## Leo Strauss, Education, and Political Thought



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## "The Second Cave": Leo Strauss and the Possibility of Education in the Contemporary World

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Leo strauss has written specifically on education only occasionally. His most notable reflections on the issue of contemporary education in America are contained in the first two chapters of Liberalism: Ancient and Modern. He also has, of course, had occasion to discuss theories of education contained in important texts from the Western tradition. An example of this is his discussion of the education of the guardians, so central to Plato's Republic.2 But in a much broader sense one could say that education and teaching are the central theme of all of Strauss's writings.<sup>3</sup> He speaks often of the "teaching" of a thinker or a period. His famous distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric is really a distinction of two forms of teaching. Not only is there here the presence of two "teachings," but more fundamentally a conception of how the complex activity of teaching takes place. As Strauss makes clear in a number of places, a central aspect of the esoteric method, perhaps the central reason philosophers engage in the self-exposure of writing, is to teach to two groups: the "city" and potential philosophers. The one is taught salutary truths necessary to the life of the city and the continued existence of philosophy; the latter the unnecessary but altogether more fundamental activity of seeking the truth that is the essence of the philosophic life.4 Whereas, for Strauss, the philosophic life is per se the best and highest life, it remains, as such, more alluded to than articulated in Strauss's texts.<sup>5</sup> Rather, what is always present to Strauss is the relation of this philosophic life to what is other than it: the city, religion, art, poetry, history and so on. For Strauss, where the philosopher engages in a reflection on philosophy's relation to these other human realities, it is never simply in the form of presenting an argument about what

these things are in themselves. It is always at the same time a teaching, an action of e-ducation—a leading out of these nonphilosophic forms to philosophy or of philosophy to these nonphilosophic forms. In a way, the nonphilosophic, for Strauss, only comes to light in its relation to philosophy, in its e-ducation into the light of philosophy. So we can say that Strauss's central teaching is about teaching.

Here the Platonic image of the cave is decisive, and Strauss alludes to it often: philosophy is the movement out of the cave. Indeed, for Strauss, philosophy is nothing but this movement out: an education or self-education. For Strauss, philosophy is fundamentally a "quest":

It is, therefore, the attempt to replace opinions about the whole by knowledge of the whole. Instead of "the whole" the philosophers also say "all things": the whole is not a pure ether or unrelieved darkness in which one cannot distinguish one part from the other, or in which one cannot discern anything. Quest for knowledge of "all things" means quest for knowledge of God, the world and man—or rather quest for knowledge of the natures of all things: the natures in their totality are the "whole." 6

This quest for knowledge of these "natures" as a whole would seem to reinscribe Strauss's account of the philosopher within the tradition of metaphysics, but Strauss argues against such a conclusion. Philosophy remains fundamentally zetetic:

But philosophy in the original meaning of the term is nothing but knowledge of one's ignorance. The "subjective certainty" that one does not know coincides with the "objective truth" of that certainty. But one cannot know that one does not know without knowing what one does not know. What Pascal said with anti-philosophic intent about the impotence of both dogmatism and skepticism, is the only justification of philosophy which is neither dogmatic nor skeptic, and still less "decisionist," but zetetic (or skeptic in the original sense of the term). Philosophy as such is nothing but genuine awareness of the problems, i.e., of the fundamental and comprehensive problems.<sup>7</sup>

Strauss elsewhere reveals that the ideas, the Platonic ideas, are nothing but these problems of which one can be aware, but of which one can never have a full grasp or mastery. So the life of the philosopher, engaged in the movement from the cave of opinion to the sunlight of knowledge never fully attained, is always an act of self-education, knowledge of which is the highest life for humans:

We have no comfort other than that inherent in this activity. Philosophy, we have learned, must be on its guard against the wish to be edifying—philosophy can only be intrinsically edifying. We cannot exert our understanding without from time to time understanding something of importance; and this act of understanding may be accompanied by the awareness of our understanding, by the understanding of understanding, by *noesis noeseos*, and this is so high, so pure, so noble an experience that Aristotle could ascribe it to his God.<sup>9</sup>

Putting aside entirely whether this description of the self-awareness of the philosophic zetetic movement can be compared to the actuality of the Aristotelian "thought thinking thought," what is noteworthy is that education or self-education is at the very heart of the highest activity in Strauss. What distinguished the self-education of the philosopher from the education of those still in the city is the "genuine awareness of the problems." Here the philosopher attains to a standpoint beyond what Strauss terms the "city"; he attains to a self-sufficiency. Here the philosopher encounters "nature," "the eternal order" or "eternal cause or causes of things," "the permanent problems." However, as we shall see, it is central to Strauss's discovery of "nature" that it remain metaphysically unavailable—it must remain available only as permanent problems and not determinative metaphysical causes.

