KEY CONTEMPORARY THINKERS

STRAUSS

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It is true of many important contemporary thinkers that they are controversial: often, what makes thinkers important is precisely that they say controversial things. What is especially challenging about Leo Strauss, however, is that the controversy surrounding him is often about what his position actually was. In both the secondary literature and the popular press, there is basic disagreement about what Strauss was in fact arguing.

Trying to provide an introduction to the thought and writings of Leo Strauss, then, is necessarily problematic. This is not an accident. The fact that commentators do not agree about what Strauss himself argued is itself a clue to what is most important in Leo Strauss. The most basic awareness a philosopher must have, according to Strauss, is the recognition of what he calls "the fundamental or permanent problems." At the very center of his life and thought, Strauss is calling upon us to recognize the deeply problematic character of human existence. It is entirely fitting that Strauss's thought should be inherently problematic.

But none of this makes the work of providing an introduction to that thought any easier. Strauss has generated dramatically varying interpretations. For his students and other admirers, sometimes called "Straussians," Leo Strauss is among the most significant scholars or philosophers of the twentieth century – in fact, perhaps *the* most important. For these, he is a figure who has revived political philosophy and classical thought, rediscovered old and hidden ways of reading, and made the very beginnings of Socratic political philosophy available to us once more. He has diagnosed

with unsurpassed clarity the "crisis of our time," and yet has also recovered the nobility and validity of revelation and renewed the debate between Athens and Jerusalem. In so doing, this Strauss has helped free his readers and students from false and destructive ideological thinking or naive ambitions about the transforming possibilities of politics, and so has recovered political moderation and the need for statesmanlike prudence and restraint in our all-too-dogmatic political world. This Leo Strauss is a wise and sober friend to liberal democracy, and especially to American liberal democracy.

On the other side, Strauss has been greeted by his critics - of whom there are many – as the very opposite of that in almost every respect, often in strangely contrasting ways. On the one hand he has been portrayed as essentially an intellectual fraud, lacking in basic scholarship, or pursuing a scholarship that is perverse beyond the idiosyncratic: more a cult leader than a diligent scholar. Whatever claims he may have to philosophical insight are, from this perspective, entirely overblown: where he is not derivative, he is delusional. At the same time, other critics have portraved Strauss as not so much an incompetent crank, more a kind of intellectual Moriarty, a spider weaving an insidious and hidden web that seeks to undermine liberal democracy. This Strauss seeks to effect a politics of lying and manipulation informed by the thought of Nietzsche or even by a kind of fascism. In this view, Strauss's all-too-superior "philosophers" are supposed to rule over all-toohuman subjects. For critics in this camp, the role of Strauss's students in the "American right" (and above all the neo-conservatives who came to power in the White House of George W. Bush) reveals the inner truth of what Strauss has really been about behind the veil of traditional conservatism. For these critics, he is a false friend to liberal democracy, and his influence has been a disaster for American and global political life.

So, for the reader who seeks to be both critical and sympathetic and to find a middle road between the Straussians and the anti-Straussians, this leaves the question: who is Leo Strauss, and in what context are we to understand his writings?

Ironically, one of the challenges in answering this is that, in contrast to many contemporary thinkers, Strauss appears to write simply and straightforwardly. He largely shuns technical language, finding it abstract and unphilosophical – and so, at the level of sentences or even paragraphs, his writing can appear to need no introduction. The last few books he wrote may seem to be nothing more than uninspiring summaries of the texts on which they claim to be commentaries. It is certainly true that, when Strauss wants to, he can write with great clarity and beauty. The challenge in reading him is to keep track of the subtle and continual shifts and changes that come to light as he moves from one thought to the next. Things quickly become complicated as we start trying to put together the various things Strauss says.

Three further things in Strauss's writing lead to even greater complexity. First, as we have already remarked, at the heart of his thinking Strauss emphasizes the irresolvable, problematic character of existence. This means that tensions and oppositions are themselves essential to Strauss's thought. Even among his students there is wide disagreement about how Strauss resolves, characterizes, or even formulates these tensions. For example, the contrast or tension between reason and revelation is fundamental to Strauss's thought, but Strauss's readers differ in what they see him doing with the reason-revelation "problem." There are atheistic, secularist Straussians and there are faith-based Straussians: both groups find a ground for their position in Strauss's writings. Another example of this fundamental disagreement is Strauss's assessment of the importance of ordinary civic or political morality. Some take Strauss to be a firm defender of such morals; others take the opposite view, that Strauss is in fact contemptuous of ordinary moral understanding. In general, I will not try to resolve these debates, but will suggest a formulation that seems best to cohere with what seem to be Strauss's other thoughts. Staving with the problems more than any solution was in fact a central characteristic Strauss himself discerned in philosophy, which he saw to be the love or pursuit, rather than the actual possession, of wisdom.

