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ESOTERICISM AND MODERNITY: AN ENCOUNTER WITH LEO STRAUSS

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## ABSTRACT

Strauss championed a philosophy of history according to which philosophers characteristically hide their actual beliefs when writing about ethics and politics. This paper begins by suggesting that an esoteric philosophy of history encourages a set of specific biases when writing of histories of philosophy. Proponents of esotericism are liable to be far too ready to conclude that philosophers intended to hide their beliefs; they are likely to be insufficiently attuned to the varied contexts in which philosophers write; and they are likely to be too ready to assimilate the beliefs of philosophers to a norm. Thereafter the paper considers the presence of these biases in Strauss's account of modernity. Strauss allows for waves of modernity but he defines these waves as part of a single, monolithic project that is defined in contrast to the esoteric character of ancient philosophy and that leads inexorably to nihilism. Once we correct for the biases mentioned above, however, modernity appears as a series of projects located in specific contexts and confronting particular dilemmas. Again, where Strauss presents our own era as one of crisis, our revised account of modernity suggests that we merely confront the more local issue of how to forge a community out of self-governing individuals.

## ESOTERICISM AND MODERNITY: AN ENCOUNTER WITH LEO STRAUSS

Leo Strauss remains one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. When the source of his influence is not the lingering effect of his personal magnetism, it is usually the way in which his historical studies combine a distinctive methodology with a historical critique of modernity. Recent accounts of Strauss have typically concentrated on his philosophical conservatism, and the impact it has had on the upper echelons of American government.<sup>1</sup> Yet Strauss's conservatism itself derives in large part from his historical critique of modernity and so, in turn, his methodology – his philosophy of history.

Perhaps the most startling feature of Strauss's philosophy of history is a clear adherence to esotericism. Strauss would have us assume that political philosophers characteristically hide their actual beliefs behind a sanitised, exoteric veneer, within which they hide clues designed to enable responsible initiates to decipher the true meaning of their writings. Although several commentators have recognised that esotericism lies at the heart of Strauss's history of political philosophy, and although many of them quickly dismiss it, comparatively little attention has been paid to its relationship to his account of modernity.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I want to examine, first, the ways an esoteric philosophy of history is liable to distort the history that one tells, and, second, how just such distortions infect Strauss's account of modernity. I aim thereby to reinterpret the so-called crisis of our times.

### I

Strauss argued that there was an inherent conflict between the city and philosophy. Whereas the city, which stands for all political organisations, depends on local religious and conventional beliefs to bind people together, philosophy consists of inquiries into the universal and so the putting into question of all local pieties. What is more, Strauss continued, the conflict between the city and philosophy leads

philosophers to conceal their actual beliefs behind a sanitised veneer, for it is only by doing so that they can fulfil their civic responsibility and, indeed, avoid persecution.<sup>3</sup> Strauss's insistence on this esoteric view of the history of philosophy inspired, finally, his methodological approach to reading past texts. According to Strauss, if we are to recover the actual meaning of philosophical texts, we have to deploy various special techniques to peel away their exoteric skin and reveal their esoteric core. Some of the techniques that Strauss recommended are common heuristic devices that historians might well deploy even if they were unconvinced by his esotericism: these common heuristics include paying attention to what authors do not say as well as to what they say, and highlighting contradictions in texts. But Strauss also recommended stranger techniques, which historians who rejected his esoteric philosophy of history, would be unlikely to adopt: these stranger heuristics include focusing on the middle of a text, and studying the number of chapters and paragraphs in it.

There can be no doubt, of course, but that people, including philosophers, do sometimes practice deception. But Strauss's claim is considerably stronger than this recognition of deceit. Strauss argued that philosophers actually engage in systematic deception. It seems to me that this stronger claim of systematic deception is hard to sustain, and yet, or so I will suggest, it pervades Strauss's history of modernity and so his conservatism.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps Strauss would defend his esotericism on the grounds that philosophers must hide their actual beliefs if they are to avoid persecution. But surely few societies have persecuted philosophers just for reading, writing, and teaching on philosophical issues irrespective of the content of what they read, wrote, and taught? Perhaps, then, Strauss would defend his esotericism on the grounds that philosophers are especially likely to hold beliefs that bring persecution; perhaps Strauss would argue, as he seems to imply, that philosophers necessarily discover a truth that is inimical to social order and they then keep this truth from the vulgar in order to maintain social order, or at least in order to avoid being persecuted for challenging social order. But surely we

can not just assume that all those who read, write, and teach philosophy come to hold beliefs that are inimical to social order; surely we can not assume they do so even if, like Strauss, we take such beliefs to be a kind of truth – after all, philosophers are by no means bound to discover the truth. In short, Strauss's esotericism appears to rely on a spurious identification of the activity of philosophising with a particular content. Only by tacitly identifying the activity of philosophy with the holding of beliefs that need to be hid can Strauss sustain the claim that philosophers characteristically hide their beliefs

