

# Introduction

## *Leo Strauss and the Theopolitics of Culture*

For the time being, Leo Strauss remains the unlikely case of a first-rate philosopher who has yet to be discovered, despite the enormous amount of scholarship invested in his legacy. Strauss has been studied widely in the fields of political science, intellectual history, and modern Jewish thought, but his philosophical project remains difficult to grasp. This is in part due to the fact that his works do not seem to have a central idea or thesis. Instead, they are exceedingly multilayered, stretching across a variety of fields, epochs, and thematic concerns. Strauss is not only a major reference for the renewal of political philosophy in the twentieth century, he has also had a major impact on the historiography of medieval Jewish philosophy and he has made a partly unexplored contribution to the logic of modern social science. Furthermore, he advocated a largely atypical notion of philosophy, according to which the problem of belief and unbelief is the central issue of philosophical investigation. Last but not least, he sought a way out of the impasse of modernity by consciously “returning” to Platonic philosophizing.

It is difficult to find a single master thesis or a common thematic thread behind these heterogeneous aspects of Strauss’s work. But perhaps there is a recurring conceptual pattern or a critical purpose—or at least a “direction” of philosophical investigation—despite the great variety of concerns? To understand the philosophical project of Leo Strauss, I suggest reading his works with regard to a specific constellation of culture, religion, and the political. In particular, this study carves out Strauss’s largely unknown critique of “culture,” his occupation with a latent culturalism that allegedly holds its grip on modern philosophical thought.

This focus may not be self-evident. His objections to the notion of “culture” initially appear to be rather vague. Moreover, “culture” is not the central theme of Leo Strauss’s writings. It is, however, a theme that leads to and accompanies the central themes. As this study argues, Strauss’s conception of political philosophy was formed in the polemics against the notion of “culture.” The problem had an extraordinary importance for the inner workings of his philosophical endeavor. As he understood the notion, “culture” signified a void in the discourse of twentieth-century philosophy, which has come to be seen in the problematic conjunction of “culture” with religion and the political.

The place where the new philosophical concern came to be most visible is Strauss’s unrecognized masterwork *Philosophy and Law* (1935), where he introduced the topic into the historiography of Jewish philosophy. In the first chapter—masked as a review essay of Julius Guttmann’s seminal book *Philosophies of Judaism* (1933)—Strauss sought to demonstrate that Guttmann could not understand the original problem of religion because he was trapped in the assumptions of the philosophy of culture; but as he argued, “religion cannot be rightly understood in the framework of the concept of ‘culture.’”<sup>1</sup> First, culture is to be understood as the spontaneous product of the human spirit, while religion is *given* to man. Second, culture is to be understood as a set of “domains of validity,” each constituting “partial domains of truth,” whereas religion makes a claim to universality. In a next step Strauss rephrased these two incompatibilities as a contradiction between two oppositional claims to universality: “The claim to universality on the part of ‘culture,’ which in its own view rests in spontaneous production, seems to be opposed by the claim to universality on the part of religion, which in its own view is not produced by man but *given* to him.” With their respective claim to be universal, culture and religion do not coexist peacefully side by side. Instead, they clash with each another and seek to submit each another to their respective semantic structure. In Guttmann’s *Philosophies of Judaism*, religion wins the fight against culture. As Strauss described the outcome of the quarrel, Guttmann “finds himself driven to a remarkable distancing from philosophy of culture by the fact of religion as such, which thereby proves to be one crux of philosophy of culture.”<sup>2</sup>

Now that Strauss had described the conflict between religion and culture, he added an inconspicuous third element. In his footnote to the passage quoted above on religion as the “crux” of philosophy of culture, he continued: “The other crux of philosophy of culture is the fact of the polit-

ical,”<sup>3</sup> referring to his review of Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political*. With this addition, the conceptual framework of culture, religion, and the political was completed.

This study follows the conceptual triad of culture, religion, and the political through different aspects of Strauss’s work stretching across a variety of spatial and temporal contexts. Each of the five parts can be read on its own to a large extent, but the triad also provides a recurrent theme or *leitmotif* throughout the book. Such an interpretation of Strauss’s philosophy inevitably finds itself in an uneasy position between “systematic” and “historical” philosophizing. The present study, with its emphasis on close reading of Strauss texts, seeks to situate them in their proper context of discussion while exploring a thoroughgoing systematic concern. It is therefore compelled to combine the “systematic” and the “historical” pursuit of philosophical scholarship in a way that is open to attack from all sides.