The second major challenge to introducing Strauss's thought is that the vast majority of his writings consists of commentaries on other writings, mostly works from the history of political thought in the western intellectual tradition (inclusive of the Jewish and Islamic Middle Ages), from the ancient Greeks to the twentieth century. In his commentaries he often assumed the voice of the author of the writing under discussion, or of one of the characters in a dialogue. Strauss only occasionally wrote in his own voice, and never provided a complete or comprehensive account or analysis of his philosophical claims. This, of course, increases the challenge of sorting out what Strauss's thought is in its own terms. This indirect form of "communication through commentary" is not an accidental feature of Strauss's thought; it belongs to his core claim about how philosophy arises from opinion, and how philosophy functions in the context of opinion.

The third great issue for the reader of Strauss is that Strauss claimed as one of his most important discoveries a tradition of "esoteric" writing in the western philosophical tradition, from the ancient Greeks through to the eighteenth century. He argued that many philosophers hid their teaching under an "exoteric" or outer form. This raises the obvious question: does Strauss himself also practice this art? We will discuss Strauss's understanding of exoteric/esoteric teachings at length in chapter 3 – but at this point, it is important at least to recognize the complication it presents. In claiming to understand Strauss, the reader must acknowledge that Strauss himself might have – or perhaps should be presumed to have – a secret or "esoteric" teaching. This obviously disrupts the normal assumption that authors mean what they say, and so complicates the task of discerning what Strauss might mean.

These challenges to understanding and explaining Strauss's thought have convinced me that a somewhat unusual approach is needed for a book such as this one that is trying to introduce Strauss's thought in a balanced way, both sympathetically and critically. Because there is so much controversy about what Strauss's position is, I have chosen to quote from him much more than is normal in an introductory book. Also, because his published writing is often complex and circuitous, I have made much use of his letters, unpublished writings, and lectures, where he is often clearer and more direct about his views. The huge advantage such an approach affords is that Strauss is a very good writer. His sentences are usually clear and, when he wants to, he can be wonderfully evocative and compelling. We will be trying to use Strauss to help us understand Strauss.

So while things can get complicated in trying to get at what Strauss's thought consists in, and there is a large and vexed secondary literature, we will seek to find our way to the center of his thought by focusing upon the question that was for him at the center of human existence: what is the best or right life? Strauss's work was a continuous response to this question.

The first thing is to provide an outline of Strauss's life, and then to describe briefly some of the basic themes and claims of his thought as it seeks to think the question of the best life.

Who is Leo Strauss?

Leo Strauss was born in 1899 into an observant Jewish family in Germany. Even before attending university, he converted to "simple, straightforward political Zionism" (IPCM 460), and was involved in the Zionist movement during his twenties. Strauss studied philosophy at the University of Marburg and the University of Hamburg. While a student, he served as an assistant to Edmund Husserl, the founder of the school of phenomenology. Strauss attended some classes and seminars of Martin Heidegger, whom Strauss considered to be the greatest thinker of his generation. After completing a doctorate at the University of Hamburg under Ernst Cassirer in 1921, Strauss became a researcher at the Academy for the Science of Judaism in Berlin, focusing on the history of Jewish philosophy, including work on Moses Mendelssohn, Spinoza, and Maimonides. His first book, Spinoza's Critique of Religion, was published in 1930. At about this time, Strauss had what he described later as a "change of orientation" that opened up for him the possibility of a recovery of pre-modern rationalism. He later stated that the first expression of his "change of orientation" was to be found in his 1932 review of a book by Carl Schmitt, the important legal theorist who joined the Nazi Party shortly afterward. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Strauss was in France on a Rockefeller research fellowship. The following year, he moved to England to work on Thomas Hobbes. In 1937, he went to the United States, eventually securing a permanent position at the New School for Social Research in New York City. In 1949, Strauss began two decades of teaching in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago. He retired and was named Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago in 1968, but continued teaching and giving guest lectures at Claremont Men's College and then at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, until his death in 1973.

