depth study of and intimate familiarity with that “forgotten kind of writing” which Strauss brought to light and revived in his writings.

The fruitfulness of Strauss’s rediscovery for historical research can hardly be overestimated. This holds no less for the philosophical consequences that follow from it. If the philosophers of the past directed their books at quite different addressees, between whom they themselves carefully distinguished, if they spoke to the vast majority of their contemporaries—or at least never lost sight of them as their audience—and if they directed their discourse at the same time at the small number of those capable of philosophy or wrote for future philosophers, then it becomes clear that they took the opinions of their contemporaries and the authoritative positions of faith proper to the commonwealths in which they lived into consideration when presenting their teachings, in order in the same books to convey to the few who know how to understand what separated the philosophers from precisely those opinions and positions of faith or the extent to which they subjected those opinions and positions of faith to a fundamental critique.

For the interpreter of their books it follows that one must respond to the art of careful writing with the art of careful reading and that there is no other way to find out what the authors thought about the matter of concern to them than to fully involve oneself in the movement of thought that underlies the exoteric-esoteric presentation, and, with such guidance, to think the matter itself that is in question. In other words, starting from a given work, which calls for his complete attention both in its rhetorical details and as an articulated whole, the interpreter must inquire back into the

author's intention; he must summon up all his powers in order to live up to the philosophical activity that found its expression in that work without having been absorbed by it or being identical with it. This is ultimately what Strauss's famous hermeneutic maxim—that it is necessary to understand a philosopher exactly as he understood himself—aims at, this is where it leads.

By way of summary I should like to mention three philosophical consequences of the access that was opened up by Strauss. The first concerns the assertion of historicism that all thought is essentially conditioned by history. If there is a decisive difference between the double-faced, exoteric-esoterically presented teaching and the thought of the philosophers, it cannot be concluded from the "historically conditioned" writing and speaking of philosophers—which takes the expectations, opinions, and prejudices of their contemporaries into consideration in order to fulfill its political purpose—that in their thinking the authors were subject to the same expectations, opinions, and prejudices. The historical dependence of their philosophy is therefore no longer a self-evident presupposition but first and foremost an object of inquiry for a philosophically adequate confrontation with the history of philosophy.

Secondly, such a confrontation will not stop at the historical reconstruction of the doctrines that have made or can make their way into the textbooks on the history of philosophy. Rather, it will transform the awareness of the distinction between doctrinal content and philosophical activity into a fundamental reflection on the relationship between teaching and thought, work and philosophical existence. In doing so, it is able to counteract the petrification of philosophy in the history of its doctrines and systems more radically and emphatically than was the so-called "destruction of the tradition," which sought to wrest the concealed, forgotten, or

unraised questions from the predominance of answers in the tradition and to regain them for thinking. The undertaking of the early Heidegger, whose philosophical impulse Strauss took up and carried farther, is exceeded by the confrontation just sketched especially insofar as it makes the turn from the diversity of historical contributions that separates the philosophers to the common ground of natural capacities that connects the philosophers and then to the one matter of concern that unites them.

To this fundamental turn from history to nature corresponds, on the level of interpretation, the movement from the articulated whole of the work to the unifying intention of the author and with it—to mention the third consequence—an understanding, if one succeeds, that in the final analysis is based on the encounter of kindred natures. This encounter is what makes possible the communication and sharing of experiences that are intrinsically bound up with the philosophical activity, and it is the ultimate prerequisite of the hermeneutic openness Strauss demands, of the effort to understand a philosopher as he understood or understands himself, in the expectation that along this path something is to be learned that is of the greatest importance for us.

### *Second Answer*

*Leo Strauss draws our attention to the fact that philosophy is a way of life.* What I have said about the access to the history of philosophy opened up by Strauss—beginning with the distinction between the doctrinal level and the philosophical activity that precedes it, via the attempt to break open the congealment of the tradition in the movement of penetrating inquiry back into the intention of the philosopher, to the common insights and experiences that connect philosophical natures in dialogue above

and beyond all historical breaks and material differences between teachings—all this has its vanishing point in the fact that philosophy is to be grasped neither as a body of doctrines nor as a discipline but as a way of life. Philosophy is the way of life that is grounded in unreserved questioning and that gains its inner unity through a questioning and inquiry that does not stop at any answer that owes its authentication to an authority. Strauss showed, as did no other philosopher during his lifetime and as had few philosophers before him, that philosophy is a special way of life on which special demands of justification and consistency are to be made. In giving prominence to the philosophical life, one takes account of a historical constellation in which philosophy is in danger of failing to answer the question of its right and its necessity, to answer the question “Why philosophy?”