Most notably, perhaps, the argument of the book cannot be properly laid out in terms of “contextualism” as it is widely understood. Only to a small extent does it situate a text or teaching in the immediate historical context of its creation. Rather, it traces how a major theme was imported from a prior discourse that belonged to an entirely different temporal and spatial context, and how it was adapted to a new situation. In each case, the connection is still visible in the voids and ruptures of arguments and conceptual strategies. I show in each chapter of my study how a prior discourse—often from a remote context—provides the conceptual template for the new discourse. The larger consideration is that philosophical discourses are not essentially a direct response to an immediate context. The recourse to earlier conceptual patterns is philosophically far more relevant than the immediate responses. However, the inevitable modifications of these patterns are being made in accordance with the historical situation.

Strauss may have been up to something when he emphasized—and maybe overemphasized—the essential difference between philosophers and intellectuals, who respond to their political and cultural situation. One need not evoke the dreadful image of timeless and spaceless philosophizing to see the difference: philosophers respond to their immediate contexts, too, but they do so in a different way. When they reflect upon “their time,” they resort to conceptual patterns and genealogical lines that reach much farther down both in history and in the structure of their argument. Such patterns and lines are also to be found throughout the writings of Leo Strauss. He had a knack for running the same conceptual patterns through the most

divergent texts and contexts, and he even ran them through the same texts again and again without ever coming to the same conclusion twice. There must be some systematic thread that keeps his philosophizing together.

My attempt to introduce a “systematic” concern into Strauss scholarship may seem odd, for Strauss is not known as a systematic thinker, and he did not present his ideas in a systematic fashion. Phrased in terms from the philosophical discourse of his time, he appears to be a *Problemdenker*, not a *Systemdenker*.<sup>4</sup> He clearly belonged to the postidealist world in which philosophers no longer wrote the huge and comprehensive philosophical systems of previous generations but expressed their philosophical ideas in a series of commentaries to previous philosophical works. Some of the main ideas are scattered across all of his work, and the only way to get hold of these ideas is to analyze them in a variety of concrete situations.

Strauss himself described the prevalence of systematic thinking without a system, and even without the slightest attempt to explicate one’s ideas in a systematic fashion, in his dissertation *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der philosophischen Lehre Fr. H. Jacobi* (1921). A major methodological question of this study was whether a “systematic difference” can also be claimed for an “anti-systematic thinker” such as Jacobi. As Strauss maintained, Jacobi was unwilling to bring his ideas into a systematic form, but the “objective systematic content” (*sachliche Systembestand*) of his philosophy could be discerned “without being systematically explicated.”<sup>5</sup>

Strauss wrote the study in a moment when the old philosophical systems were no longer viable, whereas the anti-systematic fervor of the day seemed to lead straight into relativism. The crucial issue was “that there are several types of reason,” and it was far from clear how the “multiplicity of standpoints” would allow for a unified philosophical perspective. In this situation Strauss proposed “that a philosophy which understands itself, and which does not wish to be exposed to a degrading relativism, must think of the truth as an independent, coherent existence [*Bestand*], which it does not create but seek, find, and recognize.”<sup>6</sup> Subverting the distinction between *Problemdenker* and *Systemdenker*, Strauss pointed to a connection between systematic thinking and “a strictly definable complex of problems in its own lawfulness.”<sup>7</sup> This early outline reverberated in his introductions to Moses Mendelssohn, where he pointed to Mendelssohn’s distinction between systematic (philosophical) and poetic form, as well as to the problem posed by the plurality of systems.<sup>8</sup> How did these ideas morph into the foundational writings of Strauss’s political philosophy from the early 1930s onward?

The place in Strauss scholarship that is located most closely to the matter is the question of whether there are “technical” discussions in his work. Most prominently, Stanley Rosen ventured that there are no such technical discussions in Strauss’s writings.<sup>9</sup> Whether he had a very specific kind of technical discussions in mind (after all, the claim is based on a comparison between Strauss and Aristotle) or whether he looked only in some of the writings (those “middle works” upon which Strauss’s fame and notoriety is based) we do not know. But the rhetorical question “whether or not [Strauss] was capable of this sort of technical work”<sup>10</sup> must be reposed with regard to his writings of the 1930s. These works are replete with many technical discussions, and from there we also find some technical work in his later writings. Strauss himself contributed to the fact that this layer was disregarded by his readership, for he often spoke out against “technical terms” in philosophy<sup>11</sup> and held that political philosophy was to be written in nontechnical language that stems “from the marketplace.”<sup>12</sup> He also alluded to “technical terms” as an indicator of exoteric writing.<sup>13</sup>

The technical layer in Strauss’s works, however, is to be found not in the terminology but in the discussions of the systematic division of philosophy. These discussions may not arouse the suspicion of most Strauss readers. But they indicate the place where we should look if we seek to understand the inner workings of his philosophy. Furthermore, these technical discussions are replete with historical references that situate Strauss within the overall discourse of early-twentieth-century German and Jewish philosophy. I argue in Part I that this occupation with the division of philosophy stems from his early intimate acquaintance with Marburg neo-Kantianism, especially with the works of Hermann Cohen. He discussed the problem of political philosophy within the framework of the prior discussion on the place of religion in the system of philosophy. Paradoxically, Strauss preserved this systematic preoccupation of neo-Kantianism in his lifelong polemics against neo-Kantian philosophy of culture.

