
Straussian Witchcraft and the Need for Devils' Advocates

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Although I have been an earnest admirer of Leo Strauss since I first started reading his books, and although I have for some time held certain Straussians in the highest regard, in this essay I argue that Straussians have a tendency to bewitch themselves with words and phrases from the master's lexicon in ways that are preposterous. Despite the solemn gravity with which they are employed, the terms "knowledge of the whole" and "knowledge of the part," for instance, are upon closer inspection nearly vapid mantras. What if Straussians were to find some new devils and devils' advocates to wrestle, in case they have become too familiar with their usual familiars and lost a bit of edge?

What is a Straussian?

I define a Straussian as someone for whom Leo Strauss is an authoritative interpreter of canonical texts in the history of political philosophy. For Straussians, regard for Strauss in this respect implies, or at any rate is often enough accompanied by, a large degree of sympathy towards several themes: (1) a conflict between ancients and moderns, with a preference for the ancients, Plato and Aristotle, in particular; (2) tension between reason and revelation as among other things the source for the

*Straussian
defined.*

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vitality of the West; (3) disjunction between the philosopher, who as a philosopher is above the law, and the city or political community, which is as such structured by and dependent on law; and (4) esoteric writing as a strategy among philosophers to protect themselves from the city and the city from themselves, and to entice potential philosophers to the philosophical life by showing some skin between the lines to those few who have eyes to see; (5) opposition to positivism, scientific social science, and historicism, especially.

Someone can have deep respect and admiration for Strauss without being a Straussian by contesting the importance of some or all of these themes. But generally speaking, a Straussian will think that these themes are indispensable for understanding political philosophy and its history. On the other hand, Straussians may disagree about whether preference for the ancients is finally justified or whether Strauss did or did not resolve the tension between reason and revelation personally in favor of one or the other. A Straussian does not necessarily count herself as among the privileged few who write esoterically, who transcend the law, and so on. But it is only natural that among Straussians there are some who do.

Buzzwords and Bewitching Phrases

Since Straussians see Strauss as an authoritative interpreter of canonical texts and usually share a high regard for the aforementioned themes, it sometimes happens, predictably enough, that they use the same buzzwords. That is not particular to them. It is a feature of any school of thought, probably. Each has its own jargon, consisting of words that are not mere “common sense,” but that may have special meaning for the “initiated,” i.e., for the members of the school who are more or less familiar with the ways in which those words have been presented and interpreted in the relevant body of texts. Sometimes the jargon is or appears to be so artificial and jarring that it is obvious that the meaning is not available to the uninitiated. The word “beyng” (*Seyn*) among Heideggerians is an example of that.¹ If you have not read any Heidegger,

*Jargon for the
“initiated.”*

¹ See for instance Martin Heidegger, *The History of Beyng* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

that word must jump off the page as technical jargon. Other times, the buzzwords are not apparently artificial, but an avid reader of the texts of that school is sure to feel a particular "buzz" around the words due to their accumulated semantic import. For instance, because Strauss wrote that careful writers can work "miracles" using small words such as "seems" or "appears," those words are, to Straussians, imbued with a particular significance that they presumably lack among general readers.² They are buzzwords without coming across as technical jargon.

I am not so much concerned with such words as "seems" or "appears," though. Although there are one or two simple buzzwords I will come back to later, right now it is "buzz phrases" that I want to mention. The kinds of phrases that I have in mind are well-known and well-worn tropes in the Straussian semantic universe. A decent Straussian can be expected to know that somewhere Strauss wrote that "the problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things."³ And often, when they write their own books and articles, Straussians will repeat that phrase and follow its injunction by sticking to what they take to be the surface of things in the matter at hand. I suspect that the kind of criticism I am making in this article using a few such phrases could be extended, at least as an exercise, to all of the mantras, pieties, and verbal ticks of the Straussian mind and pen, among others. I read recently a self-proclaimed Straussian making fun of this kind of habit when he wrote along the following lines: "I suppose, or as we Straussians like to say, I am inclined to believe . . ."⁴ In this case, the author identifies the phrase "I am inclined to believe" as a sort of verbal tick or buzz phrase, and he distances himself from it, though not from Straussianism in general.

Not because I think they are the most important of the lot, but because they recently caught my attention while reading

² Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 78.

³ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 13. The Zuckerts draw on that phrase in various places, for instance, on page 152.

⁴ Mark Blitz, "To Rule and To Be Ruled," *Claremont Review of Books* 13, No. 4 (Fall 2013).

Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy by the Zuckerts, I want to pick on a couple of phrases that I think have a bewitching effect.⁵ The phrases are “knowledge of the whole” and “knowledge of the part.” They are very significant phrases, as I will try to show in a moment. I confess that these and other phrases have bewitched me for a long time. It is only because they have recently started to occur to me as jarring that I have noticed that something strange might have been going on all the while.⁶

Noetic Heterogeneity

According to Strauss, one of Socrates’s great discoveries concerns—get ready for a very nice bit of insider’s jargon—*noetic heterogeneity*. That means that if you are a thinker trying to think the broadest and most fundamental thoughts—i.e., a philosopher—you cannot but be struck by the fact that the whole consists of distinct parts. There is not just *one thing* to know: that would be noetic homogeneity. Some philosophers thought that they could know the whole by knowing the root from which everything emerged. They were really concerned to get a handle on that one thing. Strauss seems to see Heidegger as obsessed with being like that. The better way, Strauss thinks, is to recognize noetic heterogeneity. If you want to know the whole, your best bet is to know the parts—because the whole is manifestly comprised of parts. So when Socrates asks his “what is X” questions, he is inquiring into the parts. He asks, “what is Justice,” “what is Courage,” and so on. A philosopher of noetic homogeneity would not ask those questions unless she thought that *everything* is justice, or courage (or water, or fire, or being, or some X).⁷

In the context of Straussianism, the significance of noetic heterogeneity is that it allows us to distinguish the domain of the political as a part of the whole. Heidegger, Strauss once wrote, failed to reflect on tyranny because all he did was talk

⁵ Catherine H. Zuckert and Michael P. Zuckert, *Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁶ I do not mind saying in passing that the Hegelian phrase “the rational articulation of the whole” similarly bewitched me for a long time. There are still phrases with that effect on me, but there is no need to discuss them here.

⁷ Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss*, 154.

*Philosophers
and citizens.*

about being.⁸ But if you admit noetic heterogeneity, then the philosopher, who wants comprehensive knowledge, is eventually led to reflect on what it is to philosophize, and part of what it is to philosophize, at least from the perspective of Socratic philosophy, which Strauss championed, is to reflect on what it is to be a philosopher among non-philosophers, i.e., a thinker among citizens guided primarily by custom, opinion, and law, and hence to reflect on politics in its own right, and thus on tyranny, too, of course. What emerges from the philosopher's examination of the philosophical life that is of importance to the argument here is that politics is, as Strauss puts it, a part of the whole that is open to the whole, and a part of the whole about which the philosopher can have knowledge through gaining knowledge of its essential limits.⁹ All of that is eventually related to the argument that the philosopher, however radical her thought, should be moderate in her actions, including in her writing (hence: esoteric writing). It would not make sense to collapse the political into the philosophical through some obsession with noetic homogeneity, because true knowledge (and sanity) means knowing that the whole consists of parts (at least in part!); and to know the part called *politics* is to know that, though it opens to philosophy, it is also distinct from it and in important ways incompatible with it.¹⁰

*Politics and
philosophy dif-
ferentiated.*

But Strauss did not think that knowledge of the part was the last word. According to the Zuckerts, though he first asserts that knowledge of the part is only possible against the backdrop of knowledge of the whole, he also argues that knowledge of the whole is unattainable, yet he does so without concluding that knowledge of the part is likewise unattainable. His arguments about the possibility of knowing the whole and knowing the parts are not altogether stable or clear. Now, I will present some of the difficulties as they are discussed by the Zuckerts. Then, I will discuss why I think that all this talk about knowledge of the part and knowledge of the whole is a little bewitching.

⁸ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁹ Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss*, 53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

Knowledge of the Part, Knowledge of the Whole

The Zuckerts' discussion touches upon at least seven propositions that Strauss makes concerning knowledge of the whole and knowledge of the part:

Proposition 1. Knowledge of the part requires knowledge of the whole. In this semantic universe, that means, for instance, that you cannot know what justice is if you do not know what everything is and how everything is related.

Seven propositions regarding knowledge.

Proposition 2. Knowledge of the whole consists in knowledge of the parts. That means knowing the whole is knowing its parts. There is circularity between this proposition and the preceding one. Apparently, you cannot know the whole without knowing the parts, but you cannot know the parts without knowing the whole. Either you know them together simultaneously, or you do not know them at all.

Proposition 3. The whole "is" in a way that is greater than the sum of its parts. We can leave the specific argument to one side. The basic point is that whereas the previous proposition says that knowledge of the whole consists in knowledge of the parts, this one says that knowledge of the whole requires more than the knowledge of the parts: it requires also knowledge of that element of the whole that transcends or is otherwise distinct from the agglomeration of its parts.

Proposition 4. Knowledge of the whole is not available, because that aspect of the whole that is greater than the sum of its parts is mysterious or beyond intellectual apprehension.

Proposition 5. We cannot know the whole (thus not wisdom but the unending quest for wisdom characterizes the philosophical life).

Proposition 6. If knowledge of the part requires knowledge of the whole, we cannot know the part.

Proposition 7. Knowledge of the part, contra proposition 1, does *not* require knowledge of the whole. It is possible to know the part without knowing the whole by revealing the *essential limits* of the part. The *Republic*, according to Strauss, shows the essential limits of the *polis* and thus provides us with knowledge of that part of the whole, a part that is open to the whole. That is, philosophy as a way of life consists in the quest for wisdom—to invoke some typical buzz phrases.¹¹

I agree with the Zuckerts that all of this is hugely important for keeping track of some of the most interesting things going

¹¹ Ibid., 48-53.

on in Strauss's writings. They call this the "all-important issue of the status or possibility of knowledge of the whole."¹² It is because of the kind of issues at stake in those propositions that Strauss can define the philosophical life as he does, oppose completed systems of philosophy like Hegel's, and contrast reason and revelation, for instance. But the whole matter can be viewed differently and less favorably, which will be explicated in the following pages.

