

## THE UNAVAILABILITY OF THE ORDINARY Strauss on the Philosophical Fate of Modernity

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*In Natural Right and History* Leo Strauss argues for the continuing “relevance” of the classical understanding of natural right. Since this relevance is not a matter of a direct return, or a renewed appreciation that a neglected doctrine is simply true, the meaning of this claim is somewhat elusive. But it is clear enough that the core of Strauss’s argument for that relevance is a claim about the relation between human experience and philosophy. Strauss argues that the classical understanding articulates and is continuous with the “lived experience” of engaged participants in political life, the ordinary, and he argues (in a way quite similar to claims in Heidegger) that such an ordinary or everyday point of view has been “lost.” The author presents here an interpretation and critique of such a claim.

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For Stanley Rosen

In *Natural Right and History* (NRH) Leo Strauss argues for the continuing “relevance” of the classical understanding of natural right. Since this relevance is not a matter of a direct return, or a renewed appreciation that a neglected doctrine is simply true, the meaning of this claim is somewhat elusive. But it is clear enough that the core of Strauss’s argument for that relevance is a claim about the relation between human experience and philosophy. Strauss argues that the classical understanding articulates and is

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continuous with the “lived experience” of engaged participants in political life. He appears to mean by this the everyday experience of choices, conflicts, and other human beings as these appear *from* the participant point of view, “within” some sort of horizon established by their various engagements and practical projects. In the modern world by contrast, he claims that we have manufactured a kind of artificial experience, have created by education and training over the course of time habits of heart and mind that have obscured and distorted how the human things originally make sense just as matters of praxis. Because of this we have been left disoriented and at a loss with respect to the basic questions about how to live that unavoidably appear within this participant point of view. This is the heart of our “crisis.”

This claim by Strauss raises important philosophical issues about the distinct nature of this “ordinary” human experience, the conditions of the possibility of an undistorted or original or genuinely human ordinary experience, how different interpretations of what it is might be adjudicated, and especially the nature of its *claim* on us in Strauss’s narrative. (We need, for example, some answer to the skeptical question: Who cares how the practical world feels to us or looks, what it is like for us to experience it? *That* ordinary world is as full of gods, angels, ghosts, wretched probability expectations, primitive fears, and banality as it is full of human meaning, right and wrong, high and low.) Strauss does not address these issues in a straightforward thematic way, but he does address them indirectly by constantly relying on implied answers to such questions, and his treatment will be the theme of these remarks.

It is a somewhat sprawling, complex theme, difficult to address economically. The issue of the relation between philosophy and experience, or how there might be a philosophical appreciation of “life as it is lived,” is arguably the central theme of all modern European philosophy since Hegel. And it is especially striking that in that tradition the theme is often raised with the same practical urgency as in Strauss. The attempt is to recover some everyday perspective that is said to have been, oddly, not only lost but missing (hard to find). The attempt often is to invoke a radically new sort of philosophy (or a way to avoid or end philosophy) in order to return to “life as it is really lived”; as if without such a reminder, we might become all too habituated to life lived in some inappropriate register, might live in some way out of scale, measuring and directing our lives disproportionately. We might even permanently “forget” what the human scale and measure are like. And the relevant figure or image is often this “remembering” what has been forgotten, and it shows up everywhere in characterizations of the task of modern philosophy. It resonates in Hegel’s claims about philosophy as partly a “phenomenology” of

experience; in Kierkegaard's remarks on *The Present Age*; in Nietzsche's insistence that we recover a capacity to look at science "from the point of view of life," rather than vice versa; in the popularity of *Lebensphilosophie* in the twentieth century (Dilthey, Simmel, Plessner, Bergson, Scheler, Hans Jonas); in Wittgenstein's assurance that ordinary language is alright, that the extraordinary character of philosophy is evidence of pathology; and in Heidegger's claims about the forgetting of the meaning of being. As Strauss himself puts it, "the problem of natural right is today a matter of recollection rather than actual knowledge."<sup>1</sup> It is a striking and somewhat underreported fact that *this* is the company Strauss keeps ("the friends of the lost, missing, but recoverable ordinary").

Obviously the central issue in such a contrast will be how to distinguish between a picture in which the everyday has been forgotten but is recoverable, layered over or screened behind artificial constructs and fantasies, and a picture in which there can be no such contrast, in which there are historically multiple (if sometimes continuous) everydays, not primordial and derivative experiences. The deepest and most comprehensive version of the latter picture is Hegel's and so involves the right way to understand what it means to tie philosophy, when understood as reflection on the meaning of human experience, to history, all as opposed to what I regard as this persistent dream of a lost (but findable) everyday, human experience of the human. But a number of preliminaries are necessary first.

### I. PHILOSOPHY AS ZEITDIAGNOSE

The idea of recovering or remembering presupposes some account of what was forgotten and why, how an ordinary experience came to be so layered over with such a distorting screen, and why that is so important. This means that a narrative and a diagnostic element must be central to a philosophical self-understanding, and it is important first to appreciate what is involved in ascribing such tasks to philosophy, especially since Strauss inherits some of these notions without explicit formulation.

Hegel of course was the first to claim that philosophy could take as its proper subject matter *historical* "actuality" ("*Wirklichkeit*"), and he went so far as to deny that philosophy was concerned with what it had traditionally taken itself to be about: the "ideal." That there might be a distinctly *philosophical* comprehension of the great swirl of events in actual human history has always seemed highly implausible to most philosophers.<sup>2</sup> For many, Hegel seems to be giving philosophy the implausible task of illuminating the

rational meaning of what he called in the *Phenomenology* the “shapes of spirit” (*Gestalten des Geistes*). It appears that he proposes to show in what sense a concrete, shared, historical form of life could be said to be a *rational outcome* of a prior collective experience, especially of the experience of something like a breakdown in a form of life, and that he intends to give philosophy thereby a kind of “diagnostic” and even narrative function. And all this in a way that particularly targets our *ideals* or *norms*; why some come to have the grip on us they do; why such a norm might lose such a grip. (Hegel treats these “breakdowns” in a form of life as constitutive of *Geist* itself, as in his famous remarks about the “life of Geist” not shying away from death, and Geist’s “tarrying with the negative.”<sup>3</sup> They are, rather, anomalies in Strauss, signs that something is going wrong, failing, and that is an important difference in their notions of diagnostic philosophy and reliance on narrative.) Hegel’s full claim about rational outcomes appeals to a practical, narrative, and collective or institutional rationality that is difficult to summarize economically. It involves not only the attempt, already extremely controversial, to identify a genuinely *common* form of life, shape of spirit, or *Weltanschauung*<sup>4</sup> but an appeal to some sort of trans-individual dimension of practical rationality. And, finally, the most contentious dispute here (and the one of most relevance to Strauss) concerns Hegel’s assessment of European modernization, his account of what it means that we live now so differently than before, and his telling us just what he thinks it does mean—that the realization of human freedom has entered a decisive (because decisively self-conscious) period.<sup>5</sup>