It seems plausible to suggest that Strauss makes too much of the idea that philosophers practice deception. Moreover, in so far as his esoteric philosophy of history involves too vehement an insistence on the presence of deception, we might expect it to lead to certain problems when it is used as a guide for the interpretation of the history of political philosophy including the history of modernity.

Consider three problems that we might expect esotericism to lead to in the writing of history. The first problem is that esotericists are likely to be too ready to conclude that philosophers actively intended to hide their beliefs. Because esotericists are rather too attached to the idea that philosophers hold beliefs that need to be hid, they might be too predisposed to conclude that individual philosophers intended to hide their beliefs. At the very least, Strauss's assumption that philosophers hide truths that they know are dangerous suggests that they intend to convey sanitised ideas. The second problem is that esotericists are likely to remain insufficiently sensitive to the diverse contexts in which philosophers live, write, and teach. Because esotericists are rather too attached to the idea that philosophers hold beliefs that need to be hid, they might be predisposed to neglect the impact of the local contexts on the particular ideas expressed by a particular philosopher. At the very least, Strauss's assumption that philosophers at all times know a dangerous truth suggests that their contexts can lead only to relatively superficial variations in their ideas.<sup>5</sup> The third problem is that esotericists are likely to be too ready to assimilate the beliefs of philosophers to some

norm or pattern. Because esotericists are too attached to the idea that philosophers always hold certain beliefs, they might be too predisposed to conclude that individual philosophers indeed did so. At the very least, Strauss's assumption that philosophers know the truth is in tension with his commendable aim of understanding authors as they understood themselves: after all; if we assume, prior to studying their work, that a philosopher knew certain truths, then we can hardly be said properly to concentrate on what they believed.

The foregoing critique of esotericism arouses the suspicion that Strauss approached authors already convinced they were engaged in political philosophy defined in terms of his vision of the quarrel between ancients and moderns, and that this lead him to ascribe to authors beliefs that are at best lacking in historical specificity and at worst assimilate them to one of other side in that quarrel.<sup>6</sup>

## II

It might sound as if Strauss's esotericism encourages him to ignore the actual meanings of texts and to ascribe all sorts of strange, hidden meanings to them. In fact, however, Strauss's interpretations of classic texts are often remarkably illuminating, as so many readers have discovered. Strauss's esoteric philosophy of history certainly does not lead him to ignore the historical evidence. Rather, it leads him to interpret that evidence in ways that reflect subtly the three problems with esotericism that I have just highlighted.

Strauss's critique of modernity revolves around the quarrel between ancients and moderns.<sup>7</sup> Modernity is characterised by its forgetting of the wisdom of the ancients. Indeed, Strauss equates the crisis of our time arose because modernity had broken with the insights of the ancient tradition of political philosophy. The content of ancient philosophy reflected the reasons why philosophers wrote esoterically, that is, as we saw earlier, the necessary conflict between the city and philosophy. The city has to rely on people accepting whatever opinions peacefully unite them; it requires an

acceptance of conventional morality and religion; it is the pious world of Jerusalem. Philosophy, in contrast, studies universal truths as they are given by an impersonal nature; it requires the questioning of all ancestral conventions and local pieties; it is the reflective world of Athens.

The conflict between the city and philosophy appears, Strauss continues, in the ancients' belief in a teleological order and natural right based on the strict separation of Athens and Jerusalem. Philosophy had to be kept apart from social life because its truths undermined the local idols on which civic life was based. In Strauss's view, the ancients gave their philosophy an esoteric character because they knew that the ability to engage in the activity of philosophy depended on the existence of the city, and that the city would collapse should philosophy ever become widely understood.

