

Leo Strauss's Platonism

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For Platonists are not concerned with the historical (accidental) truth, since they are exclusively interested in the philosophic (essential) truth. Only because public speech demands a mixture of seriousness and playfulness, can a true Platonist present the serious teaching, the philosophic teaching, in a historical, and hence playful, garb.

Leo Strauss, "Farabi's Plato"¹

Leo Strauss, the historian of political philosophy, is especially noted for seeking to revive the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. In a number of books Strauss calls for a return to and a renewal of ancient political philosophy, and in particular that of Plato. Yet Strauss's actual interpretations of Platonic texts have often been regarded by non-Straussians as idiosyncratic, perverse or simply bizarre.² Strauss, for his part, argues that he has recovered the original Plato lost sight of by the tradition of Neo-Platonic and Christian interpretation.³ In this paper I wish, on the one hand, to agree with critics of Strauss that his is not the original Plato, but, on the other hand, to try to discern the logic underlying Strauss's reading of Plato. My paper concludes by suggesting that Strauss's discussion of Plato can be seen to be of the greatest interest if it is read less as providing an interpretation of the original Plato and more as a contribution to contemporary thought. What underlies Strauss's interpretation of Plato is a one-sided, but nonetheless significant, consideration of the contemporary.

Strauss explains the basis of his return to antiquity in the introduction to *The City and Man*:

¹ "Farabi's Plato" in *Louis Ginzberg : Jubilee Volume* (New York, 1945) 376-7. The following abbreviations will be used for Strauss's various texts: *The City and Man* (1964), *CM*; *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (1989), *CR*; *Natural Right and History* (1953), *NRH*; *On Tyranny* (1991), *OT*; *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952), *PAW*; *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (1983), *SPPP*; *What is Political Philosophy* (1959), *WIPP*; *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (1952), *PPH*; *Philosophy and Law* (1995), *PL*; *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958), *TM*; *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1965), *SCR*; *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (1968), *LAM*; *History of Political Philosophy* (1972), *HPP*; *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity* (1997), *JP*.

² See M.F. Burnyeat "Sphinx without a Secret" *New York Review of Books* 32:9 (30 May 1985) 30-6.

³ See Catherine Zuckert *Postmodern Platos* (Chicago, 1996), 5.

It is not self-forgetting and pain-loving antiquarianism nor self-forgetting and intoxicating romanticism which induces us to turn with passionate interest, with unqualified willingness to learn, toward the political thought of classical antiquity. We are impelled to do so by the crisis of our time, the crisis of the West.⁴

Strauss follows Nietzsche and Heidegger in seeing a crisis of nihilism at the heart of modernity which opens up the possibility of a return to a principle forgotten or lost sight of within modernity. Again, like Nietzsche and Heidegger, Strauss would see that the recovery of this lost principle involves a return to the ancients who are now able to speak to us free from the distorting effects of modern assumptions. However, in striking contrast to Nietzsche and Heidegger, Strauss turns not to the pre-Socratics, but to Plato and Aristotle--precisely those thinkers who for Nietzsche and Heidegger are the architects of Western metaphysics and thus fully implicated in modernity and its nihilism.⁵ This different assessment of the ancients has its roots in a different conception of the character of modernity's crisis. For Strauss, the problem of modernity is not so readily captured by phrases like "the death of God" or "the forgetting of Being" as by "relativism" or "the rejection of natural right".⁶ In short, Strauss characterizes the crisis of modernity as primarily moral and political rather than existential. It is more fundamentally about the Good than about Being.⁷

Strauss has recently been accused of being a closet Nietzschean or Heideggerian, so it is important to be clear about how Strauss's position is to be distinguished from theirs.⁸ Strauss's critique of existentialism is that rather than escaping from modernity, it forms modernity's third and most radical "wave."⁹ Strauss argues that Nietzsche and Heidegger have misdiagnosed the character of contemporary nihilism. For Strauss, nihilism resides not in the loss of an originary or authentic encounter with Being or the abyss, but in the loss of contact with nature in our moral and political lives--the discovery for moderns that

⁴ *CM* 1.