As has been shown in a number of commentaries on Strauss's work, Strauss presents us with a complex discussion of the difference and connection between the "philosopher" and the "city." There are many subtleties here, but at a basic level the task of education is fairly clear: there is the education of the city and above all the gentleman, and there is the education of potential philosophers. The former is an education that both confirms the city in its virtues and fundamental opinions while also drawing the city to the highest possibilities of nobility and virtue and through this, opening the city—if only indirectly—to nature and philosophy. 12 On the side of potential philosophers, the objective is to awaken appropriate souls to an awareness of what transcends, but also renders impossible the standpoint of the city. For Strauss, the very being of the city resides necessarily in opinion, which is necessarily closed, whereas the philosophic life is an openness to the "whole"; it looks to "nature." But as understanding of the permanent problems whose heterogeneity can never be reduced to knowledge or metaphysics, philosophy retains this zetetic

openness beyond opinion and yet arises from the very instability of opinion.<sup>13</sup>

What is crucial to Strauss's account here is that the release from opinion that is the necessary consequence of philosophic education is not an experience of nihilism. Rather, for Strauss, what the prospective philosopher encounters in this "Nietzschean" rise above opinion is not the abyss but "an absolute horizon or a natural horizon in contradiction to the historically changing horizons or the caves." It is this conception of nature that, as a number of commentators note, crucially distinguishes Strauss's position from those of Martin Heidegger or Friedrich Nietzsche. The standpoint of the philosopher is then captured in his title—he is a lover of wisdom and as such not a possessor of wisdom or of science; he is one who dwells zetetically amid the permanent, the natural problems.

So, education consists above all in opening the potential philosopher to "nature," to the realm of permanent problems that underlies the realm of opinion. Now for Strauss nature has a twofold meaning: (1) nature appears as the standards and types available to natural or prephilosophic understanding; and (2) nature is the eternal, articulated order, the whole knowable properly only through philosophy. For Strauss, these two aspects of nature are connected above all in the movement of philosophy as a movement from prephilosophic opinion to philosophic awareness. This beginning in the "everydayness" of prephilosophic opinion is for Strauss, as for Heidegger in Being and Time, in contrast to a modern beginning in abstract self-consciousness. 16 The possibility of the movement from prephilosophic opinion to philosophy is that in opinion one is already open to nature. 17 Opinion, for Strauss, is both closed in its determinacy and potentially open as an image or reflection of nature. It is only in and through opinion, through the contradictions of opinion, that nature first arises.

Education is then the activity of being led out of the cave—this is above all the work of philosophers in their writings. Philosophers, the "great minds," are, as Strauss tells us, not the men and women inhabiting philosophy departments. They are those rare beings of sufficient boldness and sober madness who give themselves freely and fully to the inquiry of nature, who enter into the fundamental problems.¹8 In "What Is Liberal Education" and its sequel, "Liberal Education and Responsibility," Strauss seems to suggest that for contemporary Americans a "great books" curriculum is, if not a sufficient, at least a

necessary condition for a recovery of education in the Platonic sense. As Timothy Fuller brings out in his discussion of these texts, a liberal education for Strauss awakens for us a sense of a higher unity, a whole (pointed to by intuitions of greatness) that draws us out of the endless multiplicity and diversity of a leveling mass democracy.<sup>19</sup> One could add that Strauss might further require that in the reading of these texts we must open ourselves to a nonhistoricist and indeed forgotten kind of reading—a reading that opens itself up to nature as presented in the esoteric teaching of the great minds.

Whereas this is in general the medicine, the "counterpoison," that Strauss prescribes for our educational situation, I want to suggest that Strauss has here engaged in a degree of abstraction.<sup>20</sup> The remedy he describes is not really different from the education that belongs to the premodern context. Such a context supposes that the city is a cave open to the light of the Sun, open to our natural intuitions. Yet, Strauss, from the beginning of his intellectual career, characterized the modern context as that of a "second 'unnatural' cave," 21 a "much deeper cave."22 Now it may be that Strauss perceives in his American audience a still abiding relation to nature, to the premodern, that he found lost in the European context where he first formulated the striking image of a second cave. However, rather than pursuing Strauss's assessment of the "modernity" or "antiquity" of America, a complex and much debated topic, I instead want to think further about Strauss's image of the second cave and its implications for education in a fully realized modernity.<sup>23</sup>