For many, all of this amounts to superficial, armchair sociology, not philosophy, and those same critics might complain that Hegel has a lot to answer for, a lot of bad, pseudo-philosophic profundity about historical actuality, about jazz, professional wrestling, and Disneyland, can be traced back to his extraordinary claim that philosophy is its own time comprehended in thought. But Hegel’s invention of this diagnostic role inaugurated a great deal more than café-society analysis. To come closer to some of Strauss’s assumptions, later thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger were certainly resolute anti-Hegelians, but they continued the attempt at a *philosophical Zeitdiagnose*, at reaching the proper diagnosis of what was happening to us in the later modern period. And their appeal too was to something like *philosophical* fate, not individual genius, the conditions of bourgeois economic life, or one damn thing after another. In a way that we have to think of as modeled on Hegel’s account, their claims had it that the most important thing to understand about the civilization of “the last man” was that it was philosophy itself that had failed (“for life”), had now become a thing of the past, had died,

and that with this death, the aspirations of enlightenment since Socrates died as well, ceased to have a grip, to be a genuine, possible aspiration. In fact, they claimed, the “lived-out” consequences of such aspirations could *now* be seen to have amounted to a kind of “nihilism,” whether in the sense Nietzsche cared about (no possible distinction between noble and base)<sup>6</sup> or the version that Heidegger cared about: the forgetting of the question of the meaning of being.

Two brief qualifications are now needed on such appeals to the causality of philosophical fate, as introduced thus far, before turning again to Strauss’s claims.

First, such appeals to philosophical fate in these latter Nietzschean and Heideggerean cases (and Strauss’s) obviously involve a much more *restricted* sense of institutional rationality than Hegel claims. This is the limited sense in which one could be said to have reasons for what one does, even if the overall goal to be achieved might be in some broader sense irrational. One might, for example, have very good reasons for a revenge murder if one is a member of a Sicilian mafia clan.<sup>7</sup> It would indeed be clearly irrational to be a member of such a clan and not plot such revenge. But, one might argue, there are no good prudential or moral reasons to participate in such an institution, and the objective structure and rules of the institution might also be in themselves irrational. Analogously, Nietzsche and Heidegger obviously do not share Hegel’s view that the institutions of bourgeois society are in themselves rational (that is, can be viewed as rational outcomes in a putative civilizational struggle for self-knowledge). They therefore deny that subjects have, in the broadest sense, good reasons to participate. But Nietzsche does argue that “last man” civilization is a rational or rationally inevitable outcome of the original ideals of Christian morality and Socraticism and that we learn something essential about moral ideals by understanding such a development. And Heidegger attributes an enormous range of later ideas and phenomena to Plato and the development of Platonic metaphysics, everything from Cartesian philosophy to the *Ge-stell* of the technological worldview. All these are for them in some sense rational outcomes, and they play a central role in how both philosophers want us to understand “the spiritual situation of the age.”

Second, Hegel famously does not believe that such a philosophical comprehension of the significance of ordinary normative life is ever able to play a significant role itself in the debates and interpretations that make up that life. Philosophy “comes on the scene too late”<sup>8</sup> and is more like a “priestly sect” than a partisan participant.<sup>9</sup>

## II. STRAUSS'S ZEITDIAGNOSE

We need all these controversial notions of distinct historical epochs; a distinctly philosophical diagnosis of an epoch, of philosophical fate; and this broader and more restricted sense of historical rationality all to understand the famous claims by Leo Strauss in *NRH* and in other texts (1) that it was *modern* European philosophy that was “in crisis,” not philosophy as such (the diagnostic claim); (2) that, given its premises, modern philosophy could not but be in such a crisis eventually (here the clear “causality of fate” claim); and (3) that we could recover to some extent, could “remember,” what had been lost (forgotten) in the modern rush to embrace the new ideals of power and security and happiness. (That is, a rational development of modern premises is restricted to the assumption *of those premises*, and these premises can be avoided. What modern philosophers have “good reasons” (qua moderns) to believe and do may not be good reasons, all things considered.)<sup>10</sup> Set in context, that is, Strauss, especially in *NRH*, is clearly carrying on the kind of diagnostic goal given to philosophy by Hegel. Strauss's accounts of modern relativism, nihilism, and historicism are not sociocultural or historical explanations. His account is also an account of the philosophical fate of ideas, and he assumes that philosophical commitments have historical, social, and not just intellectual implications. He clearly assumes that some of those historical implications are relevant to understanding the meaning of those commitments and are relevant to assessing them. A good deal of the account in *NRH* is narrative, in other words (in the words of Susan Shell, “who or what killed natural right and can it be revived?”<sup>11</sup>), and the main structure of such Straussonian narratives consists in various “slippery slope” claims. Hobbes or Rousseau or Kant may have understood their positions in a certain way, as defenses of the objectivity of certain important values, say, but they did not appreciate the implications of their positions, many of which were made clearer much later (could only have been made much clearer later?) by the likes of, especially, Nietzsche. We hear from Strauss an allusion to Nietzsche, and also to Heidegger, in the claim that

modern thought reaches its culmination, its highest self-consciousness, in the most radical historicism, i.e., in explicitly condemning to oblivion the notion of eternity.<sup>12</sup>

That thought could reach in historical time a culmination, that that culmination should be a kind of self-consciousness, together with the implication that we needed to experience this culmination before we could understand properly what modern thought involved all sound unmistakable Hegelian notes.<sup>13</sup> So, even though the following might sound odd to attribute to a man

who wrote, “the delusions of communism are already the delusions of Hegel and even of Kant,”<sup>14</sup> it nevertheless seems fair, if we assume that Strauss believes that philosophy can take some philosophical bearing from historical actuality, to claim that he looks sort of like a middle-of-the-road Hegelian. That is, he stands “in between” Hegel’s full embrace of post-Kantian philosophy and bourgeois modernity as historically rational and the Nietzschean and Heideggerean claim that such a historical world is in the midst of a nihilism crisis that is the historically rational, if catastrophic, outcome of all post-Socratic philosophy (according to Nietzsche) or all post-Platonic philosophy (according to Heidegger).<sup>15</sup> (If we take our bearings from Hegel’s claim that philosophy is “the farthest thing possible” from an attempt to instruct the state about what it ought to be,<sup>16</sup> then we can also note Strauss’s Hegelian intuitions by saying of Hegel what Strauss said approvingly of Burke: that what looks like “the discovery of History” is really a “return to the traditional view of the essential limitations of theory.”<sup>17</sup>) In final summation then, according to Strauss: there is a modern crisis (this, the anti-Hegel bit); it is due to philosophical assumptions and their inevitable fate (the Hegelian bit); but it is an avoidable consequence of modern philosophy, not philosophy as such (the anti-Nietzsche/Heidegger bit).

Finally we should note that Strauss’s approach ties philosophy itself to a historical fate even more tightly than Hegel’s, for whom philosophy is “its time comprehended in thought,” and so in some way an expression of that time, of what has already gone on, not an independent *explicans*. For Strauss, on the other hand, a historical time can be viewed as philosophy expressed in action.