The moderns' eschewal of esotericism thus appears, in Strauss's view, as a kind of neglect of the conflict between philosophy and the city. The moderns made what Strauss regards as the mistake of trying to reconcile Athens with Jerusalem. According to Strauss, modern philosophers have foolishly believed that if we come to know ourselves as we are, and if we make this knowledge public, then we will still be able to construct a city, perhaps even a city greater than any that has gone before. The moderns think that knowledge will enable us not only to conquer fortune and thereby make nature serve human ends, but also to coordinate private interest with the public good so as to eliminate social conflict.

Strauss's account of the quarrel between the ancients and moderns informs his historical critique of modernity. Strauss postulated a fairly monolithic modernity that was characterised by its attempt to combine philosophy with the city. Modernity, so conceived, has arisen in three successive waves as it has worked its way through its own limitations and failings, leading to the crisis of our times.

While Strauss allows for Machiavelli having laid the foundations of a modern project, he generally specifies that Hobbes inaugurated a first wave of modernity. The first wave of modernity attempted to reconcile Athens and Jerusalem by appealing to

an unprincipled political hedonism. Strauss suggests here that Hobbes openly argued that individual virtue is irrelevant: people can be immoral – they can concentrate on the pursuit of personal pleasure – and still sustain a good and stable society. The first wave of modernity gave rise to the idea that the city could be based on a modern ideal of enlightened self-interest rather than the ancient ideal of public virtue. Although Strauss acknowledges that there were hedonists before Hobbes, he argues that it was Hobbes who turned hedonism into a political doctrine. Hobbes was, in this view, the first philosopher to argue that hedonism could sustain the city. Hobbes introduced the quintessentially modern doctrine that political order can arise out of mastery of nature as opposed to mastery of self. He implied that by mastering nature, we could satisfy a vast range of desires, thereby making unnecessary the ancient virtue of self-restraint. His political hedonism made the fulfilment of individual desire the very rationale of the city; it presupposed that the desires of different individuals were compatible with one another.

According to Strauss, Hobbes's political hedonism also led him to political atheism. Because Hobbes denied that individual virtue is necessary for the city, he saw no need for religion to sustain individual virtue. Far from recognising the role of local pieties as a counter-balance to self-interest, Hobbes suggested that self-interest should be allowed to flourish since it gave rise to public benefits. For Hobbes, self-interest could sustain the city so religion was not needed. Although Strauss allows that there were atheists before Hobbes, he argues that Hobbes was the first to make atheism, like hedonism, a political doctrine, for "no pre-modern atheist doubted that social life required belief in, and worship of, God or gods."<sup>8</sup>

Strauss's account of the first wave of modernity equates it with political hedonism and political atheism. According to Strauss, however, political hedonism was bound to fail because it had to recommend anti-social behaviour when there is little chance of being caught, and because it simply could not cope, in a philosophical sense, with threats to one's life or with war. The failure of political hedonism implied,

at least to Strauss, doubts about Hobbesian atheism: if self-interest cannot sustain the city, then this role again falls on local pieties and religions. The inevitable failure of political hedonism and political atheism gives rise, in Strauss's narrative, to a second wave of modernity. The second wave of modernity attempted to reconcile philosophy and the city by appealing to a principle of self-rule based on individual freedom.

According to Strauss, the second wave of modernity was inaugurated by Rousseau. Strauss tells us that Rousseau rejected Hobbes's unprincipled hedonism and atheism. Rousseau recognised the need to turn back to the ideal of the ancients on the grounds that only public virtue, not enlightened self-interest, can sustain the city. Rousseau believed, as had the ancients, that the city must be based on virtuous citizens who pursue a common good, and that such public virtue can be sustained only with the aid of religion. Nonetheless, Strauss continues, Rousseau ultimately failed to return to the ancient wisdom. Instead Rousseau adopted an even more radical version of the modern project, arguing that public virtue can arise out of individual freedom within an egalitarian and democratic community. Rousseau believed that philosophy should be made public so that individuals can become free by ruling themselves for the common good in accord with knowledge. In Strauss's account, therefore, Rousseau, like Hobbes, adopted a modern faith in a city based on individuals who manipulate nature in accord with a public knowledge. The difference was that whereas Hobbes appealed to freedom as self-interest, Rousseau appealed to freedom as self-mastery. According to Strauss, however, Rousseau's vision fails just as inevitably as Hobbes's. It fails in part because it is just too broad a guide to apply to practical action. Much more importantly, it fails because once, following Rousseau, we base morality on self-legislation, then we are led inexorably towards historicism, positivism, nihilism, and so the crisis of our times.