Strauss’s controversial interpretation of Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political* is a follow-up to the Cohenian question, as we can trace from the discussion on the systematic place of the political in his “Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*” (1932).<sup>14</sup> The argument with Schmitt extends his occupation with neo-Kantianism up to the point at which Schmitt himself appears as a covert neo-Kantian. As I shall argue, the “horizon beyond liberalism” opened up at the beginning of the “Notes on Carl Schmitt” was in the first place a horizon beyond the polemical antagonism between

liberalism and illiberalism. According to Strauss, Schmitt remained within the horizon of liberalism when he sought to understand the political as an equivalent to the moral, aesthetic, and economic domains. This version of the problem—locating the political among the forms of culture—is largely characteristic of the first version of “Der Begriff des Politischen” (1927). Schmitt openly turned to illiberalism when he gave up on this disposition in the second and third editions. Opting for a conception of the political as “intensity” instead—a violent suspension of all other domains—he provided the “systematic” theoretical foundation of the total state. Strauss did not follow Schmitt in this regard. As he pointed out, Schmitt’s illiberalism was just another variation of the liberalism he despised.

Schmitt’s failure to regain “a horizon beyond liberalism” also reflected the larger systematic predicament of contemporary political thought. Not coincidentally, the “Notes on Carl Schmitt” led to the point at which only the conscious return to premodern political philosophizing would lead out of the Schmittian impasse. A larger point of this demonstration concerns the relationship between philosophy and politics. Throughout, Strauss argued for a preponderance of the philosophical perspective over the political one, or for the notion that “philosophy is of higher ranks than politics.”<sup>15</sup> As he explained:

[The philosopher] is ultimately compelled to transcend not merely the dimension of common opinion, of political opinion, but also the dimension of political life as such; for he is led to realize that the ultimate aim of political life cannot be reached by political life, but only by a life devoted to contemplation, to philosophy. This finding is of crucial importance for political philosophy, since it determines the limits set to political life, to all political action and all political planning.<sup>16</sup>

Man is more than the citizen of the city. Man transcends the city only by pursuing true happiness, not by pursuing happiness however understood.<sup>17</sup>

Statements such as these should be taken literally. Even the most “political” of Strauss’s texts offer a critical philosophical perspective that surpasses their political contexts. It is this perspective that explains Strauss’s actual position in the political debates that surround his legacy, to wit, his stance on National Socialism and on various illiberal movements and intellectual formations. From early on, he searched for an understanding of politics that

would no longer be “merely political.”<sup>18</sup> He may have sympathized with Mussolini for a short period of time, and he may have leaned toward the Revisionist branch of Zionism associated with the name of Ze’ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky. He also engaged with Carl Schmitt before Schmitt turned to National Socialism and no longer replied to Strauss’s letters. But most of all, he was concerned with philosophy, its meaning and purpose and its legitimacy vis-à-vis politics and society.

In the 1930s, Strauss largely shifted the technical work to the context of medieval philosophy and, in particular, to the transformations of medieval thought into modernity. Major philosophical insights are often described with regard to a seemingly insignificant shift in the systematic disposition of a concept or doctrine. Strauss’s discovery that became a key quote for *Philosophy and Law* pertains to the “classification of the sciences,” namely, to the question of the place of prophethood in the whole of the sciences.<sup>19</sup> At one point in the book Strauss sought to clarify his obsession with the division of philosophy more generally. Against Julius Guttmann—who described medieval philosophy within the framework of neo-Kantian philosophy of religion—he wrote:

If one starts from the division of philosophy into theory of knowledge, logic, ethics, aesthetics, and philosophy of religion, thus assuming, for example, that the problems of natural theology and rational psychology are to be treated under philosophy of religion . . . then one is in fact compelled to look for the originality of medieval philosophy exclusively or primarily in philosophy of religion. That one would arrive at a different conclusion if one started from the ancient division of philosophy—much more obvious, after all, in a study of the older philosophy—into logic, physics, metaphysics, ethics, and politics; and furthermore, that it is not merely a technical question whether to label a problem “metaphysical” or “religio-philosophic” needs no further elucidation.<sup>20</sup>

Strauss bothered with a “technical question” here to show “that it is not merely a technical question.” As he warned, “a ‘method’ is never an indifferent, impartial technique, but always pre-determines the possible content.”<sup>21</sup> These and other methodological considerations provide an excellent guide through the inner workings of *Philosophy and Law*. Part II of the present study provides a detailed commentary on *Philosophy and Law* and its afterlife.