⁵ Strauss criticizes Heidegger in a way comparable to Heidegger's critique of Nietzsche. See "Nietzsche's Word: God is Dead" in Martin Heidegger *The Question Concerning Technology* (New York, 1977) 53-112. In other words, Strauss like Derrida argues that Heidegger has not sufficiently freed himself from the tradition he critiques. For Derrida Heidegger still shows a continuing relation to presence or, in Strauss's terms, nature. For Strauss, Heidegger rather shares in the modern oblivion of nature. In this respect Strauss, who did not live to encounter deconstruction, would surely have seen it as a hyper-modernism. Consider the discussions of Derrida in Stanley Rosen *Hermeneutics and Politics* (Oxford, 1987) 50-86 and Zuckert, 201-53.

⁶ See "Relativism" in *CR*, 13-26; *NRH*, 5.

⁷ See *OT*, 212. Stewart Umphrey "Natural Right and Philosophy" in Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Niggorski eds. *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker* (Lanham, 1994) 287. Umphrey points out that Strauss's notion of Natural Right can be seen to parallel Heidegger's notion of Being.

⁸ For Strauss as a Nietzschean see Shadia Drury "The Esoteric Philosophy of Leo Strauss" *Political Theory* 13:3 (1985) 315-37 and *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York, 1988); Laurence Lampert *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago, 1996); and Peter Levine *Nietzsche and the Modern Crisis of the Humanities* (Albany, 1995). For Strauss as a Heideggerian see Luc Ferry *Political Philosophy I: Rights--The New Quarrel Between the Ancients and the Moderns*, trans. Franklin Philip (Chicago, 1990).

⁹ See "The Three Waves of Modernity" in Hilail Gildin ed. *Political Philosophy: Six Essays by Leo Strauss* (Indianapolis, 1975) 81-98; *CR*, 24-6, 27-46.

no particular way of life has inherent worth.¹⁰ The pursuit of authenticity, far from being a road to release from modernity, is a symptom of modernity bereft of all connection with nature.¹¹ The release from modernity, for Strauss, will involve a release from the hermeneutic or self-interpreting self, from *dasein*, as the most extreme, and therefore truest, form of modernity. Instead of the self-interpreting exister, Strauss points to the human being engaged in and structured by civic life, standards, laws.¹² He sees that the crisis of modernity is not centrally at the level of meaning or significance for the individual exister, but about our capacity to engage in a moral and political life that connects citizens to a structure of human excellence.¹³ The "originary" encounter is, for Strauss, not for the human as *dasein*, but for the human as citizen, as a certain "type" structured by a shared moral and political life.¹⁴ To recover this form of the "originary," one turns not to the poetic musings of pre-Socratic poets and philosophers, but to the dialectical rationalism of the dialogues of Plato.¹⁵

For Strauss the need to return to the Platonic and other ancient texts in order to recover the nature of political life arises from the particular character of modernity. Modernity originated in the transformation of political philosophy effected by Machiavelli, who redirected political philosophy from an essentially contemplative or theoretical consideration of political things to the active transformation of those things.¹⁶ Strauss describes the change in political philosophy effected by Machiavelli in various ways: as a lowering of horizons, as a new conception of nature, and as a replacement of

¹⁰ Strauss builds on Carl Schmitt's insight that the crisis of modernity can be seen as the loss of the "political". See *SCR*, 331-51. For an account of the limitations of Strauss's understanding of Heidegger see Ian Lodeman "Historical Sickness: Heidegger and the Role of History in Political Thought" (unpublished, 1998) 1-28.

¹¹ Strauss clearly distinguishes himself from existentialism on a number of occasions: see his letter to Eric Voeglin December 17, 1949 in Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper, eds. *Faith and Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voeglin, 1934-1964* (University Park, 1993) 62-3. To the extent that existentialism is identifiable with Heidegger and Sartre, Strauss is certainly correct. Strauss would not agree that existence precedes essence or that language is the House of Being. In a broader sense, however, where existentialism is identified as a contemporary phenomenism in reaction to technological humanism, Strauss can certainly be identified as existentialist.

¹² Strauss tries to develop a middle ground between modern objectivity and existential engagement--what could be called the sphere of objective engagement, the sphere of institutions and roles. Strauss makes this critique of existentialist terminology: "When speaking about someone with whom I have a close relation I call him my friend. I do not call him my Thou. Adequate 'speaking about' in analytical or objective speech must be grounded in and continue the manner of 'speaking about' which is inherent in human life." *WIPP*, 29.