*Positivism
and histori-
cism.*

Consider the Zuckert's analysis of Strauss's response to positivism and historicism:

Because it does not allow for a distinction between human and other forms of being, modern natural science cannot give an account of its own origin or foundation. Indeed, neither history nor science can show why human beings should persist in a search for knowledge that does not result in knowledge, strictly speaking, because knowledge can only be knowledge of the whole.¹³

In short, they claim knowledge is not worth much unless it is knowledge of the whole. They also seem to share Strauss's opinion that knowledge of the part is possible without knowledge of the whole. As Strauss put it: "the city is completely intelligible because its limits can be made perfectly manifest: to see these limits, one need not have answered the question regarding the whole; it is sufficient for the purpose to have raised the question regarding the whole."¹⁴

The Zuckerts have not said very much, though, about how to make sense of all of that in a more precise way. Within the general confines of the Straussian semantic universe, the pieces of the puzzle fit together and make sense. You do not need a completed philosophy (knowledge of the whole) to know that politics (a part) is distinct from philosophy because of the distinct character of their horizons, aspirations, and capabilities. If all the talk about parts and wholes is meant only to "legitimize philosophy in its original Socratic sense," then perhaps Strauss was right that nothing more is needed to accomplish that task.¹⁵ But what if we take a short step outside the Straussian

*Legitimation
of Socratic
philosophy.*

¹² Ibid., 155.

¹³ Ibid., 49.

¹⁴ Quoted in Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss*, 52.

¹⁵ "[Strauss] did not think that anything more was 'needed to legitimize philosophy in its original, Socratic sense.'" Quoted in Zuckert and Zuckert,

semantic universe? If we do that—and why shouldn't we?—problems arise.

Let us linger a while. Once we have made the limits of a thing “perfectly manifest,” as Strauss puts it, have we also made that thing “completely intelligible”? Straussians sometimes take for granted or repeat such claims more or less uncritically, whereas they should really be wrestling with the devil in the details—something they do very well at other times, in other ways, and for other reasons. Perhaps once we know the limits of a thing, we still need to know about its inner composition for it to be completely intelligible, and perhaps the possible, relevant permutations of the internal elements exceed those examined in a supposedly complete account. Or perhaps we need to know in precise detail how that thing relates to every other part. Maybe both statements are true: maybe complete knowledge of what something is requires complete knowledge of how it relates in its exhaustive inner articulation to every other part also understood in detail in its inner articulations and external relations. As applied to the part called the city—assuming we decide to call the city a part—knowledge of the essential limits of the city might require perfect knowledge of how it relates to every other so-called part, of which we must have exhaustive accounts, and to every other possible permutation of itself. In any given case we must ask whether we have established beyond all doubt that the limits not only are what we have said they are, but also that there are no conceivable circumstances under which they might change or no longer limit the situation. And we can still ask: are there some parts that are and others that are not known merely through knowledge of their limits? There is not much argumentation provided by the Zuckerts to demonstrate the thesis that complete intelligibility follows from clarification of the limits or that the limits have been as precisely clarified as was originally claimed. Nor is the concept of “complete intelligibility” completely intelligible. As we can see, the seemingly straightforward talk about the part and the whole quickly transforms into a blossoming complexity. Accordingly, it starts to look as though this commonly repeated Straussian mantra exerts a bewitching effect that interferes with clear analysis.

*Intelligibility
and knowledge
of the limits.*

Leo Strauss, 53.

There may be some psychic or strategic gain to its use: mantras have their place. But if we start to pay closer attention to what is being claimed, problems arise. This is Straussian witchcraft, under the guise of philosophy.

From “What is” to “What if”

The Zuckerts emphasize diversity among Straussians, defined as those careful readers “who [work] to a degree that cannot be entirely specified within a framework of Strauss’s questions and chief concepts.”¹⁶ Strauss, they say, left behind a body of texts that encourage philosophical activity; he did not leave behind “a set of dogmas and orthodoxies that straitjacket those who, loosely, follow him.”¹⁷ By contrast, I have argued that that framework and those chief concepts nevertheless serve as a sort of dogmatic orthodoxy at times. I used the concepts of “noetic heterogeneity,” “knowledge of the part,” and “knowledge of the whole” to illustrate that claim. One way to challenge these Straussian conceptual orthodoxies is through a staged encounter with heterodoxies, with new devils and devils’ advocates. Transitioning to a different sort of questioning discussed below might do the trick.

What if rather than emulating Strauss’s Socrates’ “what is” questions and thus sanely inquiring into the noetic heterogeneity of things—a practice I fully support and truly admire—Straussians developed the habit of raising “what if” questions? What if in order to make the full scope of the nature of Strauss’s inquiries completely intelligible we had to render *their* limits perfectly manifest? What if the limits of those inquiries were best made manifest by looking far afield the semantic universe of those inquiries? What if only strange experiments in semantic superimposition, conceptual mapping, isomorphism, and “ontological anarchy,” will expose those limits and thus the nature of the enterprise? What if we would learn more invaluable as Straussians if we tried to criticize Strauss in the most unpredictable ways we could imagine?¹⁸

¹⁶ Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 336, 312-13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 337.