The principal task is to outline how the book works as a book, despite its heterogeneous parts and its multiple philosophical contexts. Needless to say, this commentary is not meant to provide a comprehensive interpretation; it merely serves to outline a path through the extremely difficult text in order to prepare for such an interpretation. If this meticulous work is helpful, it is a first step toward the future recognition of *Philosophy and Law* as one of the greatest philosophical works of the twentieth century, along with the *Tractatus*, *Being and Time*, and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

The systematic question also serves as a guide through Strauss's work on medieval philosophy, most notably through his evolving views on Maimonides after *Philosophy and Law*. A typical proposition in the article "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi" (1936) goes as follows: "It is difficult to understand the exact meaning of Maimonides' prophethood if one does not know first the philosophical place of this doctrine."<sup>22</sup> Strauss first recited the Maimonidean division of philosophy into speculative philosophy and practical philosophy—the latter being divided into ethics, economics, and politics—and argued that this disposition is well founded in the Aristotelian tradition. Second, he examined some seemingly minor deviations from that division: Maimonides mentions happiness when speaking of politics, not of ethics; he divides practical philosophy into four parts but later drops one of them; and he attributes to politics the treatment of "divine matters." Third, Strauss suggested that the difficulties pertaining to these deviations can be solved only by acknowledging that Maimonides is strongly influenced by Farabi—namely, a philosopher who fought for philosophy against religious dogma. The systematic disposition was so important for Strauss here because it seemed to decide about the philosophical character of medieval Jewish thought: it would provide the only reliable clue to the question whether a work of Maimonides was actually a *philosophical* or a *Jewish* book. This, in turn, would also give access to the precise way in which political things are intertwined with divine things.<sup>23</sup>

Strauss discussed the same division in "The Literary Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*" (1941) and stretched the matter much further. The preeminent characteristic was the exclusion of any philosophic subject from the *Guide*, and Strauss concluded that it was not a philosophical book.<sup>24</sup> The discovery of "exotericism" in Maimonides and his predecessors led to a turnaround in the hermeneutics of medieval thought. As the 1963 introductory essay on Maimonides shows, Strauss was still occupied with the structure of the *Guide for the Perplexed*, but the way he described this structure had changed. To give a typical example:



The *Guide* consists then of seven sections or of thirty-eight subsections. Wherever feasible, each section is divided into seven subsections; the only section that does not permit of being divided into subsections is divided into seven chapters. The simple statement of the plan of the *Guide* suffices to show that the book is sealed with many seals.<sup>25</sup>

At this point the systematic question had moved into the background. Instead of the underlying division of philosophy, Strauss paid greater attention to the outer division of a text, or to its surface. As in the quote above, there was a new word that indicated this new approach: the *plan*. In “How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*,” Strauss simply started from a description of the sections, subsections, parts, and chapters as the indicators of its “plan.” Such meticulous descriptions of textual surfaces became the epitome of Straussian hermeneutics in the wider public perception.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the dramatic shift in his philosophic and hermeneutic approach from 1937 onward, there is also a fundamental continuity. The original hermeneutic innovation of Straussian political philosophy preceded the discovery of exotericism and the shift of attention from the systematic division to the literary character of a text. It is to be found in his attention toward what he later called “the argument and the action” of a text.<sup>27</sup> Strauss paid great attention to the tension between argument and action, and in particular to the argument *of* the action. As Seth Benardete explained the title of Strauss’s late work *The Argument and the Action of Plato’s Laws*: “The ‘and’ in the title is misleading; it does not mean that some sort of action is represented while the argument is being developed; it means that the action has an argument, and that that argument is the true argument of the *Laws*.”<sup>28</sup>

To better understand the notion of the argument of the action—and its continuity in Strauss’s thought—we must seek to trace how it applies to the composition of his own writings. For lack of a better term, I suggest that a major aspect of the Straussian art of writing is the predominance of *directional* arguments. These arguments indicate a movement from one understanding to another, and they contain instructions on how to get from one to another. Strauss’s directional arguments suggest that the propositional content of a text must be discerned from its dramatic movement. This feature also explains why Strauss was immensely occupied with the questions of *how to begin*, and *how to proceed* from there.