Themes in Strauss's Thought

What matters most about Leo Strauss's life is not primarily his deeds but his thoughts. There are two basic ways we could approach Strauss's importance as a "key contemporary thinker": one would be chronological, and the second thematic. This book will do a bit of both, but it is primarily thematically structured. This is not

an intellectual biography, but in chapters 1 and 2, I will consider Strauss's intellectual development in the context of the Weimar Republic, and especially the significance and meaning of what he calls his "change of orientation." We will also follow him to the United States, where he taught for over thirty years and published the books that established him as one of the leading figures in political philosophy and the history of political philosophy in the mid-twentieth century. We will conclude the book by looking at his influence especially upon American conservative thought and American politics.

While there is a general biographical trajectory through the course of the book, its more basic structure is thematic – and, in order to explore these themes across the range of Strauss's thought, we will often look at writings from different decades in his life. The primary justification for this is that, once Strauss underwent his "change of orientation" sometime around 1930, his thought retained a basic stability of outlook. This is not to deny some important developments and even corrections within his thought, and certainly we will note them when they arise. Nonetheless, the essence of Strauss's philosophical orientation and vision remained remarkably consistent.

Let me turn, then, to the themes that will organize this book and help orient us in making sense of Strauss's thought. This list is by no means exhaustive, but I want to suggest that these five themes do form something like the most fundamental aspects of Strauss's thinking:

- 1. the return to natural right and the recovery of classical rationalism;
- 2. the theological-political problem;
- 3. the recovery of the exoteric/esoteric distinction;
- 4. classical political philosophy; and
- 5. the critique of modern political philosophy.

The first three themes will form our first three chapters, and we will explore the development of Strauss's thought in the context of the Weimar Republic in Germany, and in his first few years of exile from Germany in France, England, and the United States. Chapters 4 and 5 will consider the two crucial components of his mature thought, which find expression particularly in work Strauss published while he was at the University of Chicago, and, above all, in his most comprehensive book, *Natural Right and History* (1953).

But it is important to remember that the key earlier themes remain active right through his work: Strauss himself explicitly states that the theological-political problem was *the* theme of his investigations throughout his scholarly career. In chapter 6, we will consider Strauss's legacy and specifically his influence on American politics.

It is a basic claim of this book that Strauss's work as a whole cannot be understood or properly assessed except by seeing it as a response to the crisis of politics, thought, and culture that belonged to the Weimar Republic. Strauss's intellectual project clearly emerged from this context, and understood that crisis as indicative of a deeper and more fundamental crisis in western civilization: the crisis of the West, or nihilism. Our first three chapters will be an effort to understand and explain Strauss's standpoint as a response to the crisis of nihilism. Of course, many of the most significant thinkers of the twentieth century were engaged in responding to similar circumstances. We need to see Strauss's as one such response, but an importantly distinct and compelling one.

Before considering these themes, it will be useful briefly to introduce three thinkers who are especially important in understanding and locating Strauss's position. Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger were crucial figures in articulating the intellectual world in which Strauss came to his own standpoint.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), while he lived in the nineteenth century, only came to cultural and intellectual prominence in the first decades of the twentieth century and was, by Strauss's own account, the dominating intellectual presence of the Weimar Republic (1918-33), where Strauss came to intellectual maturity. Nietzsche is famous for his account of European civilization as having been subject to the claim "God is dead." Nietzsche provided the most radical consideration of the implications of this insight into modern culture: the death of God implied the loss not only of religious belief but of the whole framework of morality and science that depended on the claim of an otherworldly foundation. Nietzsche therefore saw his own time as one that was experiencing nihilism. In the face of the abysmal experience of the death of God, Nietzsche saw as illusionary and unsustainable the claims that the end of religion issued in a new egalitarian humanism and new scientific understanding of the world. Nietzsche proposed an alternative way to live in the face of nihilism through three "teachings": the world as "will to power"; the proclamation of the *Übermensch*, the "Overman"; and the doctrine of the Eternal Return of the Same. Nietzsche explores these thoughts in a number of works, but especially central is *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. As we shall see, Strauss understood himself as trying to face the demands of Nietzsche's thought.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) was important to Strauss in pointing to a way of philosophizing that might allow for a standpoint that could escape Nietzsche's devastating critique of the western tradition of philosophy as implicated in the nihilism western culture found itself possessed by. Husserl developed "phenomenology" as a way to engage in a philosophic reflection on the experienced world that avoids the kind of causal or metaphysical approaches to philosophy that dominated western philosophy, and were especially at work in modern philosophy's turn to questions of knowledge of the external world. Husserl's phenomenology sought to pre-empt the turn to this kind of knowledge by engaging in a philosophy of the description of things as they appeared to the self, bracketing, or excluding, questions of causality or metaphysics. Strauss was deeply impressed by Husserl and took up his turn to the "natural understanding" – the way things appear to us naturally – as a beginning point for a philosophy that might point a way out of the nihilism of the age.