¹³ The "secret" teaching of Strauss is that in fact only the life of the philosopher has inherent worth or is good by nature. The city derives its worth a) hiddenly but truly, as the condition for philosophy; b) openly but falsely, by convincing it citizens that partial or conditional virtues, are intrinsically good. See Zuckert, 111-115.

¹⁴ For Strauss, the philosophers encounter with nature is more primordial or fundamental than that of the citizen., but in this it parallels the relation of authenticity to everydayness in Heidegger's account of *dasein*.

¹⁵ Strauss does not see language as the House of Being; rather he sees opinion as the place of contact with nature. Strauss's writings are, then, a testing or interplay of opinions that seeks out of this interplay or dialectic to bring forth the nature of things, or at least the fundamental alternatives. As shall be suggested below, Strauss's rationalism and anti-existentialism do not mean that his position is not deeply rooted in a phenomenology that could be called existential in a broader sense of the term.

¹⁶ *WIPP*, 40.

human will for nature as the source of standards. In all of these characterizations, it is clear that, for Strauss, modernity is founded upon the internalizing of the sources of morality within human subjectivity, and, as the necessary correlative of this, results in the oblivion of nature and total historicization of all moral and political standards.¹⁷

Historicism arises in modernity because modernity is premised on a "conquest of nature"--namely, the conception that human activity can transform nature, that it can produce a reality that is other than and superior to the natural condition of man. The radical historicism and relativism that belongs to Nietzsche and Heidegger is simply the most complete "conquest" of nature, the final result of Machiavelli's transformation of political philosophy. However, the nature to which Strauss would have us return is not the "other" that modernity has conquered, but rather "another conception of nature."¹⁸ The "nature" that modernity "conquered" was itself an interpretation posited by modernity.¹⁹ The escape from modernity, for Strauss, occurs not through a return to the "other" posited within modernity, but through an appearance of a nature prior to all modernizing interpretation.²⁰ Strauss puts this sense of a return to nature through a return to the ancients with particular clarity in one of his earliest writings, *Philosophy and Law*:

The natural foundation which the Enlightenment aimed for but itself overthrew becomes accessible only if the battle of the Enlightenment against "prejudices,"--which has been pursued principally by empiricism and by modern history--is accordingly brought to a conclusion: only if the Enlightenment critique of the tradition is radicalized, as it was by Nietzsche, into a critique of the principles of the tradition (both the Greek and the Biblical), so that an original understanding of these principles again becomes possible. To that end and only to that end is the "historicizing" of philosophy justified and necessary: only the history of philosophy makes possible the ascent from the second, "unnatural" cave, into which we have fallen less because of the tradition itself than because of the tradition of polemics against the tradition, into that first, "natural" cave which Plato's image depicts, to emerge from which into the light is the original meaning of philosophizing.²¹

The difficulty in emerging from out of the crisis of modernity lies in the character of modernity as a constructed reality, a second cave. It is a reality built out of a desire to humanize nature, or--more accurately--to construct a human world in place of nature. This specifically human world is the realm of culture or history.²² At the heart of modernity is a nihilism of nature. The crisis of the West is the bringing to light of this nihilism, that in the very triumph of modernity the West discovers that humanity cannot

¹⁷ See "Three Waves", 96.

¹⁸ *PPH* 170

¹⁹ *SCR* 336 and *CM* 43-4.

²⁰ *PL* 135-6.

²¹ *PL* 136.

²² *SCR* , 336.

inwardly generate what Charles Taylor helpfully calls "constitutive goods."²³ The "second cave" of modernity, Strauss argues, is human history understood as a self-constituting reality. To be free of modernity is to dissolve the notion of human history, by regaining contact with a nature untouched by history, and, even in modernity's nihilism, implicitly constitutive of human life. But how is this rise above history not to be a Nietzschean turn to the abyss, to the dissolution of humanity and nature altogether?