Strauss's third wave of modernity consists of the working out of just this inexorable path from self-rule to nihilism. While Hobbes and Rousseau turned from the esoteric public-virtue tradition of the ancients to an open individualism, they still

believed in absolute concepts of truth and right. Historicism and relativism arose as part of the modern project, Strauss tells us, once the failings of the first and second wave doctrines inspired others to turn away from such absolute concepts. Once Hobbes and Rousseau had rejected classic natural right with its basis in a natural order, once they turned instead to a belief in a human ability to manipulate nature according to will, then there was no longer any reason to ascribe to morality any kind of foundation beyond human life. And once morality was thought to be a purely human construct, then it soon came to be seen as relative to time and to place. Hence, Strauss concludes, the modern project leads inexorably to historicism and/or positivist relativism. Modern historicism appears in Burke and Hegel, both of whom argued that all morality occurs in a particular society at a particular moment. Modern positivist relativism appears in Weber and much social science: when Weber became disillusioned with the historicist idea of an end to history, he championed a value-free social science in which morality appears as a human construct relative to a particular society at a particular moment.

To conclude, Strauss argues that historicism and relativism slide into nihilism. Historicism and relativism give up on absolute concepts of right in a way that implies we have no grounds for selecting one morality over another; they leave us able only to study the different values that have been adopted by different societies. On the one hand, Strauss argues here that historicism and positivism remain inauthentic – and unsustainable – forms of nihilism, for they try to deny the relativism that they entail by pretending that their own perspective is true rather than relative. It was, he adds, Nietzsche, not the historicists or value-free positivists, who revealed the nihilism that lies at the heart of the modern project. On the other hand, however, Strauss suggests that the inauthentic nihilism of historicism and positivism remains most characteristic of our age. He believes that the modern world is no longer convinced of its own view of the world; we are unsure of our purpose; we have lost faith in ourselves; we have lost a sense of direction; above all, we think our values and purposes are relative to us.

For Strauss, of course, the roots of our crisis of self-confidence lie, as we have just seen, in the inherent nature of the modern project as it has unfolded inexorably from political hedonism and political atheism to nihilism. It is, in other words, because Hobbes strayed from the wisdom of the ancients that we live in a time of crisis.

### III

Strauss's historical account of modernity captures important themes in political thought. Even as it does so, however, it errs systematically because of his esotericism. Indeed, we find traces each of the three problems we identified with esotericism in his account of modernity.

The first problem with Strauss's esotericism was that it encouraged too ready an inclination to think that philosophers intended to hide their actual beliefs. Strauss appears too insistent on the esotericism of the ancient tradition of political philosophy. The baneful effects of Strauss's too strong an insistence on the esoteric character of ancient philosophy appear in many aspects of his history. For example, because he maintains that ancient philosophers sought to protect the pieties of the city by hiding their philosophical knowledge, he has problems giving due credit to philosophers such as Aquinas who genuinely thought they could defend religious faith on philosophic grounds.

Of primary interest to us, however, are the baneful effects of the first problem with esotericism on Strauss's account of modernity. Strauss lays too much emphasis on the notion that the moderns overtly express truths that the ancients gleaned but kept hidden. He does so at the expense of an understanding of the novelty of modern thought conceived as a response to dilemmas that the ancients did not confront. It is because Strauss equates modernity with the demise of esotericism that he stresses Machiavelli's role as the instigator of the modern project.<sup>9</sup> Machiavelli, we might agree, was a pioneer in advising the city and its rulers to take heed of what people do as opposed to what they ought to do: he brought philosophy out of the cave, arguing

for a policy based on Athens, not Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup> Having stressed Machiavelli's place as an instigator of the modern project, however, Strauss is pushed by his emphasis on the way the moderns revealed previously hidden truths to equate Hobbes's thought with adherence to just such Machiavellian doctrines. Surely, however, Hobbes's political doctrine really arose out of a methodological scepticism inspired by the new science, especially physics and geometry.<sup>11</sup> Contrary to Strauss's argument, Hobbes did not give a new political slant to established traditions of hedonism and atheism; rather, he devised a novel political theory built on foundations taken from the new science. Hobbes did not express what earlier had been hidden so much as express what earlier had not been thought.