Between 1930 and 1935, Strauss invoked in a number of publications this image of "the second cave" to describe the specific problem of contemporary understanding—the darkness of the "crisis of the West." There are aspects of Strauss's analysis in the 1930s that he will modify in his later thinking—in particular, the role of revealed religion in the constitution of this "second cave." Still, it will remain an abiding aspect of Strauss's position that modernity in a crucial way cuts us off from direct access to nature: even as nature remains unaffected by history, our access to it is deeply changed by the development of modernity. So, if we are truly to grasp Strauss's account of the educational situation that stands before us, we must explore more fully what it means to be living in this second cave. So

Modernity for Strauss, as is well known, is structured through three "waves."<sup>27</sup> The first wave began with Machiavelli and was crucially modified by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke to produce the modern

doctrine of natural right. Its contemporary correlate is capitalist liberalism, the acquisitive consumer society dedicated to fulfilling human needs. The second wave, initiated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, absorbed nature as a standard by taking it into human history, which now served as the source of moral and political guidance. Freed from notions of a natural necessity, this wave produced a more radically utopian—and hence more deeply alienated—form of humanism. Its contemporary correlate is communism. The third wave, which Strauss sees as our contemporary crisis, began with Nietzsche's questioning of the rationality or "humanity" of both history and nature: humanity finds itself in the midst of a terrifying existence, free to create the values by which to live. The contemporary correlate of this wave is fascism.<sup>30</sup>

The three waves by which Strauss defines the historical stages of modernity are at the same time all contemporary political standpoints. But whereas Strauss sees these positions as distinct, they also belong together as a common development. The waves of modernity expose with increasing explicitness the nihilism at the heart of modernity.<sup>31</sup> The assumption that the human will has a positive content is thereby shown to be simply the residue left by the tradition, due to an inadequate liberation from it in the preceding waves. The second wave dissolves the assumption of a human nature adumbrated by a fundamental guiding passion, which could form the basis of natural right. The third wave dissolves the assumption of a human right or rational right that came to replace natural right. The third wave brings to light that the sole basis of the will's guidance is its own free activity—beyond both nature and reason.

For Strauss there is even in the Nietzschean will a deception from which a return to the origins of modernity can free us.<sup>32</sup> If classical political philosophy is defined through nature as the context or structure belonging to humanity's original moral stance, modernity can be understood through its redefinition of nature, and therefore of the very structure of humanity's moral constitution. For the early moderns, nature is no longer an order within which humanity's moral and political life is structured, but rather an otherness or lack, whose conquest provides the most profound impetus to moral and political life. Nature has become that which is to be negated for the sake of a properly human culture. The very establishment of the modern requires the positing of a nature, the negation of which forms the basis of human culture and freedom. Thus, even as the three waves of

modernity deepen this new negativity, the whole project is premised on an initial affirmation or acknowledgment of nature—an affirmation lost sight of as modernity develops.<sup>33</sup>

From within Strauss's moral and political phenomenology, the emergence of modernity must begin with a new conception of nature so that it will no longer be understood as "the hierarchic order of man's natural ends," but rather as a source of "terror and fear."<sup>34</sup> What Strauss wanted to clarify in his first writings on Hobbes was that the nature relative to which modernity takes its point of departure is not simply the mechanical necessity of modern natural science, but is rather the source of this terror.<sup>35</sup> Strauss later came to see that this same notion of nature had its first articulation in Machiavelli.<sup>36</sup> For Strauss, nature as terror, as a moral phenomenon, is more primal to the definition of modernity than nature as mechanical.<sup>37</sup> This shift in the structure of the moral and political consciousness is, for Strauss, most fundamental to the great transformation into the modern.

With this shift in the conception of nature, a whole realignment in the structure of the moral and political imagination has occurred—or, rather, as the unfolding of modernity displays to Strauss, the destruction of that imagination.<sup>38</sup> Nature is no longer a whole that structures the moral and political, providing a schema by which to give content to good and evil, a connection between "is" and "ought." Nature is no longer a system of ends or perfections that is realized and gives meaning to notions of virtue.<sup>39</sup> As Strauss notes in a number of places, nature acts in modernity not as an end to be realized, but rather as a beginning from which one must escape.<sup>40</sup> Nature is to be conquered or mastered, and this conquest or mastery is at the same time the realization of human culture. 41 Strauss points out that in Hobbes the passion that moves humans from the state of nature into civil society is itself the apprehension of the negation of nature: the fear of death.<sup>42</sup> The step into modernity is therefore a step out of, or an alienation from, nature as a whole, within which ends are discovered. Nature now stands over and against humanity:

Man can be sovereign only because there is no cosmic support for his humanity. He can be sovereign only because he is forced to be sovereign. Since the universe is unintelligible and since control of nature does not require understanding of nature, there are no knowable limits to his conquest of nature. He has nothing to lose but his chains, and, for all he

knows, he may have everything to gain. Still, what is certain is that man's natural state is misery; the vision of the City of Man to be erected on the ruins of the City of God is an unsupported hope.<sup>43</sup>

For Strauss it is crucial that modernity is not a mere development from the premodern: it is not adequately accounted for as "secularization." Strauss speaks of the "modern project." The reconception of nature that structures the whole modern standpoint is a work of will. There is in Machiavelli a "founding" of modernity. For Strauss what characterizes this founding is not simply a "lowering of horizons," but a displacement of the horizonal inward. Will, not nature, is the source of our moral and political world. But what is crucial is that this turn inward to will is itself generated by a negative willing—an antitheological ire:

I would then suggest that the narrowing of the horizon which Machiavelli was first to effect, was caused, or at least facilitated, by anti-theological ire—a passion which we can understand but of which we cannot approve.<sup>47</sup>

In fact, it was a recurrent theme of Strauss's from the 1930s on that what generated the "second cave," the enclosure of modernity, was its polemical or negative relation to religion and specifically to Christianity. This then points to the notion of modernity as willed negatively, out of a kind of ressentiment, so that the nihilism that comes out of it is simply the coming to appearance of this negativity.<sup>48</sup> In short, the "modern project" in a certain sense should never have been. Modernity is a construct that dissolves as it loses all contact with the nature that generated it. As Strauss said in his commentary on Carl Schmitt, "'Culture' is to such an extent cultivation of nature that it can be understood as a sovereign creation of the mind only if the nature being cultivated is taken to be the *opposite* of mind and has been forgotten."49 From the standpoint of classical political philosophy, both modern nature, with its indifference to humanity, and the culture that becomes the necessary response to it are constructs.<sup>50</sup> They are constructed on and over the natural world as envisioned by the classics. Strauss contrasts the immediacy or concreteness of classical political thought, which takes its orientation from the orientation of the city and the structures of "natural" moral and political imagination, with the abstractness of modern political philosophy.<sup>51</sup> For

Strauss, modern political philosophy nevertheless always retains an implicit relation to that natural structure.<sup>52</sup> As the development of modernity more and more completely undermines this connection, humanity comes to find itself lost in a directionless void—this is the crisis of our time.

Because nature remains an abiding presence with which we have lost contact, it is central to Strauss's whole project that we must turn to premodern and above all Greek texts to recover access to the natural prephilosophic standpoint as well as the movement from this to the philosophic awareness of nature. From within the modern world, even in its ordinary world of opinion, there has been an already inscribed loss of relation to the natural beginning of philosophy. This is what Strauss captures in speaking of a second cave: "we need history first of all in order to ascend to the cave from which Socrates can lead us to the light; we need a propaedeutic, which the Greeks did not need, namely, learning through reading."53 Our ordinary contemporary opinions are already suffused by the modern translation of nature, and with that its subsequent forgetting in culture and more radically, in positivism, relativism, and historicism. It is only in an act of historical recuperation that we can return to an experience of nature, and above all of the human soul with its aspirational teleology (eros) and its completeness in philosophy. Only through the mediation of reading can we again return to the "surface of things," which is at once "the heart of things."54

But it is important to see that this act of retrieval is not simply a retreat from modernity, but is rather modernity's own most complete development. Strauss in the 1930s invoked Nietzsche and saw himself as completing Nietzsche's own project:

only if the Enlightenment critique of the tradition is radicalized, as it was by Nietzsche, into a critique of the principles of the tradition (both the Greek and the Biblical), so that an original understanding of these principles again becomes possible. To that end and only to that end is the "historicizing" of philosophy justified and necessary: only the history of philosophy makes possible the ascent from the second, "unnatural" cave, into the which we have fallen less because of the tradition itself than because of the tradition of polemics against the tradition, into that first "natural" cave which Plato's image depicts, to emerge from which into the light is the original meaning of philosophizing.<sup>55</sup>

Strauss is moving in two directions here—he sees this movement to the first cave as both something that takes us out of the modern, the second cave, but it accomplishes this through the completion of the most radical aspects of modernity, which produce the self-dissolution of the second cave. Strauss expressed this twofold development in a letter to his friend Karl Löwith in 1935. There he connects his own work to Nietzsche's intention of "repeating antiquity at the peak of modernity." 56 At the same time he distances himself from Nietzsche:

I think that you do not take seriously enough those intentions of Nietz-sche which point beyond Nietzsche's teaching. You do not enter into these enough. For it is not sufficient to stop where Nietzsche is no longer right; rather one must ask whether Nietzsche himself became untrue to his intention to repeat antiquity, and did so as a result of his confinement within modern presuppositions, or in polemic against these.<sup>57</sup>

Nietzsche did not and could not return to antiquity and to nature so long as he stayed with a will entangled in a polemical relation to religion and the earlier forms of modernity. Strauss tells us in another work from the 1930s, "Religiöse Lage der Gegenwart," "We must rise to the *origin* of tradition, to the level of *natural ignorance*." This rising is made available for us not simply in our retreat before the face of radical nihilism, the radical darkening of the second cave, but also precisely in and through this darkening that points beyond itself to an original standpoint lost and forgotten but also revealed in this deepest oblivion.

Strauss is ambivalent here—on the one hand the whole modern development comes to literally nothing—it was unable to stabilize itself and so produced the crisis of the West.60 From this point of view, the appearance of nature is but the completion of this "self-destruction" of the modern. 61 On the other side, Strauss wished to keep at bay the playing out of this logic, at least as an historical reality—the end of history, whether in Alexandre Kojève's Universal Homogenous State or Nietzsche's Great Politics, Strauss saw as the tyrannical occlusion of philosophy. 62 This conservatism or moderation testifies to the deep power of the modern even in its "nothingness." Educationally, this ambivalence of the power and powerlessness of modernity plays itself out in Strauss's writing in a simultaneous move to radicalize value relativism and historicism to display their groundlessness, together with an apparently opposed affirmation of those premodern and early modern traditions that connect us to nature and would limit such a radicalization. Practically, this latter educational strategy can appear as a "conservative" stance, affirming traditional virtues and practices.

Yet, Strauss's articulation of the grounds of our prephilosophic, natural intuitions and opinions, the fundamental desires and ends that belong to the human soul, is not traditional. Strauss's "return" to the ancient philosophy is not a return to ancient metaphysics. He accepts then the modern critique and the overcoming of metaphysics, which was in fact the result of the "peak of modernity," the critiques of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Strauss's esoteric readings of Plato point to an account of the ideas and the movement to the ideas that does not violate the phenomenological return to the surface that belongs to the articulation of the third wave of modernity. 63 Strauss's view of nature can be understood to appear when the existential or phenomenological standpoint of Nietzsche or Heidegger has been purged of the role of will or temporality as creative source of the "other" or "there" that structures the Overman or Dasein's being-in-the-world. The "there" emerges then not as possibility, but as nature, a totality of heterogeneous ends or types. In particular, nature is the human soul in its given aspirational relation to its own wholeness and perfection. Strauss discovers this nature in his return to ancient and medieval thinkers out of his critique of modern moral and political nihilism. Yet, even in this repeating of antiquity, Strauss remains at the "peak of modernity."

Let me make this point in relation to education. Insofar as contemporary students are at home in the contemporary world suffused with modern assumptions of relativism, historicism, and the flattening of moral and political aspiration that these produce, the teacher is called on not to act with or build on these assumptions, but to dissolve and destroy them—to show their ungroundedness. Here the student is "liberated" by a kind of produced reduction of the opinion of the modern city. This produced reduction occurs by radicalizing the contemporary opinions of the student to show their emptiness. This willed reduction of the modern occurs from a standpoint beyond or outside the modern, from the teacher who knows the nothingness of the modern. The teacher must effect the liberation from the second cave—where the soul, in that it does not know the surface does not know the depths. The claim is that this "willful" act is of course not against the modern, but is simply its own internal self-destruction played out pedagogically and as liberating for the student. For the result is in a "discovery" of an abiding nature in and through which a lost pursuit of the whole can be recovered. The dissolution of the modern is not then destructive for the student in that the teacher, and implicitly the student, possesses a grasp of a nature that is recovered in the dissolution. The claim is then that at the peak of modernity we really do encounter the ancient.