### III. THE RECOVERY OF THE ORDINARY

We reach now the main topic I want to concentrate on. Strauss himself has a complex version of his own diagnostic claim. First he has a distinct way of describing such a crisis and of suggesting an escape: the crisis of natural right provokes an attempt to recover in some way what has been so greatly blurred—“the evidence of those simple experiences of right and wrong which are at the bottom of the philosophical contention that there is natural right.”<sup>18</sup> In order to make this claim, Strauss needs to defend a typical assertion in *NRH*: “It was taken for granted [in modernity] that it [the experience of history] is a genuine experience and not a questionable interpretation of experience.”<sup>19</sup> Strauss obviously thinks it *is* “questionable,” but there is an enormous amount involved in the claim that persons in the modern world regularly misunderstand their own experience when they understand it as

essentially historical, that, especially, their experience of the historically artificial and so mutable is not really an experience of the historically artificial and so mutable. (This would have to be the case if there is *natural* right, and if the best reason for believing this is that it is ineliminable in any genuinely human experience.) But this distinction is very difficult to state properly because Strauss is not engaged in a metaphysics of nature or any account of how there could be historically immutable value properties in reality, and he proposes no epistemology that would demonstrate permanently possible, presumably noetic access to such properties. In effect, natural right *is*, is wholly constituted by, the natural-right-experience. But on this model, *experiencing* one's social and political world as historical is also *all there can be* to such a world *being* historical. But Strauss must be claiming that modern experience can present us both with intimations of the naturalness of distinctions of right as well as, somehow, contravening experiences.

The way Strauss formulates his claim about a historical crisis is deceptively simple in itself. Strauss could, after all, simply have written books about the claims of Greek and British, French and German political philosophers, offering interpretations and assessments in the usual way of a professional philosopher in a modern university (most of whom after all hardly suffer from a historicism sickness. Most contemporary philosophers tend to treat every text as a journal article written yesterday.) There are contemporary philosophers in ethics who consider themselves Aristotelian but have nothing invested in Aristotle being "ancient"; many in the philosophy of mathematics or set theory or ethics again consider themselves Platonists about abstract objects or Platonic realists about moral properties, for whom, likewise, the ancients-moderns issue is irrelevant.

Moreover, the manifestations of a moral crisis, if there is one, might have little to do with philosophy and philosophical fate. Such a supposed modern unwillingness or inability to make and sustain ethical discriminations<sup>20</sup> might be an event with various social and economic causes, or might perhaps be due to human frailty, ignorance, fear, and irrationality. The history of political philosophy might just be irrelevant to all that. Said the other way around, there may be a serious crisis in the philosophical understanding of natural right, but the body politic might go on its merry way, unaffected and uninterested, pretty much secure in a robust (but deluded) realist or religious conviction about ethical life. To *philosophize* in the light of the "crisis of *modern* natural right" is already to have required, for philosophical reflection, an epochal "antiquity," a historical other. It is to have suggested that our understanding of classical natural right is in some philosophical sense (i.e., with respect to its meaning) a function now of its alternative historical status, its

premodernity. This is almost but not quite a historicist premise in Strauss's account, as Stanley Rosen has pointed out.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, Strauss argues that the "twin sisters" of a relativist historicism and a value-free scientism must be understood as themselves modifications of a prescientific, natural, or ordinary "human experience of the human," upon which such enterprises still depend for their ultimate sense or point. However, he also suggests in various places that the scientific and historicist worldviews have become so intertwined with experience in daily life that no phenomenology or method or call to arms or simple appeal to experience can retrieve such experiences in the modern world. (This is another tremendous concession to the power of "the experience of history."<sup>22</sup>) As he puts in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, we are "trapped" in some region of ignorance even deeper and darker than those in which the famous Platonic cave prisoners must sit. Because of what our everyday experience has literally become, we are now trapped "below" the cave.<sup>23</sup>

And this all prompts Strauss's third foundational claim (together with his reliance on some claim about the causality of fate, and about the "loss" of the ordinary). *Only*, he often insists, a consideration of classical Greek political thought, which, besides being philosophy, also articulates the ordinary experience accessible *before* the modern distortion, can call such an alternative fully to mind—can call to mind the ordinary way in which things make a human sense, especially the simple experiences of right and wrong.

So the claim is that all of our ordinary experience is so intertwined with and oriented from scientific principles, a disenchanting worldview, a robust sense of individualism, an acceptance of rapid and basic historical change, and so forth that it would be naïve and pointless to tilt at these windmills, to rant that this is all some vast mistake. "Our" world, at its most intimately experienced levels, in its most coherent and typical manifestations, does *not* have in it, is not experienced as having any longer, ghosts, witches, angels, interceding saints, or immaterial souls, but it also, just as honestly experienced, does not "point us" any longer to any realm of being higher than the human, or an ordered cosmos within which man has a place, nor does it make available any longer "the evidence of those simple experiences of right and wrong which are at the bottom of the philosophical contention that there is natural right."<sup>24</sup> (At least, such evidence has become very badly "blurred.") This again is the point of tension between Strauss's claims that the modern experience of history is both a "misunderstanding" and that that misunderstanding *is* genuinely new, a deep feature *of* our experience. (There is also an echo here and in many other places in Strauss of Nietzsche's claim that, paradoxically, the most important and disturbing *manifestation* of modern nihil-

ism is the absence of any *experience* of such a crisis.) To his credit, Strauss does not shy away from the magnitude of the problem created by this unusual situation.

On the one hand, as his various “slippery slope” arguments suggest, this situation may be said to have created a context in which human life is not coherently livable. We need to distinguish better from worse in a way not a function of our simple preferences; we cannot in such a world and so experience a great “need” for a modern doctrine of natural right. On the other hand, “A wish is not a fact.” And, (in my favorite Strauss quotation)

even by proving that a certain view is indispensable in living well, one merely proves that the view in question is a salutary myth: one does not prove it to be true. Utility and truth are two entirely different things.<sup>25</sup>

And he goes farther. The classical natural right doctrine we “need” so badly seems to many to require a teleological view of nature, a view that has been discredited by modern natural science, the most rigorous and authoritative body of knowledge we have available to us. This would seem to require a dualism, a nonteleological science of the universe and in some way a different, teleological “science of man.” Strauss considers this the Thomistic solution but he clearly rejects it, boldly insisting, “An adequate solution to the problem of natural right cannot be found before this basic problem has been solved,”<sup>26</sup> unmistakably implying that it has not yet and appearing to promise that he will solve it, in the book to follow. (In these terms, at least, he does not, but he does make clear that the “ordinary” he will appeal to, the human experience of the human, since it is not itself based on a theory, is in fact the original touchstone necessary for theorizing to have any point, avoids reliance on an antiquated cosmology, and does not resurrect teleological science since it is itself not a product or object of any sort of science. Hence again the enormous importance of this sort of appeal to experience.<sup>27</sup>)

The strategy proposed in *NRH* returns us to the issue touched on before: the appeal to a more original, less distorted experience of the human things as such, as human, not as artificially constructed through the lens of some theory. In a word, that word that has circulated so much in twentieth-century thought; in Husserl on the life-world; in Heidegger on pre-predicative experience, being-in-the-world, and the everyday; in the later Wittgenstein, Austin, Cavell (and through Cavell’s insistence, found anew in Emerson and Thoreau); and recently in two books by Stanley Rosen: an appeal to “the ordinary” as a way of bypassing, avoiding, not refuting the supposedly reductionist, skeptical, disenchanting, enervating trajectory of modern naturalism.