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was an assistant to Husserl and developed and radicalized Husserl's standpoint. Strauss encountered Heidegger as a young academic in the circle of Husserl and was deeply impressed by the power of Heidegger's philosophical inquiry both as a philosopher and as an interpreter of classical philosophy. Heidegger recognized that Husserl's phenomenology could be transformed by situating its inquiry in time and history: the self or ego that engages in phenomenological description could and should be seen not as a timeless, situationless being, but as one necessarily confronting a finite, historical situation in which time fundamentally informs that finitude. Heidegger is the intellectual source of existentialism. He agrees with Nietzsche that the modern era is one of nihilism. He finds in his radicalized phenomenology a way both to understand and confront this historical situation more deeply, and to seek to find a way of thinking that might open a stance beyond nihilism. Heidegger's most important book, Being and Time, was published in 1927. In 1933, he joined the Nazi Party. In many ways Heidegger's mentor, Husserl came to be deeply disturbed by, and felt betrayed by, the radical tendencies of his student's thinking. Husserl sought in his own last writings to

contest Heidegger's claim that his work drew out the proper implication of Husserl's own phenomenology.

Having briefly outlined the standpoints of these three major figures in Strauss's intellectual background, we can turn to sketch five key themes in Strauss's own thought.

The Return to Natural Right

As a young man, Strauss was deeply struck by Nietzsche's characterization of the contemporary western world as an age of nihilism. Strauss accepted Nietzsche's account of the self-destruction of reason that produced nihilism as a loss of all moral meaning. The modern world seemed incapable of discerning truth, above all moral and political truth. Strauss's "change of orientation" in the early 1930s was a movement away from Nietzsche made possible by Strauss's recognizing that it was only modern rationalism that was in trouble; pre-modern rationalism could be recovered in order to develop a standpoint without the nihilistic implications of modernity. Further, what pre-modern rationalism allowed was a return to "nature" as a standpoint or standard that would allow the recovery of moral content and moral meaning. Hence the recovery of what Strauss calls "natural right" - Strauss's way of translating the ancient Greek phrase physei dikaion, or "what is just or right by nature." If there could be the recovery of a standard of right or justice based upon nature and so independent of history – including the history of modernity – then the apparent victory of modern philosophy over ancient philosophy needed to be reconsidered.

For Strauss, the most developed form of the modern project that ended in nihilism was "historicism," the belief that all human thought and meaning is historically determined and historically limited. Historicism meant that nothing could be said to be simply true or good because, from a historicist perspective, truth and goodness were historically relative. The promise of the recovery of "natural right" was the promise of the recovery of a standard that was not historically relative, but true or good by nature. For Strauss, natural right is what emerges when the power of historicism recedes as it recognizes its nihilistic character. The great benefit of returning to ancient Greek philosophy, above all as shown in the figure of Socrates, is the remarkable fact that there could be the discovery of natural right as an object of philosophical inquiry. It was this insight that was made available to Strauss in his "change of orientation," and was to determine the standpoint of his subsequent thinking.

The Theological-Political Problem

To understand the significance and source of Strauss's change of orientation and recovery of natural right, we must place it in the larger context of Strauss's intellectual concerns. Strauss's own description of this larger context is the "theological-political problem." One way to view this problem is to see it in personal terms reflecting the predicament Strauss found himself in as a Jew who could no longer adhere to the orthodox faith in which he had been raised, but who equally could not identify himself with the larger German culture in which he found himself. Strauss experienced this as an antinomy between modern thought – ultimately Nietzschean atheism – and orthodoxy. The way out of this predicament was, for Strauss, in the return to pre-modern rationalism. Strauss first came to this discovery not in Plato or Socrates, but in medieval Jewish and Islamic thought, above all in the figure of Moses Maimonides (1138–1204).