It is in response to this question that Strauss calls for a return to ancient philosophy, and particularly to Plato, as the necessary way to regain an understanding of nature in its pre-modern sense.²⁴ Strauss is therefore uniting two projects: a correction of the contemporary crisis in political philosophy, and a re-reading of Plato. What allows Strauss the confidence that his re-reading of Plato can be illuminating for contemporary concerns is that Strauss has located an ahistorical nature as both the subject matter of Platonic philosophy and the needful response to contemporary nihilism. However, the Platonism known to the western tradition would ill serve Strauss's purposes. This Platonism, centred on the doctrine of the Ideas, appears implicated in Heidegger's critique of western metaphysics.²⁵ Traditional Platonism, if not directly implicated in modernity, at least cannot be the starting point of a return to nature as envisioned by Strauss--it seems to transform nature too directly into thought.²⁶ In his commentary on *The Republic*, Strauss writes:

The doctrine of ideas which Socrates expounds to his interlocutors is very hard to understand; to begin with, it is utterly incredible, not to say that it appears to be fantastic...No one has ever succeeded in giving a satisfactory or clear account of this doctrine of ideas.²⁷

To return to nature or rationalism, but in such a way as not to be open to Heidegger's critique, Strauss had to "discover" a Plato without a doctrine of ideas or immortality of the soul, without metaphysics. A number of commentators on Strauss have pointed out that he came to read Plato in this apparently perverse fashion from his reading of Farabi's commentary on Plato.²⁸ It was also from reading Farabi and other medieval Islamic and Jewish commentators that Strauss stumbled upon the tradition of esoteric/exoteric writing.²⁹ While of course Farabi nowhere states the esoteric view that Plato's doctrine of the ideas and the immortality of the soul are merely exoteric teachings, this can be "discovered" by careful reading premised on the esoteric/exoteric distinction which

²³ See Charles Taylor *Sources of the Self* (Harvard, 1989) 91-107. Taylor, in contrast to Strauss, argues for the possibility of constitutive goods within modern subjectivity. See Taylor *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto, 1994).

²⁴ Robert Pippin "The Modern World of Leo Strauss" in P.G. Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes and Elizabeth Glaser-Schmidt eds. *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss* (Cambridge, 1995) 139-60, 152 points out that Strauss's turn to the ancient Greek polity as somehow originary in a way that parallels Heidegger's turn to *pragmata* is problematic at best.

²⁵ See *NRH* 30-1.

²⁶ Strauss's critique of the doctrine of Ideas is primarily of their "separateness": see *CM* 119-20 and *OT* 292.

²⁷ *CM* 119.

²⁸ Zuckert 5 and *FP* 364, 371, 376.

²⁹ *PAW*, 8; *JP* 463.

Strauss also "discovers" in Farabi's writings.³⁰ Strauss has uncovered a Plato that perfectly meets the need of contemporary humanity to regain contact with a phenomenological nature able to be a constitutive source of moral and political life. The difficulties of directly refuting Strauss's hermeneutic may be compared to the difficulties of refuting psychoanalysis; both point to an object only available to those who practice an art which requires as a premise the prior acceptance of the existence of that object--the hidden text or the unconscious mind.³¹ However, by Strauss's own principles, his interpretation of Plato cannot be premised upon a supposed tradition of interpretation, but must be grounded in the texts themselves. At this level, however, Strauss can hardly be said to have demonstrated the exoteric character of the Platonic ideas: rather, he asserts that as a metaphysical standpoint, it is simply incredible.³²

This is not to say that for Strauss Plato's ideas have no reference at all. By contrast, they refer to the "fundamental and permanent problems."³³ Strauss's ahistoricism is an ahistoricism of the permanent problems that structure "the whole" as this appears to the philosopher, and in particular the human part of the whole, "the city."³⁴ Philosophy, in its turn, emerges as an ahistorical pursuit relative to the ideas understood in this sense:

philosophy is knowledge that one does not know; that is to say, it is knowledge of what one does not know, or awareness of the fundamental problems, and, therewith, of the fundamental alternatives regarding their solution that are coeval with human thought.³⁵

The philosophic life, according to Strauss, is fundamentally zetetic, a quest for an understanding of the fundamental problems. But Strauss warns us that to resolve those problems by coming to a determinate solution is necessarily to collapse into dogmatism. The search for wisdom can never become wisdom but only dogmatism:

Yet as long as there is no wisdom but only quest for wisdom, the evidence of all solutions is necessarily smaller than the evidence of the problems. Therefore the philosopher ceases to be a philosopher at the moment at

³⁰ Alfons Sölner "Leo Strauss: German Origin and American Impact" in Kielmansegg et al. 121-137, 126 points to Strauss's use of the esoteric/exoteric distinction as a parallel to Heidegger's use of etymology. Both methods allow the interpreter to "discover" a contemporary concern in ancient texts. Strauss reads every text as "dialogic", involving both argument and action.