#### IV. ANCIENT TEXTS AND NATURAL ATTITUDES

There are several passages from any number of books that could be cited where Strauss invokes his own notion of the ordinary or prescientific. Perhaps the clearest and broadest is from *NRH*, so I'll quote from it at length. After noting that it was in the nineteenth century when it first became obvious that a "drastic" distinction must now be made between the "scientific" understanding and the "natural" understanding (the different way things make sense *in* "the world in which we live"), Strauss makes a general remark that is positively redolent of Heidegger.

The natural world, the world in which we live and act, is not the object or the product of a theoretical attitude; it is not a world of mere objects at which we detachedly look, but of "things" or "affairs" which we handle.<sup>28</sup>

He then goes on to make an extraordinarily sweeping claim.

Yet as long as we identify the natural or prescientific world with the world in which *we* live, we are dealing with an abstraction. The world in which we live is already a product of science, or at any rate it is profoundly affected by the existence of science. . . . To grasp the natural world as a world that is radically prescientific or prephilosophic, one has to go back behind the first emergence of science or philosophy. It is not necessary for this purpose to engage in extensive and necessarily hypothetical anthropological studies. The information that classical philosophy supplies about its origins suffices, especially if that information is supplemented by consideration of the most elementary premises of the Bible, for reconstructing the essential character of "the natural world." By using that information, so supplemented, one would be able to understand the origin of the idea of natural right.<sup>29</sup>

There is a historical claim in this passage, the scope and importance of which are unclear. In the Introduction to *The City and Man* Strauss insists that the "scientific understanding" depends on and is secondary to the "pre-scientific understanding." It is "dependent" because it assumes for its own meaning (presumably its point, purpose, or importance) what is here called "the common sense view of political things," understood as "the understanding of political things which belongs to political life," or "the citizen's understanding of political things."<sup>30</sup> This is the distinction on which he bases another major claim in *What Is Political Philosophy*.

In all later epochs [later than the classical], the philosopher's study of political things was mediated by a tradition of political philosophy which acted like a screen between the philosopher and political things, regardless of whether the individual philosopher cherished or rejected that tradition. From this it follows that the classical philosophers see the political things with a freshness and directness which have never been equaled. They look at

political things in the perspective of the enlightened citizens or statesmen. They see things clearly which the enlightened citizens or statesmen do not see clearly, or do not see at all. But this has no other reason but the fact that they look farther afield in the same direction as the enlightened citizen or statesman. They do not look at political things from the outside, as spectators of political life.<sup>31</sup>

I want eventually to claim that this disjunction—“inside” the natural attitude and so originally undistorted by theory, theoretical skepticism, or scientific attitude or, on the other hand, a perspective “outside” and distorting and artificially “screening” such experiences—is not exhaustive or persuasive. But this “screen” theory already seems far too historicist for Strauss’s own purposes. If there is such a screen that decisively prohibits our ability now to appreciate or even to imagine successfully the point of view of the participant-citizen, there is no reason given to believe that the insights of classical texts won’t be just as “screened” for us in just the same way as the political things themselves, no reason we won’t be bound to treat them as early versions of us, the spectator social scientists. And Strauss nowhere argues that the idiosyncrasies of Greek accounts of political life, the application of unusual terms like *kalos*, the *polis*, the gods, and so forth, are not likewise also “screens,” mediations like Athenian or Cretan or Spartan. He nowhere shows that they should rather count as expressive of an original experience. Not to mention that Strauss himself in some contexts seems to suggest that this putative historical distortion is irrelevant in the face of the “simple experiences of right and wrong” captured in the two epigrams that begin *NRH*. The citations seem to be saying, contrary to what seems the thesis of the book, that even without the recovery of ancient texts, it is manifestly obvious that the rich man’s deed is an evil one and that Naboth is virtuous in resisting the temptations of self-interest, and in keeping faith with the Lord. But if we don’t need the classical renaissance that Strauss encourages, what is the point of *NRH*? (Strauss’s acroamatic teaching could be that it is the very appearance of self-sufficiency and obviousness in these passages that evinces the darker side or limitations of the natural attitude, with its corresponding presupposition that philosophy is dangerous and corrupting and, perhaps worst of all, unnecessary. Strauss claims that “striving for knowledge of the eternal truth is the ultimate end of man” and therefore that “justice and moral virtue can be fully legitimated *only* by the fact that they are required for the sake of that ultimate end, or that they are the conditions of the philosophic life.”<sup>32</sup> But none of this has anything to do with how we “ordinarily” recoil from the act of the rich man, or affirm Naboth’s fidelity to the law. Strauss, like Plato, never forgets that it was in the name of *ordinary* piety that Socrates was executed. This means that Strauss is obviously aware that he is playing a dangerous double game, calling for a recollection of a form of life potentially quite hostile to

philosophy, *the* human perfection. Or such ordinary experience is both the natural home of natural right and, paradoxically, a cave. And, adding to the perplexity, Plato's cave image does not suggest any natural way out or internal dialectic from the cave to enlightenment—just the opposite.<sup>33</sup> These would all obviously be topics for several additional essays.)

Also, it may be that it is just here that the relevance of Straussean hermeneutics is so crucial, that we must understand the “forgotten” art of writing in order to engage in this recovery properly and avoid the objection just stated. This would also be a large and independent topic, but the central difficulty in such an appeal is obvious. On Strauss's premises, the same problems would arise in our being able to recover such an art, as in recovering what we putatively need the art to recover.

#### V. ADDRESSING DECENT MEN

We are now in a position to contrast the competing diagnostic claims: on the one hand, we have the claim that modern culture, let us say, in its practices, politics, assumptions, natural science, skepticism, denial of transcendence, is rational, the realization of the philosophical fate of humanity. Since I share Strauss's skepticism that this realization could be a matter simply of the application of a methodology, I have been treating such a claim as paradigmatically presented in Hegel's account of historical rationality, that modern culture should be treated as a rational outcome of the experienced insufficiencies, even tragic failings, of premodern forms of life. This means exactly what it seems to mean in Hegel: a great subordination of the roles of art and religion in modern life (they both have become essentially “things of the past”) and a defense of what Hegel himself frequently calls the “prosaic” character of modern bourgeois life, the unheroic life of nuclear families, civil society, market economies, and representational democracies. Modernity is our unavoidable philosophical fate, and its fate is, at least in essentials, the rational realization of freedom.