¹⁸ By the way, I would recommend the reading of Strauss to ontological

What if Straussians did not only ask about scientific social science (positivism) and historicism, but about the possible political-theoretic and philosophical significance of computational linguistics, chaos theory (even chaos “magick”), cybernetics, artificial intelligence, secret societies, cut-up poetry, and DNA hacking? What if there were something valuable and novel for Straussians to learn in studying online video game behavior or Jungian archetypes? What if we were to begin to inject words, phrases, ideas, memes, connections, patterns, icons, and other elements into the Straussian semantic universe to see the effect this would have on the semantic ecosystem? What if we were to combine the best of Strauss with the worst of Zizek, or vice versa, or perform an even more grotesque and wonderful operation, in a sort of laboratory of political philosophemes, here an arm, there a leg, now two heads, now none? What if—to utter a real blasphemy!—today’s most interesting “political philosophy” presents itself in the garb of a complete repudiation of philosophy and perhaps even of the political, or which takes the form of something that has paid so little attention to both philosophy and the political that it sees no need even to repudiate them?

Hypothetical challenges to Straussian inquiry.

I do not think that unwavering fidelity to Straussian pieties (which I love, together with Straussian impieties and the Straussian confession booth!) will ever permit these questions even to be asked in polite Straussian company, where even to talk too much about Schmitt and Heidegger with a modicum of sympathy is to risk the wrath of those high priests who deliver judgments on behalf of the gods or the god of the Straussian city. Unwavering fidelity to pieties is at any rate not consistent with the “philosophical life,” a notion that some regard as among those very pieties.¹⁹

What if, I say, a “Straussian” reading of the Rider-Waite Tarot deck, or the Crowley-Thoth one, would produce a no less interesting and insightful result than a Straussian reading of Xenophon or Al-Farabi would do? What then?

I want to take a few steps away from the Straussian semantic universe for a moment. That semantic universe is relatively

anarchists and conspiracy theorists, too: *every* side can benefit from unexpected combinations, and the oracle should try to refute Socrates.

¹⁹ Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss*, 144-166.

*Straussian
juxtaposition
of natural
right and his-
tory.*

well ordered. It is decent and decorous. Incidentally, that recommends it, to be sure! But it is my thesis that Straussians stand to gain from finding some new devils' advocates, not just the usual suspects. So do not be too offended or dismissive if I bring out some devils: we invited them to the party knowing that they are devils, and it would be rude to send them away at once for that reason. To make their presence palatable, however, we can begin with some of the comparatively familiar devils, saving the devils we don't know for later.

As is well known, Strauss juxtaposed natural right, which his writings defend, and history, the arch villain in his philosophical drama. By his own acknowledgements, perhaps the foremost challenge to a natural right teaching was posed by what he called historicism. Natural right tells us something about the nature of man and the city that is in principle available at any time. That implies that an earlier thinker might have grasped human truths more completely than a later thinker has done, since the mere fact of having come earlier or later guarantees nothing about the truth of the claims a thinker makes concerning such universal human matters. Historicism emphasizes that man and his truths are historical. It threatens to undermine moderate politics, because it upsets the constitutional order based on standards of natural right, unbinding the glue of morality in the dissolving acids of relativity. The best way to fight historicism is to legitimize the study of Plato's philosophy, the strongest account of natural right ever advanced. Even a more general legitimization of the claims of the classics vis-à-vis the moderns can help in the struggle against history. But never in doubt is that historicism is precisely to be struggled against.

*Relation
between the
universal and
the individual.*

And yet there are reasons to think that neither Strauss nor Straussians took history seriously enough. Specifically missing is an adequate analysis of the relationship in time between the universal and the individual. In his defence of the universality of natural right Strauss risks overlooking the significance of historical individuality and its relationship to universality. But to keep universality and individuality rigorously separate and distinct is, perhaps, to commit a philosophical error, one insufficiently attentive to modern developments in philosophy. Claes Ryn thus observes that "some of the most

important ideas of modern philosophy," Croce's ideas about philosophical historicism, for instance, "are largely unknown to [Strauss,]" whom he charges with grossly mischaracterizing the nature of the problem of history and philosophy.²⁰ In addition, Straussians "typically magnify [Strauss's] philosophical mistakes and weaknesses, making him appear even less sophisticated on the issue of universality and history than he is."²¹ Ryn's suggestion, then, is that neither Strauss nor Straussians have wrestled well with the devil of history. The devil they know perhaps deserves a second look.

Mischaracterization of the problem of history and philosophy.