Hobbes drew on the new science, which advanced a mechanical view of the universe that undermined traditional teleological accounts of nature and morality. The new science posed, for Hobbes and for his contemporaries, pressing questions about the origins of right and about how we could we have knowledge of right. Hobbes modelled his answers to these questions on the very physics and geometry that had undermined the teleology of the ancients. For a start, Hobbes argued that morality comes from a non-teleological nature akin to the one revealed by the new physics. He analyzed the parts of society as matter in motion to show how a certain morality is built into nature. In addition, Hobbes argued that we could have knowledge of morality by means akin to those deployed in the new geometry – a combination of methodological scepticism and pure reason. His method was first to assume doubt so as to eliminate prejudices, and then to use reason alone to uncover moral truth. Strauss's esotericism prevents him fully appreciating the way in which modernity arose out of the new science.

Again, in line with the first problem of esotericism, Strauss is too insistent on the idea that the ancients hid their belief. If we judge that the ancients did not hide their actual beliefs to the extent that Strauss implies, then we will be less concerned than is Strauss to rebuke the moderns for their folly in saying what they did openly.<sup>12</sup>

Instead, we will pay closer attention to the reasons the moderns had for saying what they did. We will see modernity less as a neglect of an ancient wisdom, and more as a reasonable response to new dilemmas.

The second problem with Strauss's esotericism is that it encourages neglect of the different contexts in which philosophers come to hold their particular webs of belief. Although Strauss distinguishes between ancients and moderns, he does not properly bring out the differences within these two monoliths. Indeed, his account of the three waves of modernity overtly subordinates such differences to what he takes to be the more or less inherent trajectory and ultimate crisis of a monolithic modernity characterised by the foolhardy attempt to base the city on philosophy. Yet, if we are indeed to look upon Machiavelli as a modern, we have to make light of the way his advice to the city and its rulers occurs within a pre-modern context. We have to play down his belief in things such as the cyclical nature of history, the role of fate, and the benefits of a mixed regime.<sup>13</sup>

Strauss, we might suggest, lays too much emphasis on the notion that all moderns are engaged in the one grand quarrel with the ancients at the expense of an account of the ways in which their specific projects reflect narrower contexts. It is because Strauss is so pre-occupied with a single modern project defined in contrast to an ancient tradition that he interprets Rousseau as striving to revive ancient doctrines in a modern context. Rousseau, Strauss tells us, “presents to his readers the confusing spectacle of a man who perpetually shifts back and forth between two diametrically opposed positions”: although he felt that “the modern venture was a radical error,” and although he looked for “the remedy in a return to classical thought,” in the end he still “abandoned himself to modernity.”<sup>14</sup> Because Strauss locates all theorists in the context of a single great divide between ancients and moderns, he presents Rousseau's thought as a confusing mixture of the two. In contrast, an appreciation of the local context in which Rousseau wrote might prompt us to describe his thought as a more coherent whole, located at the birth of romantic organicism. Of course Rousseau did

look back to some aspects of the ancient world while also adhering to themes found in moderns such as Hobbes. To appreciate how and why he does so, however, we need to locate him in local contexts such as that provided by the rise of organicism in and around romanticism, or that provided by worries about how to maintain civic virtue in large commercial societies.<sup>15</sup>

The romantics and other organicists contrasted the creativity of nature and organic life with the mechanical and lifeless of the inorganic – sometimes they even conceived of the inorganic as being informed by life, vitality, and spirit. Rousseau opposed Hobbes's mechanistic account of social order because he was concerned with the ability of individuals to create ideals through their own activity; he highlighted the importance of independent individuals collectively transforming nature in accord with their ideals. Rousseau broke with the early moderns because he identified virtue with the exercise of a free will in relation to others, and because in doing so he seemed to have precluded the possibility of our deriving a usable morality from nature. Contrary to Strauss's interpretation, the romantics did not articulate a first crisis in modernity, a crisis that resulted in a forlorn attempt to rediscover the wisdom of the ancients. To the contrary, they transformed modernity by developing their local context, which consisted primarily organicism, so as to advance novel answers to questions about the origins of morality and how can we have knowledge of it. The romantics typically suggested that morality derives from human will or human reason, not from nature: as organic, vital beings, our creative capacities allow us to decide what is right and then to act upon it. The romantics also typically suggested that we can have knowledge of morality through our reason, even though, for many of them, our reason was culturally or historically situated.