Strauss must not be read in the same manner he read, but his advice that the philosophical argument is contained in the dramatic action is cer-

tainly useful for reading Strauss. As he explained in a landmark article on Plato: “For presenting his teaching Plato uses not merely the ‘content’ of his works (the speeches of his various characters) but also their ‘form’ (the dialogic form in general, the particular form of each dialogue and of each section of it, the action, characters, names, places, times, situations and the like); an adequate understanding of the dialogues understands the ‘content’ in the light of the ‘form.’”<sup>29</sup> Strauss imitated these features of Platonic dialogues in his philosophical prose. His own texts, to be sure, do not have the type of dramatic elements—characters, places, or situations—mentioned in the quote. But he often seemed to transpose the philosophical concepts and their systematic interrelationships into a dramatic situation, in which they all of a sudden and unexpectedly gain a new life of their own. To quote Benardete on Strauss’s Plato again: “Strauss was not the first to . . . suggest that the drama altered the apparent meaning of the argument; but what is peculiar his discovery was that once argument and action are properly put together an entirely new argument emerges that could never have been expected from the argument on the written page. Something happens in a Platonic dialogue that in its revolutionary unexpectedness is the equivalent to the *periagōgē*, as Socrates calls it, of philosophy itself.”<sup>30</sup> It is not difficult to trace these features in Strauss’s own writing, for his texts often appear to have a peculiar spatial dimension. Strauss was a master of translating a philosophical subject into a dramatic situation, in which a new argument emerges from the interplay between the concepts—the “characters” in philosophical prose—over the course of a text.

These peculiarities notwithstanding, we shall be cautious not to imitate Straussian hermeneutics for reading Strauss. In particular, we shall not presuppose that Strauss himself *practiced* exoteric writing, or that he wrote “between the lines.”<sup>31</sup> In most cases, it is more precise to understand the respective text “as it stands.”<sup>32</sup> Reading Leo Strauss, one must make a shift toward the argument: To see the dramatic action of a Strauss text, one must read it closely and follow the argument. This can be a difficult task. As a rule of thumb, readers invoke exotericism where the plain argument is either too simple or too difficult to understand. One common challenge to reading comprehension is to identify whether the position stated in the text is Strauss’s own. As Steven B. Smith explained: “One of the great challenges in reading Strauss is the question of voice. When is Strauss speaking in his own voice and when is he reconstructing, often in his own distinctive idiom, the words of someone else? He no doubt deliberately and provocatively ran these together. Strauss often restated the views of danger-

ous writers like Nietzsche and Heidegger with a power and clarity greater than those writers had expressed themselves.”<sup>33</sup> Beyond “dangerous writers,” Strauss applied this ability also to thinkers who were not easily accessible to readers. As he explained with regard to Cohen’s *Religion of Reason*, his remarks were an attempt at “reproducing or imitating difficulties” that the author had not resolved.<sup>34</sup>

This mimetic reproduction of philosophical positions and their internal difficulties adds to the directional character of Strauss’s texts, or to the fact that their propositional content must be discerned from the dramatic action. “Exoteric” readings often occur where the reader has lost track of the argument and action. But these directional arguments are not in any meaningful sense written “between the lines.” In principle they are accessible to careful readers. Their rhetorical elements—and the continuous interplay between philosophy and rhetoric—pertain to the educational function of philosophy as Strauss came to see it.

Part III of the present study will follow up on this theme in an interpretation of Strauss’s “German Nihilism” (1941), which is an extraordinarily “rhetorical” text. The rhetorical elements, however, serve a clear philosophical purpose. I argue that the text is a parable on liberal education toward philosophy, placed within the context of the debates around 1940–41 on the intellectual origins of National Socialism. As I seek to show, the text responds to a forgotten genre at the border of philosophy and politics, in which scholars sought to locate the origins of National Socialism in the history of German philosophy, particularly in German Idealism, Romanticism, or Nietzsche. The genre had been established during World War I and was resurrected for a brief and intense period during World War II. It also retained a strange afterlife in postwar debates on the alleged political complicity of philosophy. The principal fallacy of the genealogies of National Socialism was due to a confusion in the relationship between politics and culture. As they sought to trace the peculiarities of German politics in German *Kultur*, they paradoxically repeated what—so they thought—was the fallacy of German philosophy: a characteristic overemphasis on culture, to the detriment of politics with its corresponding notion of civilization. A major key to Strauss’s counterinterpretation of National Socialism in his “German Nihilism” text is the critical reversal of the distinction between culture and civilization. Located particularly within the heated debates of 1940–41, the text served to clarify the relationship between philosophy and politics.