Consistent with the view that conceptual orthodoxies constrain inquiry among Straussians in ways incompatible with their alleged commitment to the pursuit of wisdom, Ryn observes that it would not be the first time in intellectual history that a group has avoided "facing up to profound philosophical challenges to themselves by acting as if nothing had really happened and by hiding behind some old, more pleasing figure who is accorded the status of unimpeachable authority and is interpreted as representing just what the group thinks he should represent." He refers to that as "philosophical evasion, group partisanship intensified by intellectual insecurity."²² This present call for Straussians to find new devils and new devils' advocates can be restated as the imperative not to evade philosophical or non-philosophical challenges but to embrace them; not to fear devils, but to seek them out for a good fight. Ryn acknowledges that Strauss and his followers do "engage in battle to the death" against historicism. But it is a "foregone conclusion" who will die: "the historicist . . . depicted [as] a simpleton hardly deserving of a place in philosophical discussion."²³ That is not a fight from which Straussians stand to gain anything philosophically worthwhile. Fruitful philosophical confrontation must imply the risk of one's own defeat.

Philosophical evasiveness of Straussians.

All the talk about knowledge of the part and knowledge of the whole has another problem, obvious but also hastily passed over by Straussians. What happens when we ask about the

²⁰ Claes G. Ryn, "Leo Strauss and History: The Philosopher as Conspirator," *Humanitas* 18, Nos. 1 and 2, 2005: 36.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

²² *Ibid.*, 47.

²³ *Ibid.*, 57.

part and the whole from the perspective of—dare I say it—a “philosophy of language”? Straussians as a rule do not like the “philosophy of X” formulation, since they are concerned with philosophy as a way of life. But if one of the things characterizing philosophy as a way of life is the habit of rigorous inquiry, then when we approach a certain domain with that well-honed habit, it seems reasonable to speak in terms of a philosophy of that domain. Hence, when referring to the sorts of research programs that concern rigorous inquiry into language, we can talk about a philosophy of language. If Straussians think that the formulation “philosophy of X” makes it hard to recover the classical sense of philosophy as a way of life, they are open to the following objection. Once we have admitted the classical sense and are not at risk of losing it, we no longer have a good reason to abandon the newer formulation. The very antipathy towards the “philosophy of X” formulation is a sign sooner of conformism than reasoned reflection.

With those preliminaries out of the way, we can turn to the matter at hand. When it comes to wholes and parts, do we have knowledge of the “part” (for instance, that part of speech called a word) if we know its “essential limits,” even if we do not know the entire system of signs, the whole, as a system of differences? Can we know the “essential limits” of a word without knowing everything about contexts in which it is employed?²⁴ The Zuckerts lucidly explicate the reasons Strauss had for opposing presentations of language that break too radically with common sense, which perceives the world as comprised of “things with properties.”²⁵ The foremost reason is that we cannot talk sensibly or wisely about political life if we do not grasp it in the prescientific way in which it ordinarily presents itself to us. A political science must not leave things to prescientific common sense. But one that has moved too far away from common sense risks losing sight of the specific character of the political. Still, given that they acknowledge

²⁴ The usual reference point for this kind of criticism is the debate between Straussians and representatives of the Cambridge School, especially Quentin Skinner. See for instance Raphael Major, “The Cambridge School and Leo Strauss: Texts and Contexts of American Political Science,” *Political Research Quarterly* 58:3 (2005), 477-485.

²⁵ Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss*, 144-166, 73 (quoting Strauss).

that Strauss does eventually ascend from basic common sense to more general reflections about things like the intelligibility of the whole, it is surprising that the Zuckerts and others would not start to apply philosophical research to the linguistic side of that question. We cannot have our cake and eat it too. Either all our talk about knowledge of the whole and so on is a smokescreen for something else, something unphilosophical, or else however much it removes us from common sense, so long as it does not become completely unconnected to matters of political relevance, and it is hard to imagine what that would entail—we are engaged in a philosophically serious inquiry. In the latter case, Straussians should not merely follow Strauss in his repudiation of “empiricism,” for instance: they should read Willard Quine and others to inquire about the relationship between language and experience, to ask whether it even makes sense to talk about the whole, to explore the set of possible relations between the linguistic part and the linguistic whole.²⁶

Philosophy and linguistics a challenge to Straussian philosophy.

Some issues in the philosophy of mathematics could also be superimposed onto the Straussian semantic universe in interesting ways. For instance, Cantor’s diagonal proof shows that there are some infinite sets the members of which cannot be listed or “counted” (put into 1-1 correspondence with positive integers), because if we assume that they can be listed, it is possible to show that at least one member that by assumption was on that list cannot have been there after all. The proof establishes that some infinities are “bigger” than others. The set of all infinite sets, for instance, consists, let us say, of “parts”—infinite sets—but it is an ever self-transcending “whole,” since it is always possible to generate, using the diagonal method, an infinite set that was not included in the originally stipulated “whole,” and once it is included in the whole, the operation is repeated to construct or discover another set that was left out. The latter set is bigger than the former and is never self-contained. No set can exhaust the whole. The mathematical whole is mysterious.²⁷ It would be interesting to say that the

Philosophy of mathematics similarly challenges Straussian dogma.

²⁶ Willard Van Orman Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” *Philosophical Review* 60:1 (1951) 20-43. Why not also something like Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).