### *Third Answer*

*Leo Strauss places political philosophy at the center of philosophy.* To grasp philosophy as a way of life means to grasp it as an answer to the question of what is right: The philosophical life is the life that philosophers have chosen as the right life for themselves and have recognized as the best life. As a distinct way of life that rests on a conscious choice and is held onto in the face of all resistance, philosophy sees itself confronted not only with competing but also with authoritative answers to the question of what is right and just for man. It meets political obligations and moral demands that oppose it with the will to enforcement. It is subject to the law of the commonwealth, divine or human commandments and prohibitions. The question of what is right is posed in the sphere of the political. In this way both the rank of the political things is indicated and the urgency for philosophy of confronting them is designated.

Political philosophy makes the political things the object of inquiry: the foundations of the political community, the duties and rights of its members, the ends and means of their actions, war and peace internally and in relation to other commonwealths. Yet although political philosophy, as far as its subject matter is concerned, denotes merely a part of philosophy, it by no means has a narrowly circumscribed segment of human life as its object. Nor do we encounter in this object, say, an autonomous domain of life that exists alongside a number of autonomous domains of life or “provinces of culture” of equal rank. The central questions of political philosophy—the questions of the best political order, of the right life, of just rule, of the necessary weight of authority, knowledge, and force—can be adequately raised only in conjunction with those other questions of the nature of man, of his place between beast and God, of the abilities of the human mind, the capacities of the human soul, and the needs of the human body. The object of political philosophy is thus the human things in the comprehensive sense.

Through carrying out the confrontation with the question of what is right with the seriousness and circumspection required by the sphere of the political, political philosophy becomes the locus of philosophy’s reflection on itself. The contemplation of the political conditions of philosophy’s existence and the ascertainment of its natural foundations belong just as much to political philosophy as does the insight into the insuperable tension between the right and the nature of philosophy on the one hand and the requirements of the political community on the other, and, consequently, as does the reflection on the rhetoric needed to do justice to that tension. Political philosophy is charged with the political defense of philosophy, and the rational justification of philosophy can take place nowhere else than in political philosophy. Political philosophy



thus proves to be the part of philosophy in which the whole of philosophy is at stake.

*Fourth Answer*

*Unlike any philosopher before him, Leo Strauss makes the theologico-political problem his theme.* The rational justification of the philosophical life is neither to be achieved by means of theoretical positings and deductions nor can it be made dependent upon the accomplishment of systematic efforts, the conclusion and success of which lie in an uncertain future. Philosophy must demonstrate its rationality elenctically, in confrontation with its most powerful antagonists and with the most demanding alternative. And it must undertake this confrontation in the present. A confrontation that is literally *fundamental* for the philosophical life cannot be postponed any more than it can be delegated.

When in 1964 Strauss characterized in retrospect the theologico-political problem as *the* theme of his studies, he said in almost as many words that his entire work revolved around philosophy as a way of life and had its justification in view. For the talk of the theologico-political problem serves Strauss as an abbreviation for the urgency of the confrontation with the theological and the political alternative to the philosophical life or for the necessity of including in the philosophical investigation the opinions and objections that are, or can be, raised against philosophy by appealing to a human or superhuman authority. If philosophy is able to justify its right and its truth only elenctically, then it has to concentrate on that way of life by which its own answer to the question of what is right might be defeated. If philosophy is able to demonstrate its rationality only by knowing how to repel and refute the most powerful objection to philosophy, it has to seek out

that objection and make it as strong as it possibly can, as strong as only philosophy can make it. It is in this sense that Strauss turned to the political life and the life of the obedience of faith in his theologico-political treatises. It is in this sense that he sought out the challenge of revelation and made it strong for philosophy. For no more powerful objection to the philosophical life can be imagined than the objection that appeals to faith in the omnipotent God and his commandment or law.

The four answers I have given outline corner points of a contribution to philosophy that, like few others, causes us to see the new in the old, the foreign in the familiar, one's own in one's counterpart, and depth in the surface, and whose radicality fills us with all the more wonder the farther and the more freely we move in the space that this contribution discloses to self-knowledge. For those among and after us for whom the cause of philosophy is of vital importance there are good reasons to study Strauss's work and thought intensively.

Let me return now to the school. In June 2002, a few months before the quarrel over Strauss's influence on U.S. foreign policy began to preoccupy the media, I said in a lecture at the Munich symposium "Living Issues in the Thought of Leo Strauss" that Strauss, having learned from historical experience, was not willing to pay the price that philosophers from Plato to Nietzsche had been willing to pay for their teachings of political founding and their projects of counterfounding. The sole political endeavor, I noted, the sole political act of consequence, that Strauss brought himself to launch was the founding of a school, which the offer of a professorship in political philosophy at the University of Chicago in 1949 provided him the opportunity to do. Then I added that Strauss surely was aware of the price he had to pay for making this political decision. I was asked at the time what price I was talking about. A

question that presumably would not have been asked a year later. But let us begin with two other questions: What can move a philosopher to found a school? And in what sense does the founding involve a political decision?