Although this is not the “historicist” experience directly treated by Strauss, even the Hegelian invocation of reason would not allow escape from the accusation that such a putative “rationalization” of social and political life in modernity is another distortion of and distance from the ordinary experiences without which the practically necessary appeal to natural right fails.

On the other hand, there is the “screen” or distortion claim of Strauss (and Heidegger) that paradigmatic modern experiences and assumptions arise from, depend essentially on, artificial human constructs that block any genuinely human, original, natural, participant experience of the human. A typi-

cally modern experience (presumably the sort described in modern novels and drama and poetry, as well as in philosophy) is already the expression of a misunderstanding, a distortion of something more original, fundamental, and genuinely revelatory—the experience of distinctions of value (or of being *qua* being in Heidegger’s narrative). Over and over again Strauss insists that this latter ordinary experience of value is the true basis of the claim of natural right, an intuitive sense of nobility and baseness, high and low, right and wrong that modern philosophy can claim does not exist because modern philosophy has systematically covered it over.

At this point, however, we are prevented from investigating any further such an appeal to prereflective, ordinary lived experience as a *philosophical claim* by the following qualification that Strauss makes in his essay “On Classical Political Philosophy.” After noting that classical political philosophy “started from the moral distinctions as they are made in everyday life,”<sup>34</sup> he there introduces a crucial limitation in any philosophical expectations of classical political philosophy. Such a philosophy, he notes, “limited itself to addressing men who, because of their natural inclinations as well as their upbringing, took those distinctions for granted.” Or “the political teaching of the classical philosophers, as distinguished from their theoretical teaching, was primarily addressed not to all intelligent men, but to all decent men.”<sup>35</sup>

Now Strauss goes on in this essay to admit that once a genuine philosopher enters the inevitable debate about value that common opinion gives rise to, his response will look finally “absurd” or “ridiculous,” because he will come to realize and to claim that “the ultimate aim of political life cannot be reached by political life, but only by a life devoted to contemplation, to philosophy.”<sup>36</sup> But these original limitations on any philosophical treatment of value—limitations already visible in Strauss’s parsing of “political philosophy” not as philosophy about the political things but as about the political mission of philosophy—in effect slam the door on any further philosophical treatment of the debate posed above: “modernity (i.e., understood as what is reflected in basic, orienting experiences of the human world) as rational” versus such modern experience as “distorting.” For Strauss is conceding that these putatively original, fundamental experiences of noble/base distinctions and the like require specific conditions that cannot themselves be the subject of philosophical debate and are certainly not results of philosophically informed political action. These conditions are natural and social (matters of “upbringing”), and one can authoritatively *claim* that they are the true and proper conditions only if one already takes one’s bearings from the “simple” or “natural” experiences that are prior to and so the conditions of any further philosophical reflection on value. Without the natural dispositions and upbringing, one will not be able to appreciate such distinctions, and the whole point

of Strauss's treatment of classical natural right has been to show that these distinctions cannot be regarded as conclusions of a systematic philosophical account or deduction or policy. You either see it or you don't, and if you don't, there is no way of "arguing you into seeing it," part of the indirect point, presumably, of the so-called "Socratic" and aporetic dialogues.<sup>37</sup>

This last is in some sense a valuable, true point, and I don't want to dispute it. But we should note first that it was precisely this awareness—that our ethical life is woven deeply and in microscopic detail into the web of our lives as a whole and is not a matter of "isolatable" obligation to law or a coordination problem among egoists, or even responsive directly to philosophical critique—that began the so-called "conservative" reaction to revolutionary politics that, according to Strauss, terminated catastrophically in Hegelian historicism. All we need add to generate that sort of historicist conclusion is something Strauss obviously also accepts, that such dispositions and social conditions change, and add that they change radically, on matters as fundamental as what it is to be a man or a woman, slavery, child labor, and so forth. That claim, together with the denial earlier that the ancient Greek version of such prereflective conditions has any privileged status, will locate such original and all-important bases for moral life in time, and in time essentially, and that will make Strauss's case for, as opposed to his analysis of, the claims of classical natural right fairly weak.

Moreover, since Strauss is admitting that identifying those who have or can have this natural experience establishes nothing philosophically, merely classifies those who already experience the world in these terms and distinguishes those who do not (and given their upbringing, most likely cannot), what sort of answer is being provided to those who might admit the existential need of natural right but who are not aided in realizing such a need by being pointed to a community in which such a need was, luckily for them, satisfied? Most of *NRH* tries to establish the disorienting, crisis-like, even nihilistic consequences of the modern rejection of natural right. That is supposed to be the philosophical or rational fate of such a rejection. But that just all may *be* our fate. For the reasons just discussed, that just establishes such a need, and these invocations of ancient Greek experience cannot serve as the answer to Strauss's wise remark about truth quoted earlier. It is worth recalling.

Even by proving that a certain view is indispensable in living well, one merely proves that the view in question is a salutary myth: one does not prove it to be true. Utility and truth are two entirely different things.<sup>38</sup>

And we should be clear here about the complexity of Strauss's position, a complexity that his "screen" metaphors can often disguise. He is not saying

that Greek political experience was in some way in direct contact with human nature, the ideas of the virtues and so forth, and so the record of such experience in classical political philosophy can guide us back to those originals. The language of metaphysical originals and less than real images is wholly out of place here. (For one thing, there is no idea of the human soul, no idea of eros. There *is* only experience as a touchstone here.)

Let me put it another way. It is clear enough from much of what Strauss writes, especially about the Platonic ideas, that he regards an engagement with certain fundamental problems as unavoidable in any worthy human life, that he regards those problems as permanent and coeval with human thought itself, and that the absence of such engagement in much modern thought and even modern experience is not proof against this claim. This is why the image of forgetting is so important; it allows him to say that such nonpresence does not require re-creation (perhaps arbitrarily and just as a response to a need) but remembering. It also explains some of the attraction of at least Heidegger's way of framing the issues, because it is obviously a consequence of Strauss's "coeval" claim that he must say, with Heidegger, that we are not, or not yet again, "thinking."

#### VI. THE NATURAL ATTITUDE AS THE "WAY OF DESPAIR"

I have been suggesting that the claim about "original" and "distortion" is very difficult to defend with any consistency. The attempt at such a distinction has raised a number of questions about Strauss's position, which I summarize here in the simplest terms possible.

1. If natural right is *constituted* by a certain sort of experience, and if that experience has been lost or forgotten, what status can the claim of natural right possibly have now?<sup>39</sup>
2. If the epigrams in *NRH* call to any reader's mind the "simple experiences" of right and wrong that form the starting point of classical political thought, why do we need such a complex historical recovery?
3. Why should we be struggling to get from one cave to another? Why recover the ordinary if the ordinary looks as it does in Plato's *Republic*? Are there better and worse caves? Isn't one sort of darkness like any other sort?
4. If we, as moderns, are now "screened" from ordinary experience, why wouldn't we be just as "screened" from any deep understanding of the texts that manifest and analyze such experience?
5. It appears (with Strauss's remarks about "decent men") that the only persons who could appreciate the recovered experience are just those who don't need to. What would then be the point of the recovery?