Strauss's esotericism prevents him fully appreciating that romanticism arose in the context of a broader organicism.<sup>16</sup> Once we recognise that the moderns often had very different beliefs from one another, we will be less concerned than Strauss to place them in the context of the one general quarrel with the ancients. Instead, we

might pay closer attention to the changing nature of the dilemmas they confronted. We might see modernity less as a single project defined against the wisdom of the ancients, and more as a series of projects inspired by various intellectual contexts. So, for example, we might see romantic organicism, which overlaps considerably with Strauss's second wave of modernity, as intimately concerned to work out how a vital, active subject, possessing a faculty of reason, might come to take moral principles as binding upon itself.

The third problem with Strauss's esotericism is that it encourages assimilation of the beliefs of philosophers to a norm. Strauss can appear to split philosophers into the two warring camps of ancient and modern. For example, although his account of the ancient view of natural right covers both Platonic and Aristotelian doctrines, when he discusses the ancient conception of the "whole", he seems to assimilate all ancient philosophy to the Platonic doctrine.<sup>17</sup>

Strauss's account of the crisis of our time similarly lays too much emphasis on a collapse that allegedly awaits a monolithic modern project. Because he assimilates all moderns to a single norm, he argues that the dilemmas we face are rooted in the ill-conceived nature of modernity. The crisis of our time, he tells us, consists in a loss of faith in our values – we have reached the nihilistic crash inherent in modernity. Thus, for Strauss, the important point about social science is its refusal to take a principled stand, a refusal that expresses a lack of confidence in our values. Surely, however, most social scientists do hold values, and, moreover, are willing to defend them? It is just that their conception of a social science requires them to explain the actions of individuals by reference to social forces. Social science suggests that individuals are products of their social contexts in a way that threatens the romantic belief in self-rule.<sup>18</sup> Whereas Strauss interprets social science as evidence of a nihilistic lack of confidence, we might see it as a challenge to reconsider the way in which we are to realise the ideal of the free self that arose with romantic organicism.

Historicism, like social science, might be understood not as the inevitable nihilistic crash of a monolithic modernity but as a local dilemma for the romantic or organic account of human life. On the one hand, historicism does not appear to be inherently nihilistic: it is quite possible to look upon morality as a human construct that varies with time and place, and still to believe that one's own morality is valid. On the other hand, however, if historicism is put alongside the Rousseauian ideal of self-rule, it raises the problem of how we can bring others to agree with us. If, as historicism implies, our morality lacks any basis in nature, then we cannot expect others to adopt it unless we can convince them of its worth. Thus, if we follow the romantic organicists in regarding morality as a human construct, we leave ourselves having to convince others of the rightness of our values by argument alone.

Once we grant that different moderns held significantly different beliefs, we will be less willing to follow Strauss in seeing our crisis as internal to a single modern project. We might focus instead on the specific nature of the dilemmas that confront the contemporary world. We might even suggest that we confront questions that are really very different from those addressed by Hobbes. The preceding account of modernity suggests, for example, that whereas early moderns, such as Hobbes, were interested in the source of morality and of our knowledge of it, we face questions about the relationship of the individual to society and about how to reach agreement on moral principles. What is more, we face different dilemmas from Hobbes in large part because our inheritance includes a romantic organicism, which was manifestly absent from the context in which he wrote. Indeed, the dilemmas that we confront really only make sense against the background of romantic organicism with its idea of creative individuals who can apprehend, debate, and create morality and social life through their labour and action. Far from having lost faith in a set of ideals that we inherited from the early moderns, we are troubled by dilemmas that confront the particular legacy that we inherited from the romantics.

#### IV

Strauss's account of modernity might now appear far too catastrophic in some measure due its dependence on an esotericism that is premised on a pessimistic view of the antagonism between philosophy and the city. The catastrophic and pessimistic character of Strauss's philosophy, we might guess, is at least in part a response to his experience of Nazism – the evil of the holocaust lurks behind his account of the whole of modernity as leading toward a horrific nihilism.