²⁷ Francesco Berto, *There’s Something about Gödel: The Complete Guide to the*

philosopher is the diagonal to the city-set, thus establishing a sort of isomorphism between an important aspect of Straussianism and set theory. The philosopher is always more than the city, but always arises from the city, just like the diagonal set is always more than the initial set of sets, but always arises from it. Moreover, the philosopher is never in complete possession of wisdom, just as the diagonal operation never reaches a limit. This strange type of isomorphic reasoning has the merit of bringing Strauss closer to the semantic universe of some continental political philosophers, like Badiou, for instance, who uses mathematical ontology to reason about political things.²⁸

Inasmuch as they talk about knowledge of the part and knowledge of the whole, then, Straussians should be thinking more not only about history and language, but also about mathematics and much more. They should reflect on Gödel's incompleteness theorems, one of which concerns the question whether mathematics is complete, i.e., "whether every statement in the language of number theory can be either proved or disproved."²⁹ After all, the status of mathematical axioms has its place even in Plato, on the divided line.³⁰ They should have something to say about Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, according to which one cannot know simultaneously the exact position and speed of an object. Surely, that is not completely unrelated to disputes over the nature of and relationships between "knowledge of the part" and "knowledge of the whole."

We can go further, of course, beyond history, language, mathematics, and even particle physics, not to mention other devilish fields, like evolutionary psychology, that we have bypassed. Let us imagine that some time in the future, maybe a hundred years from now, maybe in Burma, year 2200—wink, wink—researchers discover intelligent life on another planet in the TRAPPIST-1 solar system.³¹ Inter-planetary research proceeds at an unparalleled pace and contact is made. Human

Incompleteness Theorem (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 32-36.

²⁸ Ian Hunter, "Heideggerian Mathematics: Badiou's *Being and Event* as Spiritual Pedagogy," *Representations* 134 (Spring 2016).

²⁹ <http://mathworld.wolfram.com/GoedelsIncompletenessTheorem.html>

³⁰ *Republic* 509d-511e.

³¹ The wink points to: Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, edited by Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 30.

beings from Planet Earth and beings from the other planet enter into relations that gradually, or instantly, transform our understanding of what it means to be human.³² The alien beings have a more comprehensive knowledge of the history of our species than we have. Moreover, contact with them does not only elucidate our self-understanding. Through a strange noetic proximity effect, our intellectual abilities also undergo a transformation as a result of our new relations with these more advanced alien beings. Actually, so that our example does not reproduce an “overly intellectualistic epistemology” and instead takes into account “the entire personality,”³³ let us suppose that not only our intellectual abilities, but also our entire selves, our complete constitution, is refashioned from the encounter in a totally unpredictable way. Let us imagine, then, that both our understanding of fundamental concepts and our abilities and characters change as a result of that interaction. We cannot say whether what seemed to us to be “limits made perfectly manifest” will not appear rather differently to us under these changed circumstances, such that what we thought was “completely intelligible” must be rethought thoroughly.

I think that this kind of speculation about transformative alien encounters is rendered impossible a priori by the strictures of the Straussian semantic universe (and good riddance to the aliens, some of you might be saying!), even though this kind of speculation, for better or for worse, is manifestly relevant to certain issues and arguments made in that universe. One cannot know the limits of the city without knowing the limits of man. But it is doubtful that reading Plato will teach us the eternal limits of man and thus “the essential limits, the nature, of the city,” if something like what I have described is possible, and we don’t know that it isn’t.³⁴ In short, there are, or there might well be, “more things in heaven and earth,”

Limits of “the city” and limits of man.

³² Alexander Wendt speculated along similar lines by asking what the acknowledgment of UFOs might mean for our anthropocentric concepts of sovereignty. Alexander Wendt, “Sovereignty and the UFO” *Political Theory* 36:4 (2008) 607-633. The 2016 film *Arrival* depicts a fundamental change through alien encounter.

³³ Claes G. Ryn, “Political Morality Reconsidered,” *Humanitas* 28, Nos. 1 and 2, 2015.

³⁴ Quoted in Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss*, 53.

Straussians, “than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”³⁵ Accordingly, the limits that Straussians draw around their own conceptual universe should be tested. They should be expanded. Should they be expanded in the direction of the “whole,” towards the embrace of all of the “parts”? Yes. That sort of maximalism is consistent with the spirit of Straussianism.³⁶

There is a ubiquitous Straussian buzzphrase, a Straussian affectation, that does perhaps indicate better than any other the kind of philosophical self-limitation or immobility that is at issue here. I have in mind the phrase “the city,” as in “the city and man” and “philosophy and the city.” “The city” this, “the city” that. This single favored phrase, an English translation of the ancient Greek word *polis*, is allowed again and again to stand for a socio-political reality that could not be larger or more complex and that cries out for closer examination. Not only does the phrase imply a simplicity that is not there, but it also refers to an historical peculiarity that ceased to be politically relevant over two thousand years ago. The sheer anachronism of this buzzphrase has made it all the more bewitching.

