BETWEEN CONSERVATISM AND UTOPIA, OR, LEO STRAUSS’S QUEST FOR A NONPOLITICAL FOUNDATION OF THE POLITICAL

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ABSTRACT
Leo Strauss has been read as the author of a paradoxically nonpolitical political philosophy. This reading finds extensive support in Strauss’s work, notably in the claim that political life leads beyond itself to contemplation and in the limits this imposes on politics. Yet the space of the nonpolitical in Strauss remains elusive. The “nonpolitical” understood as the natural, Strauss suggests, is the “foundation of the political”. But the meaning of “nature” in Strauss is an enigma: it may refer either to the “natural understanding” of commonsense, or to nature “as intended by natural science,” or to “unchangeable and knowable necessity.” As a student of Husserl, Strauss sought both to retrieve and radically critique both the “natural understanding” of commonsense, or to nature “as intended by natural science,” or to “unchangeable and knowable necessity.” He also cast doubt on the very existence of an unchangeable nature. The true sense of the nonpolitical in Strauss, I shall argue, must rather be sought in his embrace of the trans-finite goals of philosophy understood as rigorous science. Nature may be the nonpolitical foundation of the political, but we can only ever approximate nature asymptotically. The nonpolitical remains as elusive in Strauss as the ordinary. To approximate both we need to delve deeper into his understanding of Husserl.

KEYWORDS
Leo Strauss, Edmund Husserl, phenomenology, political philosophy, nature, unpolitical.
INTRODUCTION

Leo Strauss¹ has been read as the author of a paradoxically nonpolitical political philosophy.² This reading finds extensive support in Strauss’s work, notably in the claim that “the highest subject of political philosophy is the philosophic life.”³

The questions of political life, regarding, for example, power, justice, and authority, lead beyond themselves to philosophy. Pondering these questions also proves to be superior to political engagement as an activity—at least in the ancient teaching on the greater freedom and dignity of the contemplative life.⁴ Yet, no sooner do we step into the life of contemplation, as it were, than Strauss bids us to return. The movement away from politics is countered by a movement back to ordinary political opinions. As a consequence, both the purely philosophic (and transpolitical) in Strauss and the purely political remain elusive.

Strauss did not provide us with a theory of justice or a political ethics, and we look in vain in his writings for answers to such allegedly political questions as “Who gets what, when, and how?”⁵ Instead, we find an impressive range of commentaries covering ancient, medieval, modern, and postmodern thought discussing the fundamental problems of justice, happiness, and natural right, among others. We find critical engagements with major political thinkers such as Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, Isaiah Berlin, and Alexandre Kojève, as well as an intriguingly large number of writings on ‘political philosophy’. We find penetrating accounts of the ways of life of a variety of ‘human types’—the poet, the philosopher, the tyrant, the gentleman—and much else. But there is hardly a teaching on politics or the political as commonly understood, for example, as collective self-actualization or legitimate domination.

The political remains elusive in Strauss because it is overshadowed by the nonpolitical. As Strauss put it in 1959, “the nonpolitical” is the “foundation of the political,” whereby the nonpolitical was traditionally understood as “the natural,” that is, as the

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² Harald Bluhm, Die Ordnung der Ordnung. Das politische Philosophieren von Leo Strauss (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002), 22.

³ WPP, 91.

⁴ Ibid.

“condition” or the “ultimate end” of political life. Yet any claim to knowledge of ‘the natural’ is immediately undermined by Strauss’s writings. Indeed, according to Strauss, no political society has ever been—or will ever be—established on the basis of knowledge of the natural.

Strauss’s work seems to be built to be perfectly antidogmatic. Paradoxically, however, its distinctive openness rests on an intransigent defense of the truth, or what Strauss calls “the true standards.” It is therefore essential for an adequate understanding of his work to specify what these standards are. Here I shall focus on the nonpolitical understood as the natural and as the “the foundation of the political.” I shall argue that the purely nonpolitical in Strauss remains elusive because “nature” (in his work) is a problem. ‘Nature’ may refer to the “natural understanding” of common sense, to nature “as intended by natural science,” or to “unchangeable and knowable necessity.” As a student of Husserl, Strauss sought both to retrieve and radically critique the natural understanding and the naturalistic worldview of natural science. He also cast doubt on the very existence of an unchangeable nature. The true sense of the nonpolitical in Strauss, I shall argue, must rather be sought in his embrace of the trans-finite goals of philosophy understood as rigorous science.