These all amount to internal problems suggested by tensions in Strauss's texts. I turn in conclusion to what I take to be the main substantial, philosophical obstacle to recovering or to being able to trust any such putative original experience. This objection is based on sweeping theoretical claims inaugurated by Kant and Hegel. In Hegel's language, modern life has itself become thoroughly "reflective," the first part of what he means in claiming that it is becoming potentially "rational." We assume the roles we occupy, respond to moral claims as we do, in a way now much more self-consciously aware of it being our way, among other possible ways. Such roles are *assumed* not just *inhabited*, and since we are aware that they are not roles shared by other times and places, we understand that the authority and legitimacy claims inherent in such roles require some justification beyond their *being* our way. To put the point in another way: an enduring, continuous human life is not an event or occurrence, a happening, like others. Lives don't just happen; they must be actively led, steered, guided, we now for the first time fully appreciate. A subject must not only "take up the reins" of a life in order to do this but must do so continuously, and with an eye toward the unity and integration without which lives cannot be coherently led. Where there is such unity and integration, it is a result of our work, and not a discovery of an underlying human nature. Moreover, leading a life in this way is reflexive because it always involves actively taking a point of view or stand on some relevant event or person or state in the world, and this in an always challengeable and potentially revisable way. If this were not so, any "ordinary" point of view could not be said to be *ours*, to be something for which we were responsible, which we had to "stand behind." (We would not then merit the respect we are entitled to as responsible subjects.) After the Kantian turn, all human experience had to be understood as essentially a judging, a *result*, a holding to be true, a claim to which I commit myself, am not committed to otherwise, for which I implicitly pledge a defense, and so forth. In the much more radical (Kierkegaardian) language developed by Heidegger and Sartre to make this point, one *is* a subject (does not flee such an unavoidable self-responsible stance in bad faith or inauthenticity) only by not simply *being* a subject or *being* an anything, even while one is not some free-floating mere possibility, not nothing at all.

It is this reflective character of experience that made all ordinary experience forever afterwards seem extraordinarily suffused with what Hegel called "negativity" (an activity or even one's own self possibly not-being what it seemed), a question for further questions, rather than an unexplained explainer. In Hegel's *Phenomenology* language, "consciousness, however, is explicitly the concept (Begriff) of itself"<sup>40</sup> and just therein "the pathway of

doubt . . . the way of despair." That is, "consciousness goes beyond limits, and since these limits are its own, it is something that goes beyond itself. . . . Thus consciousness suffers this violence at its own hands; it spoils its own limited satisfaction."<sup>41</sup> The only way such dimensions of experience could possibly be avoided would be by a kind of "active forgetting" (which Nietzsche once recommended as a cure for modern homesickness), and not by a remembering of more innocent (or "natural" or undistorted, unscreened) times. (Or, in a claim Hegel shares with Rousseau and Kant, we must lose this naturalness in order to reclaim a form of the everyday as our own. The fall is the greatest human boon, and while a distinctly human existence is a self-inflicted "wound," it is a wound that we can heal, even "without scars."<sup>42</sup>)

In saying this, it must be stressed that Hegel, like Strauss (for that matter, like Burke, like Oakeshott, like Heidegger, like Gadamer, like Wittgenstein, like Cavell, like Bernard Williams), rejects the idea of a philosophical enlightenment of and so intervention in the ordinary way of going on, and none of these "friends of the ordinary" think that the everyday can be appealed to as a ground, or truth-maker, as a component in an *argument* about anything. That would be to miss the whole point.<sup>43</sup> And indeed on one reading of Strauss, to appreciate the genuinely pretheoretical experience is to be able again to appreciate it as a cave, precisely as unenlightenable, and this renewed appreciation would be wholly philosophic, would not involve any change in our ways of going on.

But Hegel is stressing something that many in this club do not: that the ordinary ordinarily tears itself apart, that whole forms of life come to fail catastrophically, fail to sustain allegiance, can come to seem alien, to lose meaning, often as a result of the skepticism, alienation, the interweaving of self-consciousness, even "everyday" aspects of reflection, all present in everyday sensibilities, and so forth. Hegel is not willing to write off so much of that "tearing apart" as something like a storm or other disturbance. (As the quotations above indicate, he thinks it is something we do to ourselves, and this purposively, rather than merely suffer.) He wants to know if such breaking down and rebuilding make any kind of sense, not, he admits, in and for a life but, as he often says, "after" it, for the "priestly sect" of philosophers. At the simplest and so most misleading level, we can see a clash of images in these accounts of failure and rebuilding: one, Hegel's, invoking some greater self-consciousness and explicitness about our normative "self-legislation," and other, Strauss's, invoking a transformed Heideggerian figure, forgetting, forgetting especially the genuinely human scale and thereby subject to various slippery slopes and dangerous blind spots once a skepticism about and dissatisfaction with ordinary, always available, prudential wisdom seizes the imagination of the West. (We "tear ourselves apart" for Strauss, too, in other

words, but because we in essence don't know what we're doing, not, as in Hegel, because more and more gradually, we do.)

This is much too large a topic to allow any persuasive defense, but I am trying to stress that the issue at stake does not turn on something as obvious as the great varieties of very different, incompatible historical experiences, something taken for granted by intelligent commentators at least since Herodotus. The Hegelian claim at issue—that the transition in the Western language (and “experience”) of self-understanding from roughly “soul” to the “self,” or a distinct subject of experience that *cannot* be understood as an object of any sort—seems to capture a wholly different experience of ourselves, not anticipated in antiquity and one that casts doubt on any general appeal to the ancient ordinary. (Any pretheoretical experience would be prereflexive and if so not ours, not attributable in the relevant sense to us.)

This idea that consciousness could be in some sort of constant “negative relation to itself” helps us conceptualize a wide panoply of phenomenological data characteristic of the distinctness of modernity and visible in much modern philosophy and literature, not to mention media like film. (The experience in question is also very different from the “Socratic” sense that many of our beliefs might be false. It is closer to the slow realization that there is nothing in the world that makes our beliefs about “oughts” or norms true, that sustaining a commitment does not look like finding such a truth-maker, even while we cannot give up such normative bindingness.) The nature of a free life could be reformulated on such an understanding, could be said now not to consist in substantive knowledge of the eternal and the proper human place within it, or in a spontaneous causal power, but in the proper, new sort of relation to oneself, something that must be achieved and, according to Hegel, only in relation to others.

This is, in my view, the real philosophical issue at stake in what Strauss calls the “second wave” or Rousseauian stage of modernity (although it is never discussed in these terms, as the problem of autonomy, by Strauss),<sup>44</sup> and it involves the most ambitious philosophical claim of all modernity: that the source of all normative necessity is self-legislating spontaneity or freedom, a claim that presumes the negative or reflective notion of subjectivity that we discussed above. A treatment of this question would be necessary before we could know an answer to a very important question (an answer to what would be Strauss's obvious skepticism): whether this emphasis on self-legislation, with this emphasis on self-authoring, could preserve a robust notion of *law*, “real” normative force, or whether we have begun another slippery slope, from spontaneity to the creative imagination to the will to power to resolute deciding.<sup>45</sup> (And in Platonic terms, the most difficult question would arise: whether, at the most fundamental level, human eros, a yearning

for completeness and totality, for some “ultimate” sense, for what Strauss calls “eternity,” could be said to be satisfied by such a human, self-legislating whole. And what follows if it is not?)