As to the inner development of Strauss’s thought, it has often been argued that “German Nihilism” marks the transition of a German-Jewish

scholar of the Weimar era to the American research context. I propose to move this debate to another playing field, namely, Strauss's discourse on American social science and his scathing critique of modern relativism. Part IV of the present study argues that Strauss's transition to American social science is to be located in a shift from "culture" to "cultures." There is a quote in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* that captures this shift better than any other:

It is not easy to say what culture susceptible of being used in the plural means. As a consequence of this obscurity people have suggested, explicitly or implicitly, that culture is any pattern of conduct common to any human group. Hence we do not hesitate to speak of the culture of suburbia or of the cultures of juvenile gangs, both nondelinquent and delinquent. In other words, every human being outside of lunatic asylums is a cultured human being, for he participates in a culture. At the frontiers of research there arises the question as to whether there are not cultures also of inmates of lunatic asylums. If we contrast the present-day usage of "culture" with the original meaning, it is as if someone would say that the cultivation of a garden may consist of the garden's being littered with empty tin cans and whisky bottles and used papers of various descriptions thrown around in the garden at random. Having arrived at this point, we realize that we have lost our way somehow.<sup>35</sup>

Quotes such as this are likely to be noticed for their irony and wit, but there has been little effort to understand them in their theoretical and historical context. As I show from numerous traces—often to be found in remote articles and unpublished lecture manuscripts—the actual target of this critique of "cultures" was the new science of cultural anthropology, with Ruth Benedict as its principal spokesperson in the wider public discourse. According to this viewpoint, all values are relative to a social or cultural group. The absurd notion that juvenile gangs or inmates of lunatic asylums constitute "cultures" provided the extreme case for the thesis that all values are "relative" to any group.<sup>36</sup> The ostensibly more open-minded and flexible notion of "cultures"—or of *a* culture as opposed to culture—thereby came to be regarded as a problem. In the words of Geoffrey Hartman, "[I]t is 'a culture' that tends toward hegemony, while 'culture,' understood as the development of a public sphere, a 'republic of letters' in which ideas are freely exchanged, is what is fragile."<sup>37</sup>

Strauss occupies a special place in the wider discourse on relativism, although he is practically nonexistent in the more technical philosophical debate. For some, he is a bulwark against the tide of Western relativism, while for others, he is the high definition of an “absolutist” invoking the threat of relativism for demagogic purposes. To the extent that the so-called Strauss wars have any specific philosophical and moral content (beyond the more obvious political content), they revolve for the most part around the relativity or permanence of ideas, values, and philosophical problems. But Strauss was by no means the staunch antirelativist he has come to be regarded as in the wider public perception. To reevaluate his contribution to the understanding of modern relativism, it seems useful to keep a certain distance from both sides. In other words, we shall neither presuppose nor merely debunk Strauss’s antirelativism. His critique of modern social science can neither be taken to be true nor understood as untrue in its entirety, as if social science were still the same as it was for him in the 1950s. The debates on “relativism” in the 1950s and ’60s are for the most part a matter of recollection at best. Hence, one must first recontextualize the Straussian discourse on relativism to reevaluate his understanding of social science. This procedure will help to see the strengths and weaknesses of the actual arguments against “modern relativism.”

For the thesis of a fundamental plurality of cultures, the theoretical project of cultural anthropology provided some extreme cases such as cannibalism, the killing of parents, and female genital mutilation. Initially Strauss’s sometimes enigmatic contributions to this discourse seem to be rather unspecific. He generalized the matter to the point at which he concluded that modern social and political science as such has become relativistic and that it is therefore methodologically incapable of addressing the fact of the political. But his arguments are often highly idiosyncratic interventions into specific theoretical situations. In the first place, one must rehearse the arguments and rhetorical strategies pertaining to the theoretical matrix of “relativism” and “absolutism.” One must analyze them in their respective textual situation. Second, Strauss’s discourse is not a unified theory but a loose set of strategies and arguments in a complex matrix of relativism and absolutism. Third, Strauss was occupied with relativism only in a comparably short span of his philosophical career. And fourth, he did not reframe his arguments as a contribution to an ongoing debate. Their precise function is to disrupt a debate. As he sought to demonstrate, the debate had lost track of its subject matter and purpose. He therefore designed his arguments as a disruption that would prepare for a change of perspective.<sup>38</sup>

For the most part, then, Strauss's arguments do work, even as their function is limited. There are basically three types of arguments: commonsense arguments, historical arguments, and arguments that combine a commonsense understanding with a historical perspective. Commonsense arguments often come in colloquial phrases—"forgetting the wood for the trees" is the most common phrase. The purpose is to remind the reader of a triviality, "if a necessary triviality."<sup>39</sup> Historical arguments usually seek to put a modern problem into a larger historical perspective. Their main purpose is critical, and for the most part they come in brief and fairly dry statements that seek to strip a contemporary teaching of its normative claim: "this conclusion . . . is known to every reader of Plato's *Republic* or of Aristotle's *Politics*."<sup>40</sup>