³¹ One could readily build up a set of parallels between Freudian psychoanalysis and Straussian careful reading, with this difference: that the hidden object in Strauss is a conscious construction, whereas in Freud it is an unconscious construction.

³² See *HPP*, 44.

³³ *WIPP* 39.

³⁴ See *WIPP* 229; *NRH* 24, 32-3. Because for Strauss the ideas are "problems" they are necessarily understood as being *for* the philosopher (they are surely not problems in themselves) and not as self-subsisting realities or causes in a metaphysical sense. In short, Strauss sees the ideas as phenomenological realities for the philosopher who encounters them. See *HPP*, 50-1.

³⁵ *NRH* 32

which the "subjective certainty" of a solution becomes stronger than his awareness of the problematic character of that solution.³⁶

The moment that the thinking of the philosopher becomes determinate--that is, becomes one with being--the philosopher collapses into opinion. As we shall see, this problematic belongs to Strauss's whole conception of Platonism. In a preliminary way here it can be seen in Strauss's very formulation of philosophy as the movement between alternatives that determinate thought is opinion: these alternatives are necessarily exclusive, one-sided and given. Metaphysics, and in particular the Platonic ideas as self-constituting realities or as a mediated activity of thinking and being premised on a unity beyond their distinction, is not even allowed to appear. Strauss presents, as the true Platonism, a Platonism without metaphysics.

In what, then, does Platonism consist for Strauss? Strauss sees the need to turn to classical political philosophy as a whole to be integral to recovering an understanding of nature. Nature, in a pre-modern sense, emerges when the governing opinions of the city come to be questioned and the need arises to come to know the relation of those opinions to an abiding reality, nature.³⁷ Strauss's return to the ancients is premised upon the need for a contemporary recovery of a phenomenological or pre-philosophic awareness. That awareness is the necessary beginning point of philosophy if it is to recover a rationalism that is non-technological.³⁸ In the rise from opinion to knowledge, the philosopher does not emerge as a subjectivity disengaged from nature. Indeed, precisely because the ideas are not metaphysical, causal realities but rather permanent problems, the philosopher can only seek for a knowing he can never attain or master. The method of the philosopher, embodied for Strauss in the life of Socrates, is to ask the "What is...?" questions about human and non-human things.³⁹ In the dialectic of enquiry the natures or essences of these things emerge--not as metaphysical causes, but as phenomenological realities. Out of the questioning of philosophy, nature emerges as a heterogeneity of various natures; the whole consists of different parts.⁴⁰ However, the nature of these natures or parts is itself fundamentally problematic. The philosopher can never grasp the whole in all of its parts; nature can never be a pure object of thought. The Socratic philosopher is defined by knowledge of ignorance.⁴¹ In short, the philosopher never converts phenomenology into metaphysics.

But it is here that Strauss brings out the fundamental problematic of philosophy and the fundamental subject matter of the Platonic dialogues: the relation of the philosopher to the city. For Strauss, the enquiry that looks to human ends, to the question of the good, is an activity destructive of the good of the city. Strauss takes up the Nietzschean view that what holds together forms of human life (cities or cultures) is a certain horizon or opinion that gives significance and moral direction to people's lives. In Strauss's terms,

³⁶ *OT* 196

³⁷ *NRH*, 83-93.

³⁸ *WIPP*, 86.

³⁹ *CM*, 19.

⁴⁰ *CM*, 19; *CR*, 141-2; *WIPP*, 39-40.