In these terms, the question of whether some fundamental element of the modern philosophical tradition is fated—philosophically fated—for a nihilistic culmination is only directly addressed if we can formulate a response to this question about the relation between spontaneity and law, rational freedom and normative necessity. This is the doctrine that in post-Kantian Idealism that renders unavailable the ordinary as normatively sufficient. The ordinary, like everything else in human experience, is, in Sellar’s famous phrase, “fraught with ought,” and there are no original, natural oughts; they are always, in the language developed here, results, commitments. In Hegel’s language, such experience is always a manifestation of the “labor of the Concept,” more an epiphenomena of such work than an “original basis for assessing.” This is the heart of the claim that there is no *prereflective* or natural human experience of the human; there is rather only the *implicitly reflective*, already “negative,” not yet fully explicitly reflective human experience, if it is to count as human.<sup>46</sup> The counter-Straussean claim is that even the most ordinary of lives has to be understood as a complex of commitments, not mere habits of heart and mind, and that on the modern understanding of freedom (or the post-Kantian) these must ultimately be redeemable by reason in some way for them to be ours, for us to be able to stand behind them, even for them to count for us as significant.

If it is true that we cannot be said to inhabit, embody, be wholly absorbed in a natural attitude but that such an attitude is even “originally” reflexive and thereby self-negating, always potentially destabilized and disorienting, then philosophers do not either “look farther afield in the same direction as the enlightened citizen or statesman” by also inhabiting and extending the participant point of view *or* stand outside the practical world and explain its motions from a third-person point of view. Philosophy should rather be understood as rendering explicit the original *self*-transformation of the natural attitude into what it always is, implicitly: more than natural by being a *second* nature—therefore, itself by being “beyond itself.” Strauss claimed that classical political philosophers did “not look at political things from the outside, as spectators of political life,”<sup>47</sup> in the way that, he charges, all modern political philosophy did. I have been trying to suggest that this is not an exhaustive disjunction when applied to certain strains of modern philosophy, but this for an unusual reason. From the point of view I have been trying to suggest, there is no such “outside vs. inside” duality. Or said in Hegel’s dialectical way, everything inside always already has *its own* “outside.” And, perhaps more importantly for the spectator, theoretical attitude that Strauss is

worried about: vice versa. Every “outside” already has its “inside,” is an expression of a form of life, a “shape of spirit.” Philosophy is, and is nothing but, its own time comprehended in thought.

### NOTES

1. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History (NRH)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 7. Other Strauss texts referred to, and their abbreviations: “Correspondence Concerning Modernity” (“CCM”), translated by Susanne Klein and George Tucker, *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1983): 105-19; *The City and Man (CM)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); “On Classical Political Philosophy” (“OCP”), in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss (RCP)*, edited by Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 49-62; *On Tyranny (OT)*, edited by Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (New York: Free Press, 1991); *Persecution and the Art of Writing (PAW)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); “Political Philosophy and History” (“PPH”), in *What Is Political Philosophy (WIPP)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 56-77; and *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion (SCR)*, translated by E. M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

2. “PPH,” 56, for Strauss’s formulation. Perhaps the first expression of such skepticism is Aristotle’s claim in his *Poetics* that poetry is more philosophical than history, able to present broad human problems and general types since not tied to unrepeatable events and unique particulars.

3. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 19.

4. Montesquieu’s term of art was the “spirit of laws.” Strauss’ word is mostly “regime,” which he identifies with “the form of life of a society, its style of life, its moral taste, form of society, form of state, form of government, spirit of laws” (*WIPP*, 34).

5. This is the greatest dispute about the *content* of Hegel’s claims. A sweeping resistance to this whole *style* of thought is understandable. There are as many people who cringe in academic pain when they hear terms like “the” moderns as there are protestors who howl at mention of “the” ancients. Among academics, a professional nominalism, supplemented in the humanities by suspicion of grand or Eurocentric narratives, has become a powerful orthodoxy. Strauss’s argument is that such aggregation is justified because (1) classical political philosophy all share the same “specific assessment,” that “the goal of political life is virtue,” and (2) that all modern political philosophy agree in their “rejection of the classical scheme as unrealistic” (*WIPP*, 40). How (1) would deal with Thrasymachus, Gorgias, Protagoras, and the like, and how the latter would include Hölderlin or Hegel or Schiller, is not clear to me. Strauss later admits there is a Hegelian attempt at reconciliation with the ancient emphasis on virtue, but he indicates that Hegel’s reliance on his philosophy of history vitiates that attempt (*WIPP*, 52-55).

6. Nietzsche even describes the “self-sublation” (*Selbstaufhebung*) of morality. *Morgenröte*, 1886 Preface, sec. 4, in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, edited by G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), 16.

7. Cf. the very helpful discussion of these issues in Martin Hollis’s book, *Trust within Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

8. G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, translated by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 23.

9. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 3, edited by Peter Hodgson, translated by R. F. Brown, Peter Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 162.

10. "I began, therefore, to wonder whether the self-destruction of reason was not the inevitable outcome of modern rationalism as distinguished from pre-modern rationalism" (*SCR*, 31).

11. Susan Shell, "Natural Right and the Historical Approach," forthcoming. One might note variations on this theme: Nietzsche's "what did natural right die from?" Answer: "natural causes." Heidegger's "what did commitment to natural right and all that came with it kill off?" Answer: "an opening to the meaning of being issue." And Hegel's narrative, "given classical natural right as origin, what will eventually grow from such beginnings?" Answer: "spirit's full self-consciousness in modern ethical life."

12. *WIPP*, 55.

13. I admit that it is sometimes not easy to see clearly how Strauss wants us to understand such a claim about culmination and self-consciousness. He can also write, in *NRH*, that "the contemporary rejection of natural right leads to nihilism—nay, it is identical with nihilism" (p. 5). I find this "nay" construction puzzling. Perhaps Strauss means that, since the rejection of natural right *inevitably* leads to nihilism, therefore we can say that it is identical with nihilism. This interpretation would highlight even more Strauss's reliance on a "causality of fate" argument in order to justify that "inevitably."

14. *WIPP*, 56. I cannot resist pointing out that what Strauss says is a serious distortion of the claims made about human history by Kant and Hegel. It is true that both admit that the "operative mechanism" of historical change is egoism, violence, immorality, even "the slaughter bench." But it is profoundly misleading to associate that claim with "communism" and presumably the arrogation by leaders to themselves of the right to commit violence in order to effect virtuous ends. For both Kant and Hegel, the very first premise in their account is that major historical change is not subject to the will of rulers or leaders or anyone who works "behind the back," and *unintentionally*. Strauss must of course realize that Hegel says that the owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk, when philosophy paints its grey in grey, but he does not mention that here in this swipe at what amounts to the gross misuse of Kant's, Hegel's, indeed Marx's philosophy of history by Russian revolutionaries.