Both these types of argument are not yet very spectacular. Strauss's specialty was to combine a commonsense argument with a historical argument. Even these combinations seem trivial at first, but they are well thought out and surprisingly strong. When Strauss sought to remind his contemporaries of "a necessary triviality" he typically followed a concept or debate to its ultimate relativistic consequences to state that "we have lost our way somehow."<sup>41</sup> The inconspicuous claim functions as a brief allusion to a larger change of perspective: The debate had been on the right way, but at some point it strayed off course. It is therefore necessary to make a fresh start.

Another characteristic element of this change of perspective is the understanding that this new start must involve some kind of return to an earlier position, which had been refuted in the debate that eventually strayed off course. Each time, Strauss proposed an untimely "return" to Platonic political philosophy (supplemented by Aristotle's *Politics*). He did not merely speak as a Plato scholar here, but as the principal spokesman for a full-fledged return to Platonic philosophizing. But how is it possible for a twentieth-century philosopher and/or Jewish philosopher—a modern—to return to premodernity, and why did he insist?<sup>42</sup> As we shall see in various textual situations, Strauss often evoked the return to Plato to facilitate a change of perspective on modernity. The contrast between modernity and premodernity creates a tension within the modern world, and this contrast is primarily a *critical* difference introduced by Strauss into twentieth-century philosophy. Whereas some of his contemporaries sought to judge modernity by its socioeconomic flipside, for Strauss it was to be tried in a "pre-modern court."<sup>43</sup>

But Strauss was also radically modern. As he explained in 1935, "[T]he return to pre-modern thought . . . led . . . to a much more radical form of modernity."<sup>44</sup> There is no better context to study this paradox in action

than his life-long occupation with the theme of Jerusalem and Athens. Strauss was a major proponent of a view that understood philosophy from its opposition to revealed religion, and one of his principal contributions was to renew the conflict between reason and revelation in the middle of the twentieth century. He took reason and revelation as representatives of two types of wisdom, and he associated these types of wisdom with the names of two cities, Jerusalem and Athens.

Part V provides a fresh commentary on the seminal article “Jerusalem and Athens” (1967) in its basis and its genesis. As to the basis, Strauss outlined an understanding of religion *after* the critique of religion: he described a notion of religion that is no longer exposed to the critique of religion proposed by Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud offered three—maybe *the* three—comprehensive post-traditional interpretations of Judaism in modernity. They represent the three options for a radical critique of religion to argue where religion stems from: class struggle, the will to power, or neurosis. Religion, then, is a sign either of injustice, mediocrity, or immaturity. Despite their internal differences, their respective views on religion have a lot in common. Marx called it “the opium of the masses,” Nietzsche spoke of “alcohol and Christianity” as “the two great European narcotics,” and Freud compared religion to “intoxicating substances.”<sup>45</sup> They all expected a future without the drug of religion to be blissful and bright. But Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud did not account for the possibility that one could be thoroughly religious without falling back behind their critique. They presupposed that the religious interpretation of reality had been discredited, and that the common man only held on to it for narcotic purposes. A new interpretation would successfully replace the religious interpretation. The one thing necessary for humanity was a new purpose—the classless society, the overman, or the man of unprejudiced science. These purposes were the core elements of a new, secular “belief,” which was based on the idea of the perfectibility of man.

Strauss was not the first to detect the fundamental weakness of this critique of religion, but he took the matter to another level. Following his reevaluation of the critique of religion and its premises, we may describe the epistemic situation of religious belief as follows: it is possible to refute religion, of course, but it is just as possible to refute the refutation, and both refutations take place on the very same grounds. Religious and non-religious or antireligious beliefs and attitudes are a matter of choice, an act of the will. Religious and antireligious discourses are a matter of rhetorical persuasion. A philosophical critique of the critique of religion is therefore

not needed to rehabilitate or reestablish religion, it is justified by the purpose of philosophy itself. The veracity of philosophy depends upon its relationship to religion and theology, for this relationship illuminates the epistemic precondition of philosophy.<sup>46</sup>

Strauss was also somewhat ahead of the discourse on belief and unbelief when it came to the proper conceptual strategies. With a strong sense for the structural asymmetries in the conflict, he was careful not to prematurely resolve the case in favor of one side. As Pierre Manent put it, Strauss's account was "so impartial that it seems impossible to say where he stands."<sup>47</sup> The relatively high symmetry of Jerusalem and Athens developed over a long span of time, evolving out of his passionate—perhaps even preposterous—resistance to mediation through "culture." Strauss had started from a highly asymmetrical understanding of the conflict between Jerusalem and Athens and only successively came to an understanding of the conflict as one that cannot be resolved in either direction. And while he became less and less convinced that the mere decision for the philosophical life could settle the matter, he came to emphasize that the possibility and necessity of philosophizing depended upon its clear delineation from the life of obedience to God.