⁴¹ *CM*, 20-1; *WIPP*, 38-9.

the city is, and must be, closed.⁴² Here lies the ambivalence in Strauss's concept of nature. The city, the natural community of humans, is sustained by the engagement of its citizens. This engagement is premised upon a belief that the laws of the city are legitimate. For cities that have come to question their foundation and tradition, this legitimacy is premised on notions of justice and right, ultimately grounded in nature. But, for Strauss, no actual city can be just or be in accord with nature. Every city must be conventional, structured by determinate opinions, and thus not open to "the whole."⁴³ Each city must have decided among the various alternatives and in order to retain the engagement of its citizens must by force and persuasion (even to the point of a noble lie), instill the engagement of its citizenry.⁴⁴ There is an irresolvable conflict between the philosopher, the highest type of man who would live in openness to nature as a whole, and the city, which by nature must be closed to nature as a whole. The conflict between the philosopher and the city is at the heart of Strauss's position, and at the heart of his reading of Plato. For Strauss, the Platonic dialogues are not metaphysical but a "psychological" and "sociological" phenomenology of the relation between the philosopher and the city.⁴⁵

In his published writings, Strauss has provided us with analyses of eight Platonic dialogues: *The Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphron*, *Republic*, *Statesman*, *Minos*, and *Laws*.⁴⁶ In each of these commentaries Strauss's procedure is the same: he seeks by a close reading of the text to bring out the content of the dialogue as an exploration of the vexed relation of philosophy to other aspects of human, and in particular civic, life.⁴⁷ So the dialogues explore the relation of philosophy to religion, poetry, rhetoric, sophistry,

⁴² It is a nice question to ask why for Strauss the city must be closed. As Peter Levine argues, Strauss shares with Nietzsche the conviction that to escape modern technological humanism requires a rise above historical life into a realm beyond horizons. The capacity to "escape" history depends upon a phenomenology of identity as premised upon horizon construction in the face of an unliveable or unthinkable 'reality.' An alternative phenomenology of identity, which Levine relates to humanism, is a phenomenology of practices. Here there can be no standpoint beyond historical life; positions only develop within history. It is this latter phenomenology that Taylor and MacIntyre develop.

⁴³ *WIPP*, 227.

⁴⁴ *CM*, 102.

⁴⁵ *RCPR* 179-80 and *PAW* 21. It belongs to Strauss's conception of philosophy that it is incommunicable. As zetetic, it can not be reduced to a teaching. The writings of philosophers are then, not philosophy but ways of both considering and influencing the conditions of philosophy: the relation of philosophy to the city. In short, Strauss posits philosophy as an absolute activity, the only inherently worthy or good human activity, but gives it no content: it is a mania. See *JP*, 463 and the useful discussion in Zuckert, 121-8.

⁴⁶ Commentaries of *The Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, are in *SPPP*, 38-88; *Eutypron*, in *CR*, 187-206; *Republic* in *CM* 50-138 and with *Statesman* and *Laws* in *HPP* 7-63; *Laws* in *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws* (1975); *Minos* in *LAM*, 65-75.

⁴⁷ Strauss makes clear that philosophy is inherently theoretic and not reducible to a) serving the moral and political needs of the city; b) reflecting only upon the human things. The life of the philosopher is self-sufficient and so centrally "apart" from the city. But for Strauss, Platonic philosophy is crucially Socratic in enriching the pre-socratic conception of nature to include human things. This enrichment is brought about through philosophy's consideration of its own conditions. Pre-socratic philosophy tended to a materialistic homogeneous conception of nature: Socrates brings to light the ineliminably heterogeneous character of human ends. Philosophy becomes a never complete effort to hold together without reduction heterogeneity and homogeneity. In this sense philosophy itself both includes and transcends the city. However, this zetetic activity is never directly the subject of philosophic writings: it can only be intimated to those capable of it. The *Dialogues* are therefore never directly philosophic. See *WIPP*, 39-40 and Zuckert 116-8.