15. Another point of contact: Hegel is the sort of strong critic of modern natural right and so contractarian doctrines of the state that Strauss affirmed in his remarks on Burke, even while distancing himself from any reliance on providence or even prudent compromise with that doctrine (evident, he thinks, in Burke and Hegel).

16. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 21.

17. *NRH*, 304. And: "There came into being a new type of theory, of metaphysics, having as its highest theme human action and its product rather than the whole, which is in no way the product of human action" (p. 320). In Strauss's narrative, once the notion of a completed history began to seem implausible, the reactions of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, on the one hand, and the historical school and eventual Heideggerian historicism, on the other, were the only possible reactions.

18. *Ibid.*, 32.

19. *Ibid.*

20. If that is the crisis, the present age can sometimes look like the triumph of a self-righteous, naïve moralism.

21. Stanley Rosen, "Philosophy and Ordinary Language," in *Metaphysics in Ordinary Language*, by Stanley Rosen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 121. It "approaches" a historicist claim because Strauss need not have invoked any historical epoch to make his point about such "simple experiences." Such ought to be available everywhere and every when, and

need require no "special" help from the Greeks. Strauss himself seems sometimes to admit this, so it would require a separate discussion to sort out the historicist dimensions of the "ancient-modern" quarrel (instead of simply a quarrel between *any* proponent of nature as foundations as against history).

22. Cf. his discussion of the "overwhelming power of the past," in "the attempt to solve the Jewish problem," in "Progress or Return," in *RCP*, 233.

23. Cf. Heinrich Meier's note on this image, *Die Denkbewegung von Leo Strauss* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1996), 22, n. 2. The basic issue is whether we can presume to start out in the kind of "natural" philosophical ignorance that Socrates described, and so come an awareness of our ignorance. (We cannot, straightaway anyway, according to Strauss.) See especially Meier's discussion and citations from Strauss's correspondence on p. 25, n. 7, where Strauss notes that another reason we live "under" the Platonic cave has to do with the entanglement of Greek philosophy in the tradition of revealed religion.

24. *NRH*, 32.

25. *Ibid.*, 6.

26. *Ibid.*, 8.

27. I think Richard Velkley is quite right to tie this strategy to the influence of Heidegger. "Natural Right and History as a Response to the Challenge of Martin Heidegger," forthcoming. See Meier, *Die Denkbewegung*, 29, n. 10, where Meier cites a revealing passage wherein Strauss makes very clear his indebtedness to Heidegger and Heideggerean "Destruktion."

28. *NRH*, 79.

29. *Ibid.*, 79-80.

30. *CM*, 11.

31. *WIPP*, 27-28.

32. *NRH*, 151.

33. This cannot be the complete story, of course. For one thing, there are the other images, especially the Divided Line, which suggests that imagination (*eikasia*) functions naturally in calling attention to images as such and so prompting a journey toward originals. For another, it is indisputable that for the Strausesean Plato, the great deficiency of life in the cave is not intellectual but erotic. Life there does not satisfy the deepest human desires, visible only in a few human exemplars. I am much indebted to Richard Velkley for correspondence and for his suggestions about these issues.

34. "OCP," 89. "Although it knew better than the dogmatic skeptic of our own time the formidable theoretical objections to which they are exposed."

35. *Ibid.*, 58.

36. *Ibid.*, 91.

37. And here again one must note that one could read Strauss's narrative as suggesting indirectly and cautiously that what philosophical attention to such experiences helps reveal is finally that there is only one "natural right," one human activity good by nature, philosophy, even though *this* would never be conceded by the man of healthy common sense. This suggests that what Strauss wants is some revival of the ordinary of natural sense of hostility to philosophy. And just *how* the original recovery would then also lead to a transcendence of the ordinary view that its moral bearings are in order and unassailable is not clear in Strauss (at least not clear to me).

38. *NRH*, 6.

39. I note here, in response to an interesting suggestion made by Nathan Tarcov, that it is theoretically open to Strauss to make much less of the ancients-moderns contrast, to treat it as a matter of rhetorical and pedagogical usefulness, and to insist that our own experience, however fraught with a kind of forgetfulness and willfulness, still does manifest somehow "the claims of natural right" on any experienter, that a kind of phenomenology of modern life can lay bare in

some way what has not been, perhaps cannot wholly be, forgotten. Something like this is, in essence, Stanley Rosen's emendation of Strauss. See his *Hermeneutics as Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 128. I would note here only (1) that this is quite an extreme correction of Strauss's original position and means we will also have to discount the image he used so frequently to describe modern fate, a cave beneath the Platonic cave. I take it that the whole point of that image is to contest the possibility of any such depth-phenomenology, and it is not clear to me what, if anything, is left of Strauss's actual position after such a correction (see especially *PAW*, 155-57; "CCM," 106-7, 109, 114; see especially such typical passages as *OT*, 177, where Strauss makes clear why we are "forced" to attempt a "restoration of classical social science," or *CM*, 11, where the return to classical political philosophy is called "necessary." Not to mention the passage quoted above at *NRH*, 79-80, where Strauss clearly says that to recover this ordinary experience one "has to go back" to the ancients [my emphasis], indeed to the "ancient" ancients. I see no indication that he believes we have the choice: either such a restoration or a recollection called forth out of present-day experience). (2) It is not immediately clear how much, and what sort of detail, can be defended by appeal to such a historical phenomenology. Perhaps an aspiration to be rescued from a confusing relativism, a yearning for some secure distinction between the noble and the base? At best, these would be aspirations and hopes, not answers. I note again Strauss's powerful rejection of philosophy as wishful thinking, at *NRH*, 6.

40. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 51.

41. This was a major component of Hegel's thinking from early in his Jena days and is given fine expression in his *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, translated by H. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977).

42. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, vol. 1, translated by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 98.

43. This is especially true of the complex position defended by Stanley Cavell. I don't claim that anything said here yet bears on his position, one very different from Strauss's, but I would note that there is something different in simply living out the ordinary, and feeling some need to call it to mind. That is already something extraordinary.

44. Cf. Robert Pippin, "The Modern World of Leo Strauss," in *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations*, by Robert Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 209-32.

45. In the words of Stanley Rosen, whether "freedom begins its long decay in what one could call historical libertinism. Post-Kantianism is the story of that long decay" (*Metaphysics in Ordinary Language*, 165). In this case, I think the Kant to Nietzsche to Heidegger progression is adventitious, not logical or internal. What Nietzsche "took" from the Kantian and Hegelian notion of spontaneity and transformed into or revealed as will to power was not what was "there" in Kant and Hegel. In other words, Nietzsche planted the bomb he then exploded.

46. The first argument of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a denial, a reduction to (determinate) absurdity, of the claim that there can be a prereflective acquaintance with the world.

47. *WIPP*, 27-28.

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