All of this is to suggest that Straussians should not rest content with the sense that they understand the import of certain commonly recurring buzzwords and phrases of great significance. Moreover, the arguments they use to challenge themselves should not merely be drawn from the sanctioned places in the Straussian universe of discourse (Xenophon, etc.). It might be equally interesting and profitable to explore strange combinations like Strauss and UFO theory, Strauss and Deleuze and Guattari, Strauss and Jung.

Objection and Responses

A good, typical Straussian objection that can be made against the sort of thing I have been saying so far is this: yes, there are philosophical issues of all kinds, including issues about language, numbers, the full scope of existence (extraterrestrial intelligent life, etc.), and so on. But the central issue presupposed by all of them is philosophy as a way of life. And

³⁵ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5.

³⁶ Such maximalism would include a study of the philosophical subfield called mereology, of course.

philosophy as a way of life stands in immediate relation to that from which it arises, the city, with its moral, not theoretical, commitments. Philosophy threatens the city through its corrosive questioning of *all* things, including opinions, customs, laws: the things that hold cities together. No one is saying not to ask about language and mathematics. But all of that presupposes that the way of life of the philosopher has first been made more or less secure. To make the life of the philosopher secure is to protect philosophy from the city, first and foremost, and vice versa, to an extent. So the major themes of Straussian political philosophy take precedence. If other themes are not treated openly or at all, it is not because they are ignored but either because there is no need to present them publicly or there is a need to prevent them from being presented publicly. Anyway, Straussian principles offer no guidance here. They only require one to secure the space in which these and all other philosophical questions can be asked safely and responsibly. And that means reflecting first on “the city and man” and only then on everything else.

*Antagonism
between phi-
losophy and
“the city.”*

Now, the question of how we live together is of course of great importance, if not of the greatest importance. But for Straussians, an essential part of the question of how we live together is how to make sense of the social significance of the philosopher and his antitypes. For many of them, following Strauss, who followed Plato and Socrates, that is the central question for political theory.³⁷ The theme of the philosophical reconstitution of the political also matters. What does politics look like from the perspective of the philosopher who is to some degree beyond politics, who exits the cave and then returns to it in the function of an educator? After all, “the city and man” does not only mean “man’s life in the city.” The two terms are not only horizontally aligned on the same plane. For most Straussians, they also have the vertical or diagonal relationship referred to earlier. The true man is the philosopher, who transcends the city and its mere citizenry. Transcending the city, he also helps to give sense and significance to it, for instance, by legislating or by educating legislators with an eye to intellectual and moral excellences known only to philosophers. The question I am asking is whether it is enough for Strauss-

³⁷ Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*.

ians merely to do the preliminary work of carving out a space for “the philosopher.” On their own terms, ought they not also philosophize? Objecting to being more daring looks, first, like a convenient excuse for not actually philosophizing directly. True, theoretical inquiry can pose a threat to moral pieties. A moral order might require a belief in God that theoretical inquiry destabilizes or destroys; it might require a belief in innate human equality that natural philosophy utterly refutes. But just as Maimonides was once compelled to transgress an injunction against setting down secrets in writing because of the disrepair into which Jewish learning had fallen,³⁸ Straussians might find themselves compelled to transgress the injunction against theorizing openly if philosophy has fallen into such disrepair that the light has almost gone out among those so used to cloaking it.³⁹ Would it not be strange if the constant defence of philosophy replaced the practice of philosophy that is not reducible to its own defence?

Second, the objection overstates the impact of the sort of philosophizing that by assumption is too dangerous to do publicly. We are asked to regard ourselves as members of an invisible college or invisible constitutional convention where every dispute over every point threatens to bring the whole thing down. It also overstates the scope of publicity. For we are talking—let us be honest—about books and journal articles that will not be read by “the masses,” or even by those who manipulate them, except in the rarest cases. It is not impossible that chief strategists of entire countries will be versed in the dangerous arcana of various philosophies (Trump’s Bannon is an Evolist! Putin’s Dugin is a Heideggerian! Neocons are Straussians!),⁴⁰ but it would be a mistake for every contributor to one or another journal to ascribe to herself world-historical

³⁸ Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*.

³⁹ There are, of course, Straussians who philosophize openly, like Stanley Rosen, Gregory Bruce-Smith, and Michael Gillespie, for instance. I could name names of unphilosophical Straussians I know well, but I won’t.

⁴⁰ Jason Horowitz, “Steven Bannon Cited Italian Thinker Who Inspired Fascists,” *The New York Times* February 10, 2017; Ronald Beiner, “Who is Aleksandr Dugin?”, *Crooked Timber* March 10, 2015; Danny Postel, “Noble Lies and Perpetual War: Leo Strauss, the neocons, and Iraq,” *openDemocracy* October 15, 2003: https://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-iraqwarphilosophy/article_1542.jsp

significance.⁴¹

It is self-bewitchment to imagine that one is preserving the republic, or whatever, by not asking about the meaning of words in the pages of an academic journal, the more so if the republic is already crumbling or under attack from other much more powerful forces. That attitude may betray good intentions, like the purchase of a bottle of “ethical” water from a Starbucks. But you are not going to save the world with that purchase. Nor are you going to protect the republic by cloaking your spark of light.