I start from an outline of the emergence of the topic and the conceptual strategies in Strauss's work. "Jerusalem and Athens" in particular, with its unique outline of a philosophical interpretation of the Bible and a theological interpretation of Greek philosophy, is an extremely well-crafted text, displaying certain hypermodern arguments and rhetorical means that deserve close attention. Another aspect of "Jerusalem and Athens" is how it brings together Strauss's two critiques of culture—the critique of German philosophy of culture (represented in text by Hermann Cohen and *his* understanding of Jerusalem and Athens) and the critique of cultural anthropology (represented by some unnamed scientific observers of Jerusalem and Athens).

Strauss did not fully develop the intricate connection, but in the void between the two concepts of culture the text announces a third type of culturalism, which had come up in the 1950s and '60s. This new type of culturalism was closely linked to the emergence of postcolonialism—a multiplicity of "cultures" becoming nations and eventually founding nation-states. Both the political events and their repercussions in the academic discourse brought about a *first* wave of reaffirming the roots of "Western civilization," for which Strauss became a spokesman. As Judith Shklar contended in 1964:

The conspicuous concentration on "the West" today is clearly a response to the Cold War and to the political organization



of ex-colonial, non-European societies which now challenge the European world. These events have made us all culturally self-conscious. . . . The question is whether it is valid to extract a quintessence of “the West” by subtracting from its history all that it shares in various degrees with the rest of mankind. The result inevitably gives Europeans an unwarranted appearance of consistency and uniformity. The aim of this exercise, moreover, is not difficult to guess: as always it is a matter of defending the “essential” West against other ideological forces, revolutionary, national, and violent. The difficulty is that these too are Western.<sup>48</sup>

Shklar summed up the argument against the resurgence of “the West” well. It is based on the plurality of what constitutes the West, generalizing the claim that the idealizing view of the West excludes some of its many aspects while highlighting others. We must not diminish the scope of this criticism to see that at least the more intelligent proponents of “the West,” such as Strauss, have little to fear from it. They had known about this plurality all along. When Strauss recast Jerusalem and Athens as the “two roots of Western civilization,” he was well aware that he had not described all its branches and fruits. It was the ongoing conflict between the two roots or “pillars” of the West that safeguarded its vitality, with all its heterogeneous elements.

A *second* wave of reaffirming the roots of “the West” began as a response to the conflicts at the border of culture, religion, and the political in the twenty-first century. This wave has ignored many of the lessons of the first wave, including those of Strauss. The current return to “the West” also witnesses the renewal of an older quarrel between two highly politicized notions of culture: the largely conservative notion of culture as a reaffirmation of the roots of Western civilization has again entered into a principal argument with the liberal notion of culture as an agent of social change. This principal argument can now be seen again after a time when the argument in favor of “the West” was virtually absent from the discourse on culture. As Susan Hegeman noted about the conservative appropriation of the term *culture*: “A classic rhetorical tool of liberal discourse is now being appropriated by the Right.” Her response reflects the shock caused by the loss of a monopoly:

What does it mean that “culture,” undeniably a central term of a left-leaning academic discourse in previous decades, has now become accessible to this kind of manipulation? . . . I believe we

are in danger of ceding the domain of culture to those who we already know have a deliberately limited understanding of it.<sup>49</sup>

We shall be glad that the debate is open once again. But we shall also welcome any serious contribution that would lead the way out of this highly politicized situation. And we shall remind ourselves that neither the reaffirmation of the West nor the hope for social change exhausts the meaning of culture.

There are three ways in which the relationships between culture, religion, and the political are being played out here: as a conflict between the religious and the philosophical life, as the conflict between philosophy and politics, and as the resistance to mediation by way of “culture.” It is important to notice these different concerns. But it is also crucial to see that they are all part of an inconspicuous larger concern, namely, to secure the possibility of philosophy. The possibility of philosophy had to be negotiated in the force-field of culture, religion, and the political. We may seek to pose the pertinent conflicts differently than Strauss did, but it seems useful to further acquaint oneself with the contexts, problems, and strategies of his philosophical project to see the scope and magnitude of the issues at hand.