In Maimonides, Strauss found a particular way of framing and understanding the theological-political problem. The term "theological-political" Strauss borrowed from the title of a book by the seventeenth-century Jewish philosopher Spinoza. Strauss understood the phrase to refer to the need of philosophy to establish itself and to defend its freedom from the forms of authority that belong to religion as well as to political power. In this book, we will look at these two tensions in turn. In chapter 2, we will focus on the tension between philosophy and religion, the tension between "Athens" and "Jerusalem." Strauss argues that the biblical revelation, specifically Judaism, presents the most radical challenge to philosophy and its claims to determine the question of the best way to live on the basis of natural reason alone. For Strauss, the question of "the best life" is the orienting question of human life, and so the contest between reason and revelation is the most basic human question. Strauss's interest in this debate is not simply to secure the claims of reason against any competitor, but more fundamentally to see in the debate itself a shift in the meaning of philosophy. For Strauss, the standpoints of reason and revelation are mutually irrefutable. But recognizing and engaging this "problem" for Strauss gives birth to a deepening understanding of what philosophy is and

demonstrates its inherent limits, showing that its very context is constructed of fundamental and permanent problems.

The Exoteric/Esoteric Distinction

One of Strauss's fundamental and recurring arguments is that philosophy, as the life given to questioning in the pursuit of wisdom, is inherently opposed to the nature of the "city" (or, more generally, of society) as a way of life founded upon opinion and above all upon belief in the justice of the laws of the city. In order that philosophers would not be persecuted nor the city be harmed, according to Strauss, philosophers began to conceal their true teaching behind an outer or "exoteric" teaching that would, at least on the surface, suggest that philosophy supported the ways of the city. In other words, the tension between philosophy and the city gave birth to an art of writing for philosophy: the art of esoteric writing.

The exoteric/esoteric distinction can appear to be a plausible claim that philosophers, facing potential persecution, have not always been open about their thoughts, and so interpreters must "read between the lines." At one level, Strauss is certainly saying this. Importantly, however, he connects this historical point to the deeper claim that underlying what appears to be an occasional strategy is a fundamental opposition between philosophy and the city.

Here we can see that the exoteric/esoteric distinction is also a manifestation of another crucial aspect of Strauss's thought: "political philosophy." For Strauss, political philosophy is not primarily a branch or field of philosophy; rather, it is a way in which, or an awareness with which, philosophy is practiced. Political philosophy is philosophy aware of its political context and beginning point. Strauss argues that classical political philosophy is especially self-aware in this regard. It is characteristic of modern political philosophy to practice esoteric writing in the service of seeking to change the world and so eventually to bring about a modern world in which a free, enlightened people can live without the need for such devices. Strauss's judgment, arising from his sense of nihilism, is that this modern project has failed. It is only in classical political philosophy and the city, and which practices

esoteric writing in the service of that difference, that we can find a stable standpoint and so escape a nihilistic result.

Classical Political Philosophy

A great deal of Strauss's standpoint rests on his understanding of classical political philosophy, and many of his writings can be seen as contributions to his recovery of classical political philosophy. Strauss articulates this recovery through the interpretation of classical texts, above all texts that have as their focus the figure of Socrates, with whom Strauss associates the origin of political philosophy. The texts central to this for him are the dialogues of Plato, as well as dialogues by Xenophon, Aristophanes' play The *Clouds*, and some comments by Aristotle. However, it would be fair to say that Strauss's consideration of classical political philosophy extends to more than these works: he includes not only other works of classical philosophy and classical literature, but beyond that (and in a more complicated sense) the work of the great Jewish and Islamic philosophers, above all Alfarabi (872–950) and Maimonides, whom Strauss understands to be continuing in the practice of classical political philosophy. Still, the central and defining figure in Strauss's account of classical political philosophy is the Socrates of Plato's dialogues.

Strauss's recovery of classical political philosophy is, as we have seen, a response to the crisis of modernity: nihilism. Further, in Strauss's view, historicism - with what he sees as its moral relativism and moral nihilism - represents the most extreme manifestation of that crisis. For Strauss, what classical political philosophy does is to give access to a reality untouched by history: nature. But the "nature" Strauss finds in classical political philosophy is not a metaphysical account of nature. The traditional reading of Plato and Aristotle and other ancient philosophers finds that Plato's and Aristotle's standpoints bring to light a metaphysical realm of ideas or forms that underlie and cause all reality; this accords with what Nietzsche and Heidegger find. Strauss, following his esoteric reading of texts, argues that this surface or exoteric account is not the true standpoint of classical political philosophy. For the careful reader, argues Strauss, the true teaching of classical philosophy, and above all that of Plato, shows itself to be focused on philosophy as ceaseless questioning, rather than on a metaphysical solution to those questions. What Plato teaches esoterically is Socrates'

"knowledge of ignorance," philosophy as the life dedicated to the quest or pursuit of knowledge, rather than to its possession in and by metaphysical knowledge. For Strauss, this is crucial if classical political philosophy is not going to be subject to the critiques of Nietzsche and Heidegger, who argue that the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle in fact leads to modern nihilism.