*Straussian
self-bewitch-
ment.*

Some time ago, Julian Assange and Wikileaks leaked “Vault 7,” a collection of documents detailing the Central Intelligence Agency’s “global hacking force.”⁴² The leaked materials include among other things the revelation that the CIA is able to use Samsung TV’s and other devices as “covert microphones.” Will an article exploring the significance of Quine’s “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” for Strauss’s critique of empiricism do more damage to the republic than, depending on your perspective, CIA activities or their illicit disclosures? Yet articles of that sort are not, therefore, trivial: *on the Straussians’s own account*, they tackle philosophical questions concerned with such “all-important” issues as “knowledge of the whole,” and, anyway, they are “above the fray” of day-to-day events, out of the cave.

The bottom line is this: Straussians are right to think about the social significance of the philosopher. They are right to worry about the ways in which philosophical reflection can upset civically beneficial moral pieties. They are right, ultimately, that philosophy matters to politics. But they are wrong when they invoke Straussian commonplaces about the part and the whole, essential limits, and much more without thinking through them. They are wrong when they limit their work to good public deeds and the exoteric defence of philosophy

⁴¹ Some Straussians, as a result, create their own world-historical venues for influencing public opinion, but these venues predictably are devoted to the laudable public goal of defending, say, Western civilization (fantastic), while ignoring the philosophical act, sanctioned by their own principles, of calling Western civilization into question. In other words, a legitimate philosophical act with illegitimate political consequences is regarded as illegitimate in public. The risk is that the legitimate philosophical act atrophies meanwhile.

⁴² Wikileaks “Vault 7: CIA Hacking Tools Revealed,” accessed Tuesday March 7, 2017: <https://wikileaks.org/ciav7p1/>

at the expense of the actual act of philosophizing—wrong on their own terms, though I would not mind having such wrong-minded persons as neighbours. They are wrong to cloak what Ryn called their “philosophical evasion” in the virtuous cloak of a concern for public order. Moreover, there are legitimate reasons to worry not only about the atrophy of philosophy in their hands—my primary concern—but also their effect on the public order, which not everyone agrees is good.⁴³

A Short Story

There once was a political theorist with a background in philosophy. The words “political philosophy” were like a magic charm for her, a sort of “Hare Krishna.” She loved to think and she loved to think about her thinking and to reflect on the gains she had made in thinking, even if those gains amounted to increased knowledge of her own ignorance. Before she had ever started to read about political philosophy, and before “political philosophy” had become for her one of the names of God, she had had another magic charm called “mysticism.” Back then, she loved to read about and to meditate upon mystical union with the almighty, and at times she might even have believed—foolishly or not—that she, too, had had a taste of that cherished mystical union whose realization was the culmination of human possibility. What seduced her away from “the mystical” towards philosophy was rational speech. In light of philosophical rationality and the logos, the mystical was reinstated as the dark, silent apex of thought, supplemented, though not replaced, by the logos, which it needed and which needed it.

Dwelling, eventually, among professional philosophers and later political theorists, she became accustomed to stay silent about the mystical—as is fitting—and to focus on the rational, on speeches about political theory and political philosophy. The profoundest speeches that she heard were the speeches of Leo Strauss, which to be sure were not without their own sweet silences. When she tried to discuss those speeches with his colleagues, she was warned about Leo Strauss (“that guy scares me!” said one timid soul to her). So she kept quiet.

⁴³ Ryn, “Leo Strauss and History.”

Later, she was or believed she was fortunate enough to have as colleagues admirers of Leo Strauss and therefore, so she thought, admirers of philosophical inquiry. But when she tried to discuss philosophical speeches with her colleagues, she was warned and eventually she was made to stay quiet.

Eventually, she reflected on her intellectual journey. Along the way, she had alienated atheists through her theism and theists through her heterodoxy and atheism; progressives through her reactionary tendencies, and reactionaries through her progressive ones. She was too Christian for the Jews and too Jewish for the Christians (and so on), everywhere at a crossroads, viewed from the outside.

Many, it would seem, had good reasons to look at her askance or not to look at her at all. What about us? I suggest that we can see in her story a structure that can be permuted, transmogrified, and mapped over into many other variants that would share similar strange attractions: journeying towards a comprehensive human experience, but fighting against partial interpretations of that experience (neither the night in which all cows are black nor the day in which they are all merely cows); combining or trying to combine opposites as part of the effort to embody an expanse, or to disembody it, depending on the operation to be performed.

Possibly, her very effort was vain and in vain. Still, my message to Straussians, and incidentally to other schools, drawing on her experience, is that there is more beyond the hypnotizing, bewitching, and ultimately numbing buzzwords, phrases, themes, and arguments of a particular approach and the *relative* complaisance they engender. (A study of Xenophon might well be fastidious and brilliant but the horizons within which it occurs might nevertheless be generated out of a certain complacency concerning the main concepts and key questions of a predetermined field.) There is more, to repeat, beyond all that than is dreamt of in your philosophy. And “the unending quest for wisdom” should have the courage, and lack the moderation, to go there—should it not?