The school has uncontested advantages for the development of a comprehensive teaching, for the pursuit of a research project, and for the formation of an interpretive approach. It makes it easier to test philosophical arguments and to experiment with rhetorical figures. It makes possible both the thorough differentiation of an edifice of thought in directions, and the application of an interpretation to objects, the pursuit or execution of which would surpass an individual's powers. In the best case, the semipublic sphere of the school permits the combination of the playful treatment of possible answers that presupposes the release from the demands of public self-assertion, and the serious involvement with the true questions that requires agreement about the fundamental points of a common agenda. The institution of the school helps to gain an audience for a new orientation of philosophy and to lend it stability. It is the means of choice when the aim is to found a tradition and thereby to make it more likely that an oeuvre will remain accessible to future generations. The school offers, not least, the possibility of making some citizens familiar with philosophy and educating them in such a way that, when they later assume responsibilities in the commonwealth, those citizens will treat philosophy favorably or at least respectfully and, if necessary, grant it protection and support.

Strauss used all of these advantages of the school. He also took the opportunity—following Plato's and Aristotle's example—to foster the politically gifted and the gentlemen among his students. As a citizen of the United States of America, he was loyal to the country that had given him refuge from persecution. He showed

himself to be a friend of the liberal democracy that allowed him to lead a philosophical life. He prompted a number of his students to investigate the historical, constitutional, and political foundations of the United States and encouraged them to defend those foundations. He respected their patriotism and taught them to understand the dignity that is proper to the political life. Yet he made it clear: “patriotism is not enough,” and he—no less than Socrates, the citizen of Athens—left no doubt about the fact that he did not consider the political life to be the best life.

The founding of a philosophical school, however, becomes a political decision not only insofar as the founding makes it possible to exert a salutary influence on the commonwealth—no matter how mediate, no matter how variously refracted that influence may be. It is a political decision already insofar as the school like the commonwealth comprises quite different natures, it too consists of philosophers and nonphilosophers who (bound together to varying degrees) cooperate in different ways, and therefore the central determinations that apply to the tension between the political community and philosophy remain valid in the relationship of the school to philosophy. For the school, no less than for the commonwealth, it holds true that different addressees have to be addressed differently, that they grasp the teaching differently and pass it on differently. The school demands political action and is fraught with political risks.

If the school gains a larger audience for the philosophical teaching, it also contributes to strengthening and oversimplifying the doctrinal content of philosophy, to emphasizing everything that allows of being taught and reduced to formulas, and, without any in-depth confrontation with the cause or the matter at issue, can be repeated, applied, and communicated. And if the school is able to exert some political influence, then it is in danger of accommodating

philosophy to a particular regime or underscoring its closeness to this regime in such a way that the philosophically gifted in the future or in other regions of the world who have a genuine philosophical interest in that teaching must loosen the link to that political regime in order to free the teaching from the odium of being bound to an order prevailing at a certain time and in a certain place or being subservient to an ideology.

The founding of a school will be successful only if the teacher adapts his oral teaching to his students' ability to understand it. It is very likely that he will entrust his farthest-reaching reflections, his most profound thoughts, and his most challenging considerations to his carefully written books. Members of a school, however, are inclined, as I mentioned, to value the oral tradition more highly. They tend to overestimate or to regard as absolutely indispensable what for them was of enormous significance. This may explain in part why the school is so susceptible to apologetic tendencies regarding the teacher's philosophical radicality, why precisely in its orbit his thought is often rendered innocuous, and why pieties of all kinds are able to take root there.

Strauss was as familiar as anyone with the problem of the school and the tradition in philosophy. He knew the history of Platonism, of the Aristotelian, Epicurean, and Stoic schools, their successors and their latest heirs. In his dialogue with Alexandre Kojève on tyranny and the politics of the philosophers, he commented in no uncertain terms in 1950 on the formation of sects and drew a sharp line between the philosopher and the sectarian. Precisely because he had confronted the philosophical tradition so intensively, he was aware that the petrification of philosophy in the tradition can be cleared away again and again, he was aware that philosophical energy can be set free ever anew from its encapsulation in doctrines. And precisely because he was familiar

---

with the history of the schools of the ancients, he was also aware that those schools helped essentially to make philosophy conspicuous as a way of life. In modernity, Rousseau and Nietzsche attempted to give the philosophical life a visible shape by emphatically drawing attention to their own lives. The alternative was the founding of a school, which does not have to produce only members of a school. Aristotle was a member of Plato's school for twenty years, nearly twice as long as he was able to teach in his own school, the Lyceum. Aristotle left the Academy as a philosopher, and from his school emerged other philosophers in turn. Just as from the school that Strauss founded philosophers have emerged—and by no means only “Straussians.”