To relate Strauss's philosophy to the holocaust, no matter how loosely, is to ask of any alternative account of modernity how it would make space for Nazism. One interpretation of Nazism could be as an especially pernicious response to the local dilemmas that confront our legacy from romantic organicism. With respect to the question of how we can realise self-rule within a social context, Nazism embodied a glorification of individual self-fulfilment through identification with the folk and its charismatic leader. With respect to the question of how we can reach agreement over moral principals, Nazism embodied an anti-rationalism and a glorification of the will to power, which together displaced a concern for consensus with a belief in violent self-assertion. If we approached Nazism along these lines, we would find in it not the nihilistic crash of a doomed modernity, but rather a remarkably vicious attempt to make sense of our post-romantic world.

#### V

Strauss's esotericism informs various problems in his account of modernity. For a start, he does not pay enough attention to the intellectual reasons that the early moderns had for renouncing beliefs widely held by the ancients: he does not bring out adequately the close relationship between modernity and the intellectual power of the new science. In addition, he does not recognise the full extent of the break between the early moderns and romantics: he does not recognise that organicism brought a decisive departure from the early modern ideal. Finally, he over-dramatises the crisis

of our times: he miss-represents it as a nihilistic loss of faith in our values, when it is just a pair of local dilemmas, concerning how we can realise our values and how we can bring others to share them.

The problems with Strauss's historical account of modernity cast doubt on the task he ascribes to contemporary political philosophy. Strauss seems to think that the role of political philosophy is to resolve the crisis of our times by devising a new and usable version of the ancient wisdom. Yet, in so far as the early moderns turned away from the wisdom of the ancients because it had been discredited by the new science, we presumably cannot now return to a teleological concept of natural right, for to do so we would have to renounce the knowledge that science has given us. Classic natural right is incompatible with a science that we cannot now discard. Although Strauss himself sometimes seems to acknowledge as much, writing, for instance, “the teleological view of the universe . . . would seem to have been destroyed by modern natural science,” he still appears to want philosophers indirectly to recover the ancient wisdom by first making possible something akin to a teleological view of humanity and then defending a form of natural right.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever the exact nature of Strauss's hopes for contemporary philosophy, it is clear that they were developed in response to a perceived crisis of modernity. Do we really face a crisis? Perhaps we confront not a nihilistic loss of confidence in our values, but just local dilemmas about how to realise the values we inherited from the romantics. What is more, local dilemmas are surely a more or less constant feature of human thought: there are always things in our beliefs that we feel need to be extended or modified in the light of new experiences or critical reflection. The existence of local dilemmas does not, then, constitute a crisis. We might find solutions to our dilemmas. It is just that we can not yet know which solution will come to dominate future thinking since we are ourselves currently engaged in the process of articulating and debating the matter. All we can do is point to some prominent solutions. Social democracy might stand, for example, as a response to the dilemma of the relationship

between the individual and society. Social democrats typically uphold an ideal of self-rule while arguing that the power of society is such that individuals require some support from the community if they are indeed to rule themselves. Postfoundational and procedural philosophies, similarly, might stand as a response to the dilemma of how we are to reach agreement with one another. Several ethicists have rethought truth less as an absolute certainty about substantive content and more as the product of a particular type of discourse.<sup>20</sup> While we need not rush to endorse any given solution of the dilemmas we confront, we should recognise that there are solutions out there.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples include S. Drury, Leo Strauss and the American Right (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997); S. Halper and J. Clarke, America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); A. Norton, Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); and, for Straussian perspectives, K. Deutsch and J. Murley, eds., Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime (Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Quentin Skinner complains that Strauss's approach rests on implausible a priori assumptions such as that to be original is to be subversive. See Q. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas", in J. Tully, ed., Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics (Cambridge, Eng.: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 42-3. However, Skinner gives us no reason to think that it is wrong in principle to discuss texts as though they were original in a way that makes them subversive. Instead, he talks vaguely of "genuinely empirical criteria" for discovering the nature of a text. But surely Strauss would agree that when the empirical evidence shows a text does not contain hidden meanings, we should not find such meanings in it. The debate is not one of a priori assumptions against empirical studies. It concerns what presumptions we should bring to our empirical studies. Thus, the problems with Skinner's critique of Strauss are: first, empirical criteria come into play only when we read a text, so they can not determine the presumptions we bring to the text; and second, he gives us no reason to adopt presumptions other than those advocated by Strauss. They are: first, his critique of Strauss rests on an a priori assumption that we should approach texts with presumptions contrary to those advocated by Strauss, or, more implausibly, we can approach texts without any presumptions at all; and, second, he offers no argument to suggest his a priori assumptions are any more plausible than those of Strauss.