Many of Strauss's students have written in the most glowing terms about the "conversion" that he effected in them. For instance, Harry Jaffa likened his encounter with Strauss to Saul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus.<sup>64</sup> Now it would be belittling this experience and others like it to reduce it to psychological terms such as charisma. I am not interested in such a reduction—rather what I want to point to is that the effect of this transition is to reveal a radical imbalance between teacher and student—which may be overcome on the new terrain, but only on the new terrain. What alone can justify such an imbalance is that the student was "delusional" in his modern assumptions; that the teacher really does restore the student to an encounter with nature.<sup>65</sup> The pedagogical difficulty is that if modernity is a "second cave," obscuring natural light, the Platonic conversion from it must be correspondingly radical: the teacher stands in the place of this natural light.

But can this claim to a return to nature be sustained? I want to say both yes and no here. It is certainly Strauss's position that he discovers nature in the return to the ancients, just as he discovers an esoteric writing that really belongs to the "the thinker the way he understands himself." Strauss does not see any of this as an act of Nietzschean creative willing.66 And yet for this prewilled standpoint to appear for us in the second cave, there must be a willed unwilling of the will that produced this second cave. For Strauss, this original modern will really does come to nothing. But in his nonmetaphysical recovery of nature, as in his esoteric recovery of texts, Strauss has removed the capacity for nature or the text to appear "in themselves": they "are" only for the zetetic philosopher. This is especially true of "nature," understood as fundamental problems—which cannot be what nature in itself, as a reality, is. Problems are only problems for someone. Certainly it is necessary for Strauss's position that "nature" be prior to will, that it be discovered, but equally it must be only as discovered. But why *must* it be this way—because of the way in which Strauss understands and experiences "nature" in and through the retraction of the contemporary:

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.<sup>67</sup>

There is an ambiguity at work in Strauss's return to ancient views of nature—an ambiguity played out in the divided reading of Strauss's work. Strauss sees his return to the ancient view of nature as a return also to the esoteric teaching that argues for this view of nature as a discovery. Strauss discovers in Plato and others a nonmetaphysical naturalism that might be characterized as a phenomenology purged of voluntaristic futurity. However, this nature can also or equally be seen to arise for Strauss not so much as a discovery, but rather as "projection," in Heidegger's sense of the term, or as Strauss writes describing Nietzsche's understanding of nature: "nature, the eternity of nature, owes its being to a postulation, to an act of the will to power on the part of the highest nature."68 In this sense, Strauss's "nature" appears as the disclosure of the world born out of an experience of modernity. Strauss would then, despite his deepest intentions, remain—even in his critique of modernity—entrapped within the contemporary.

Now let me be clear: I am not taking up Shadia Drury or Laurence Lampert's accounts of Strauss as an esoteric Nietzschean—his whole position falls into complete incomprehension on this reading. Rather what I am suggesting is that Strauss cannot philosophically maintain his encounter with nature as a move beyond the contemporary. Implicit in this is, of course, a claim that Strauss's account of the contemporary is incomplete insofar as he does not see this encounter with "nature" as belonging to the contemporary and not to a move beyond it. But, even insofar as we hold to the difference between Strauss's standpoint and the historicist accounts of Nietzsche and Heidegger, such a placing of Strauss fully within the contemporary does require a transition beyond Strauss's self-understanding.

This returns us again to the situation of education. The possibility of a real return to nature is the linchpin on which the whole Straussian enterprise depends. It is the great books, the conversation of the great minds, that is to effect this for today's students; a liberal education, at least rightly taught, is to lead us beyond the contemporary. But if the nature that orders and allows such a movement, if the esoteric reading that opens these texts for us, is but a contemporary result, we have moved nowhere beyond the circle of the contemporary. We have but

taken up one side of the contemporary against the other.<sup>69</sup> From this perspective, the Straussian student, just as much as the fully modern relativist and historicist student, comes to nothing. That is to say, in reading the "great thinkers," because they are only read out of a fully contemporary demand for a nonhistorical, nonmetaphysical nature and through a "forgotten" type of reading that eliminates any metaphysical or other aspect that does not conform to this requirement, nothing but the contemporary is encountered.

Yet, this is clearly false—there is a real content encountered in the Straussian turn to nature; there is a real content in the great books as read from this Straussian standpoint. But this need not be opposed to the point I just made. It rather requires that the claim be retracted that the contemporary is a second cave, or, if it is, that it is a cave that shuts out the light. To recognize Strauss's position as ineliminably contemporary is neither to reduce it to nothing nor to equate it with Nietzsche. It is rather to argue that there is real content in the contemporary, both on the side of "modernity" and on the side of the Straussian phenomenological response to modernity. In turn this means that we need not be simply caught in the circle of the contemporary in its immediacy and self-definitions—a contemporary that is not a second cave is then open to and continuous with the noncontemporary. The ancient and modern need not be simply opposed, and equally contemporary standpoints can be seen as much complementary to one another as opposed. None of this is of course obviously true. What I am suggesting, and here I am following the argument of Charles Taylor, is that one need not simply dismiss Strauss's critique of modernity, but rather reframe it: the apparent "flatness" of the contemporary soul then need not be due to emptiness, but rather to an "inarticulacy" or immediacy of what is actually present to this soul. 70 From such a perspective what needs to be recovered is not so much nature (another form of immediacy) as mediation, a mediation that will relate that what Strauss opposes and demands be opposed to one another.