For Strauss, the possibility of an ahistorical, non-metaphysical political philosophy rests upon recovering the Socratic beginning, seeing philosophy as arising from the philosopher entering into the *agora*, the space of public opinion, to begin a process of questioning and dialectic that seeks to uncover the abiding reality – nature – that public opinion points to. What this means is a turning to what people say, to their speeches, and not trying to seek an underlying causality that treats what is said in a reductionist way. In doing this, the fullness of humanity can be recovered: the "high" is not seen from the perspective of the "low." Classical political philosophy's turn to speeches can be seen as the beginning necessary to avoid the outcome of moral nihilism that belongs to modernity. Strauss's whole work of scholarship is, then, a sustained effort to recover this way of doing philosophy, as the thing most needful in the face of the crisis of the West.

The Critique of Modernity

The final theme we will explore is Strauss's explanation of the history that has led to what he sees as the modern crisis. The first thing to understand is that history is, for Strauss, fundamentally a history of ideas. The modern world, or "modern project" as he sometimes calls it, is not primarily a result of social, economic, or other historical causes; it is primarily the work of changes in thought, and above all the work of changes in political philosophy. The most fundamental change was a shift in the meaning of political philosophy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries so that it was no longer seen to be a life in pursuit of theoretical knowledge, but became dedicated instead to the alteration of political reality. For the modern, knowledge became no longer the knowledge of what is, but of how to change what is. In short, political philosophy became dedicated to effecting historical change. More specifically for Strauss, in the modern project historical change was aimed at constructing a world dedicated to fulfilling human needs and purposes.

Strauss came to see the modern project as consisting of three stages or waves that bring out a progressively deeper radicalism. We will have a chance to explore this development in detail in chapter 5. But at this stage, the general point to see is that, according to Strauss, modernity began with a break from the pre-modern made by political philosophy, and came to a kind of conclusion in the crisis of the moral nihilism and relativism of twentieth-century life. For Strauss, this places us, as inhabitants of a modern or postmodern world, in a terrible dilemma. We have lost our capacity to orient ourselves morally and politically. We cannot simply turn back to an earlier moment in modernity; its history has shown that modernity generates its own undoing. Even if we find a way to recover the standpoint of natural right through a study of classical political philosophy, for Strauss it is hard to say how that can and should guide us in a world that is no longer classical. As Strauss stated, "only we living today can find a solution to the problems of today" (CM 11).

Strauss argues that, rather than a "solution," what emerges from the insight that fundamental problems are irresolvable is a way of living with the problems: the recognition that moderation and practical wisdom are the proper standards of political life. Nature can function as a kind of guiding star in terms of natural right, but it does not provide an ideological map. For Strauss, one of the marks of the modern project is its tendency to become ideological, to move toward a fixed determination of the workings of the world. In Strauss's mind such ideologies tend toward reductionism. At the heart of Strauss's political philosophy is an effort to liberate thinking from reductionist or ideological accounts of politics and of the human more generally. For him, it is only when reductionist tendencies are resisted that the fundamental problems can emerge – and that political philosophy will be able to become, as Strauss called it, "first philosophy" (CM 20).

The Thesis of this Book

Beyond trying to introduce readers to the often-challenging thought of Leo Strauss, this book does have a thesis about that thought as a whole. Strauss always called himself a "scholar" and not a "philosopher." This was not simply due to modesty on his part; it is actually central to his basic claim. If Strauss is simply recovering a pre-existing standpoint – that of classical political philosophy

– his basic work is scholarly recovery. But the claim of this book is that Strauss is doing more than "scholarly recovery": he is a key contemporary thinker precisely because his work is philosophically original. He is not simply recovering the thought of Plato, as he presents himself to be doing; nor is he simply occupying an already-established contemporary standpoint, whether it is that of Nietzsche or Heidegger, as some critics of Strauss have alleged. Strauss developed a distinctive contemporary position – and it is this distinctive position that we will be trying to uncover as we go through Strauss's thought.

However, precisely because he is more original than he allows, Strauss's claims to recovery are more open to question than he allows. The focus of this introduction to Strauss will be not primarily on his interpretations of specific texts, but on his own thought. That thought was undoubtedly worked out in and through his readings of ancient and modern political philosophy, but it was not determined by those texts. Our effort will be to see Strauss as himself a key contemporary thinker.