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<sup>3</sup> Two clear theoretical statements of his esoteric thesis are L. Strauss, "Persecution and the Art of Writing", in Persecution and the Art of Writing (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1952), pp. 22-37; and L. Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?", in What is Political Philosophy (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1959), pp. 9-55.

<sup>4</sup> I offered a general argument for a presumption of sincerity, rather than deception, in M. Bevir, The Logic of the History of Ideas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> While the contextualists are thus right to charge Strauss with anachronism for failing to pay enough attention to changes in the ways issues are discussed - see Skinner, "Meaning" - this does not imply they are right to deny the very existence of perennial problems - see M. Bevir, "Are there any Perennial Problems in Political Theory?", Political Studies 42 (1994), 662-675.

<sup>6</sup> While the contextualists are thus right to charge Strauss with anachronism for failing to pay enough attention to the actual intentions of authors - see Skinner, "Meaning"; and J. Pocock, "Prophet and Inquisitor", Political Theory 3 (1975), 385-401 - this does not mean they are right to insist we must locate a text in its linguistic context if we are to grasp its meaning - see M. Bevir, "The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism", History and Theory 31 (1992), 276-298.

<sup>7</sup> The major work here is L. Strauss, Natural Right and History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953). A useful shorter piece is L. Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity", in An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss, ed. H. Giddin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 91-98.

<sup>8</sup> Strauss, Natural Right, p. 169.

<sup>9</sup> L. Strauss, Thoughts on Machiavelli (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

<sup>10</sup> There is, of course, considerable discussion of the nature and extent of Machiavelli's disruptive originality in relation to earlier

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humanist advice books for princes. See, for just one exemplary case, Q. Skinner, "Republican Virtues in an Age of Princes", in Q. Skinner, Visions of Politics, Vol. 2: Renaissance Virtues (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 118-159.

<sup>11</sup> On the similarities and differences between Machiavelli and the raison d'etat tradition that led up to Hobbes, and also on the place of scepticism in the latter, see R. Tuck, Philosophy and Government 1572-1651 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), partic. chap. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, a good case has been made for seeing Hobbes's discussion of the Foole as a critique of the exoteric or vocal (as opposed to esoteric or silent) acknowledgement of the conflict between private interest and civic duty. This case begins to ascribe to Hobbes positions at least as close to those Strauss identifies with the esotericism of the ancients as those he associated with Hobbes. For the relevant reading of Hobbes see K. Hoekstra, "Hobbes and the Foole", Political Theory 25 (1997), 620-54.

<sup>13</sup> In fact, Strauss's concepts of the ancient and the modern are so abstract that they do not seem to have any real historical existence. Perhaps they are best understood as highly abstract ideal types through which we can approach the work of particular philosophers, but they are not instanced in their ideal form by the work of any given philosopher, let alone two groups of philosophers divided by a neat historical line.

<sup>14</sup> Strauss, Natural Right, p. 254 & 252.

<sup>15</sup> It is always wise to be cautious when using a concept that has been used to describe as broad a range of phenomena as has "romanticism". However, a general characterisation will suffice for our purposes. We want to show only how Strauss's history suffers from his neglect of a local context, and we can do this with a broad concept of the romantic movement, even if a more specific one would

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be needed to give anything like an adequate account of particular individual representatives of the movement, including Rousseau.

<sup>16</sup> The decisive break between early modernity and the romantics is (over?) stressed by the distinction between the classical and modern epistemes in M. Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (London: Tavistock Publishing, 1970). But to recognise the existence of a decisive break is not to endorse Foucault's ideas of incommensurable epistemes structured by different views of the nature of a sign.

<sup>17</sup> Strauss, Natural Right, chap. 4.

<sup>18</sup> It is no accident, therefore, that it was Rousseau, not Hobbes, who first articulated a fear that within society we might act for others, not ourselves. The idea that society could exercise an undue influence on the character of the individual is a problem for the romantic ideal of freedom as autonomous self-rule in a way that it is not for the Hobbesian picture of the individual as matter in motion, a bundle of passions the source of which is of little import.

<sup>19</sup> Strauss, Natural Right, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> The most prominent example is perhaps J. Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (Cambridge, Eng.: Polity Press, 1987).