Such an account provides a very different view of both what teaching is and what the liberal study of the Great Books and great minds entails. In the account Strauss provides of the contemporary situation, there is necessarily a radical imbalance between the teacher who is beyond modern nihilism and the student entrapped therein. It is the task of such a teacher to dissolve the student's complacent self-satisfied relativism and historicism, so as to liberate the natural *eros* 

of the soul for the wholeness that can be found only in higher human ends and above all philosophy—all of which is lost sight of in the modern turn. However, the recognition of Strauss's position as a contemporary one born out of a relation to other aspects of the contemporary prevents such a diagnosis and such a cure of contemporary ills. From this latter standpoint students need not be seen as empty in their modernity nor, equally, to be simply affirmed in their contemporary self-satisfactions. Rather, both attitudes can and should be allowed and corrected relative to one another—the modern is not a second cave, a lack or absence or loss of contact with content—nor is it self-complete. The reading of the Great Books is not then an exercise of regaining contact with a lost nature, but rather a recollection of a content already implicit in and present to the contemporary soul.

## Notes

- 1. Leo Strauss Liberalism Ancient and Modern (Chicago, 1968) Cornell University Press, 3–25. The following abbreviations will be used for Strauss's various texts: The City and Man (1964), CM; The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism (1989), CR; Natural Right and History (1953), NRH; On Tyranny (1991), OT; Persecution and the Art of Writing (1952), PAW; Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy (1983), SPPP; What Is Political Philosophy (1959), WIPP; The Political Philosophy of Hobbes (1952), PPH; Philosophy and Law (1995), PL; Thoughts on Machiavelli (1958), TM; Spinoza's Critique of Religion (1965), SCR; Liberalism Ancient and Modern (1968), LAM; History of Political Philosophy (1972), HPP; Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity (1997), JP; The Early Writings (1921–32) (2002), EW. For a thoughtful analysis of the two essays from LAM, see Walter Niagorski, "Leo Strauss and Liberal Education," Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy 13, no. 2 (1985): 233–50.
  - 2. See CM, 97ff.
- 3. Strauss writes, "I own that education is in a sense the subject matter of my teaching and research" (LAM, 9).
  - 4. See PL, 66-7 and 140 n.18. This Nietzschean theme reemerges in NRH, 26.
  - 5. See Neil G. Robertson, "Leo Strauss's Platonism," Animus (1999): 5.
  - 6. WIPP, 11. See also NRH, 86.
  - 7. OT, 196. See also NRH, 125.
  - 8. WIPP, 39.
  - 9. LAM, 8.
  - 10. OT, 212; WIPP, 11, 39; NRH, 24, 32–33.
  - 11. NRH, 123-26.
  - 12. CR, 132-33.
  - 13. WIPP, 39-40.
- 14. NRH, 35. See Peter Levine Nietzsche and the Modern Crisis of the Humanities (Albany: State University of New York, 1995) for an argument connecting Strauss's philosopher to the Nietzschean Overman.