legislation, art (techne) and so on. Strauss above all focusses on the figure of Socrates whose life embodies the opposition between civic life and the life of the philosopher, the life dedicated to thought.⁴⁸ Strauss seeks to illuminate the inherently political character of the relation of the various aspects of the city to one another and to philosophy. For Strauss the heterogeneity of nature, most readily evidenced by the heterogeneity of the human, is irreducible and immune to synthesis.⁴⁹ Nonetheless these heterogeneous ends must co-exist in the city--hence the irreducibly "political" character of human existence, the ever-present need to mix force and persuasion, nature and necessity, convention and natural right. Modernity, in its internalizing of the Good, reduces and synthesizes the given ends and so loses sight of Nature as the mysterious source of human aspiration for the Good and an inherent limit to the humanization of that Good. For Strauss, each Platonic dialogue is a necessarily incomplete or abstracted consideration of Nature as it emerges in the interaction of the philosopher with various types of citizens.⁵⁰ The Socratic or Platonic character of the Dialogues for Strauss is revealed in philosophy's turning to a consideration of its conditions in political life: thought knows itself to be beyond political life, beyond opinion, but always connected to political life. In Strauss's reading of Plato this comes out in his distinction between the argument and action of the dialogues. As both dramatic and theoretical, the dialogues present an interplay between thought and life. What distinguishes Strauss's use of this often noted feature of the *Dialogues* is that he seeks to bring out the conflict between, not the mutual relation of, "deeds" and "speeches."⁵¹ In this sense, the "teachings" of the dialogues are never directly present in the "arguments" of the dialogue, but rather are intimated to the careful reader. The *Dialogues* are not works of metaphysical theory, but of the central problematic of human life: that human excellence in general demands a determinate community to sustain the phenomenological activity of moral and political life and yet truth and the pursuit of truth shows this given realm of moral and political activity to be mere opinion. For Strauss, the city is and must remain a "cave" of opinion, in contrast to philosophy's rise above all particular caves into the realm of fundamental problems. Aside from the life of the philosopher, there can be no synthesis of truth and life: modernity's nihilistic result evidences this.

Strauss's reading of Plato as the articulation of philosophy and as an openness to a Nature prior to modernity, has a rather ironic result. In the terms of the traditional, exoteric Plato of the "ideas", this view of Philosophy, far from being an escape from the cave of opinion (to say nothing of the cave below, the cave of modernity) is at best an escape from "images" to a zetetic or skeptical consideration of "things."⁵² Strauss's philosopher may have loosed his chains, but he remains wandering about the back of the cave. Precisely because for Strauss philosophy is never the attainment of knowledge, but remains searching among alternative teachings, among the permanent problems, there can never be a rise from opinion to knowledge. Certainly "images"--the pre-philosophic

⁴⁸ Strauss explores the figure of Socrates not only as he is presented by Plato, but also by Aristophanes and Xenophon. A good beginning point for gaining a sense of Strauss's view of Socrates in this wider context is "The Problem of Socrates: Five Lectures" in *CR*, 103-183.

⁴⁹ *WIPP*, 39-40.

⁵⁰ *CM*, 50-63

⁵¹ *CM*, 61-2.

⁵² See *Republic*, 509d-510b.

opinions of citizens, the phenomena--are resolved into teachings or fundamental alternatives. But because, for Strauss, philosophy is simply the movement between alternatives it can have no content which is not opinion. Thus it belongs to Strauss's vision of philosophy that all determinate thinking is dogmatic. Philosophy as zetetic points to the need for a movement beyond the cave, but Strauss declares dogmatically that this is unattainable. For Strauss the actual uniting of thinking and being in a realm beyond opinion remains impossible. This certainly prevents a rise to "metaphysics" and so leaves the phenomenological in its integrity, thus avoiding exposure to a Heideggerian critique of metaphysics. However, from a Platonic standpoint, what is remarkable is the capacity of the Straussian philosopher to resist the movement of the thinking of appearance (phenomena) to the thinking of the principle that is the reality of appearance. What explains this resistance to a rise to a thinking and being beyond appearance is that Strauss both assumes and requires of his Plato a thoroughly contemporary phenomenological concreteness. Strauss's ahistorical esoteric hermeneutic appears not so much as a respectful reading of philosophers of the past as they understood themselves, but more as the importing-into ancient texts of contemporary assumptions and concerns.⁵³ The permanent problems then seem to be thoroughly contemporary problems about the place of the good in the face of modern technological subjectivity.

Seen in these terms, Strauss's Platonism appears no longer as a bizarre reading of the *Dialogues*, but as a reflection on moral and political phenomenology that can readily be connected to considerations by thinkers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. While Strauss's position is neither existentialist nor Nietzschean in crucial aspects, nonetheless Strauss does emerge as a contributor to the contemporary phenomenological critique of modernity. Strauss's reading of Plato is rendered systematically distorting by too directly connecting a contemporary problematic to the Platonic texts. Yet, while Strauss's readings cannot be definitive, precisely because they are systematically distorting, they can provide a way into the reading of Plato in a Platonic manner.

⁵³ This is, of course, contrary to Strauss's intention: see "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy" *Social Research* 13:3 (1946) 326-67.