- 15. Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 41; Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 160–62.
  - 16. NRH, 124.
  - 17. WIPP, 39.
  - 18. WIPP, 40; NRH, 156.
- 19. Timothy Fuller, "Reflections on Leo Strauss and American Education," in *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss*, eds. P.G. Lielmansegg, Horst Mewes, and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 61–80.
- 20. This is not to say that Strauss is here entirely abstracting from his account of the contemporary in these essays. He refers to the distinctive difficulties of a contemporary approach to great books at a number of points—but the form in which he expresses this suggests more problematic opinions than the very nature and character of those opinions. See *LAM*, 7, 15, 19.
  - 21. PL, 136.
  - 22. EW, 215.
- 23. For a useful survey of the diverse views of America and its openness to the premodern see Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), chapter 2.
- 24. For a helpful discussion of the continuing role of religion and especially Christianity in the later Strauss, even as he came to distance himself from the secularization thesis, see Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) 109–17.
  - 25. See PPH, 163-64; WIPP, 28, 75-77.
  - 26. NRH, 246; PPH, 121.
- 27. Leo Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity," in *Political Philosophy: Six Essays*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Indianapolis: Pegasus, 1975).
  - 28. NRH, 274.
  - 29. WIPP, 54.
  - 30. "Three Waves," 98.
  - 31. WIPP, 55.
  - 32. SCR, 336.
  - 33. SCR, 336; NRH, 251.
  - 34. SPPP, 144, 223.
  - 35. PPH, 169-70.
  - 36. SPPP, 223; TM, 279-80.
  - 37. WIPP, 47. Strauss makes this point emphatically in PL, 34.
  - 38. PPH, 152.
  - 39. WIPP, 90.
  - 40. NRH, 180, 249-50.
  - 41. WIPP, 46-47; NRH, 201; "Three Waves," 85.
  - 42. NRH, 180-81.
  - 43. NRH, 175.
- 44. Leo Strauss, "The Crisis of Our Time," in Harold J. Spaeth, *The Predicament of Modern Politics* (Detroit: University of Detroit Press, 1964), 42.
  - 45. *PPH*, xv-xvi; *TM*, 292.
  - 46. PPH, v-xi. Strauss in a way wants to say two things in tension with one

another about modernity. On the one hand, he wants to state very clearly that modernity is not relative to anything new. Strauss emphasizes this point in relation to Machiavelli; see *TM*, 295. Modernity is not "more" than the premodern, it does not outstrip; it is less a lowering of horizons, a reduction to the cave. But this reduction to the cave is also the production of a second cave: that is, the more that is modernity is simply the (polemical) negation of what is more than the cave. This negation or subjectivity is for Strauss, in truth, nothing, and yet it is an utterly transformative nothing.

- 47. WIPP, 44.
- 48. *PPH*, xv.
- 49. SCR, 336.
- 50. *OT*, 192.
- 51. WIPP, 28.
- 52. WIPP, 188. See also LAM, 203-23.
- 53. EW, 215.
- 54. TM, 13.
- 55. PL, 136.
- 56. "Correspondence: Karl Löwith and Leo Strauss," *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 6 (1988): 183.
  - 57. Ibid, 184.
- 58. Strauss is here criticizing Nietzsche for failing to in fact free himself from the *ressentiment*, the revulsion that Zarathustra struggles with at the conclusion of Part 2 of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. It was, of course, the doctrine of the Eternal Return of the Same that was to effect this. As Strauss's letter to Löwith shows, Strauss agreed with this assessment, but, I take it, he would argue that so long as Nietzsche retained the doctrine of will to power and read the eternal return through this he could not recover antiquity.
  - 59. EW, 33.
- 60. This is the argument of the introduction to *PL*, where Strauss (following Nietzsche) retracts not only modern moral and political philosophy, but also modern natural science. But it remained Strauss's view as shown in his repetition of this text in the "Preface" to *SCR*.
  - 61. SCR, 31.
  - 62. See OT, 211.
- 63. See Stanley Rosen, "Leo Strauss and the Possibility of Philosophy," in *Review of Metaphysics* 53 (March 2000): 541—64.
- 64. See Harry Jaffa, "Strauss at 100," Claremont Institute. There are many testimonies to the power of Strauss's pedagogy. Milton Himmelfarb in tribute to Strauss noted his capacity to engender not simply students, but disciples. See "On Leo Strauss," *Commentary* (August 1974): 64. See also Allan Bloom, "Leo Strauss: September 20, 1899—October 18, 1973," *Political Theory* (November 1974): 372, 375, 378.
- 65. For a particularly disturbing account that displays the imbalance between teacher and student see Werner Dannhauser, "On Teaching Politics Today," Commentary Magazine (March 1975): 74–78. Of course, I have in mind as well Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind (New York, 1987) and his account of the "souls" of modern American students. For a thoughtful defense of Bloom's

approach to education, see J.R. Muir, "The Strange Case of Mr. Bloom," Journal of the Philosophy of Education 30, no. 2 (1996): 197-214.

- 66. An interesting parallel to the claims I am making here is Strauss's comments on history, which appeared to those who identified it as a "discovery," but it is, according to Strauss, better understood as an "invention." NRH, 33.
  - 67. CM, 1.
- 68. SPPP, 190. See Stanley Rosen, Hermenutics as Politics (Oxford: Yale University Press, 1987), 137.
- 69. This is the claim James Doull makes against Strauss in "Hegel's Critique of Hellenic Virtue," in *Dionysius* 9 (1985): 8.
- 70. See Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: House Anansi Press, 1991).