1. THE NONPOLITICAL HORIZON IN STRAUSS: BETWEEN CONSERVATISM AND UTOPIA

What distinguishes Strauss from most twentieth-century political philosophy may be his defense of transpolitical, ‘natural’ standards, which impose limits on politics while pointing to a conception of the (universally) good life. Whereas most recent political

6 OPS, 11.
8 LAM, viii (“every political society that ever has been or ever will be rests on a particular fundamental opinion which cannot be replaced by knowledge...”). Cited in Christopher Bruell, “A Return to Classical Political Philosophy and the Understanding of the American Founding,” The Review of Politics 53, no. 1 (1991): 173–86, 176.
9 WPP, 12 (“to judge soundly one must know the true standards”).
10 OPS, 11.
11 SPP, 31; NRH, 77, 79, 81 (“natural understanding”); SPP, 35 (“natural science”); NRH, 90 (“knowable necessity”).
philosophers have abandoned “the teaching of the good life” as “the authentic realm of philosophy” (Adorno), Strauss sought to keep that teaching alive. In line with the tradition of political philosophy since Plato, Strauss also held on to the view that everyday political questions concerning (for instance) just rule or legitimate government must be framed within broader metaphysical inquiries concerning the nature of man and the whole.

Strauss refers to nature as a standard throughout his work. To quote a few representative statements:

1. “Plato goes back to the truth hidden in the natural valuations,” whereas Hobbes denies “the existence of a...natural standard.”
2. “Man’s freedom is accompanied by a sacred awe, by a kind of divination that not everything is permitted. We may call this awe-inspired fear ‘man’s natural conscience.’”
3. “[A]bsolute tolerance is altogether impossible... [it] turns into ferocious hatred of those who have stated most clearly and most forcefully that there are unchangeable standards founded in the nature of man and the nature of things.”
4. “The just city is...impossible...because it is against nature.”
5. “[P]recisely because the female nature is inferior to the male in regard to virtue, it is all the more in need of being subjected to order and law.”

Granted that these statements must be read in context to specify their meaning, the general message is clear: political philosophy must attempt to retrieve ‘nature’ or ‘natural right’ to respond to what Strauss calls “the crisis of the West.” One of the key consequences of such a retrieval is a critique of utopian political projects which are
somehow oblivious of ‘natural’ standards. This is an essential ingredient of Strauss’s conservatism as a political thinker. Yet Strauss also insisted that the existence of natural standards is an open question. And a closer look at his work reveals a utopian vein, which arguably leads to the very heart of his endeavors. Indeed, in the ‘classical political philosophy’ he sought to retrieve, ‘nature’ was understood as an “ideal” which is far removed from ordinary political conceptions—so far, indeed, that it points to a different ontological plane.

Without heeding this dimension it is hard to make sense of Strauss’s rather visionary statements concerning the need for a “meeting of the West and the East” to address the perils of a “technological world society.” Moreover, and equally importantly,
without placing the utopian dimension front and center in our reading of Strauss, we cannot make sense of his relentless critique of dogmatism or ideology.

Thus, there is, as I shall argue in what follows, a double movement in Strauss, which is anti-skeptical and conservative—in one direction—and skeptical and utopian in the opposite direction. It is this double movement that bestows it with a critical potential which has not been adequately understood.  

2. THE POLITICAL AS ‘NATURAL’: THE CONSERVATIVE HORIZON

Strauss holds the Aristotelian view that man is by nature a political animal. “Human life as such,” he writes in 1931, is “life together and thus political life.” This is why, as Strauss continues, “every human action and motivation and thought is in itself political.” Though Strauss may have changed his mind on the possibility of a supra-political life devoted to contemplation, the quoted statement seems to reflect (by and large) his mature views as well. It prefigures three theses that establish the political—or, more precisely, the theological-political—as the ‘natural’ horizon of human life.

First, “all our actions” are guided by an “awareness of the good.” But the good—or the common good at least—is “essentially controversial.” By virtue of this controversy and the “seriousness of the question of what is right,” humanity will group into friends and enemies. In this understanding the political appears as a phenomenological datum. Human societies happen to be organized as “regimes” or ways of life which are “decisively determined by [their] hierarchy,” that is, by the “type of men [who] predominate in broad daylight and with a view to compel power and obedience and respect.” In a striking statement, Strauss underscores the conflictual element of the

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28 NRH, 129.
30 Ibid.
32 WPP, 10.
33 Ibid., 16.
35 OPS, 8; NRH, 136.
political as manifest in “men killing men on the largest scale in broad daylight and with the greatest serenity.”

This description of the phenomenon of the political is supported by a conception of human nature as evil or bad. Thus, a second key thesis on the political is that human life as such is in need of law, or “coercive restraint,” for its preservation and possible perfection. As Strauss puts it, “[t]here is something harsh in the political, something angry”; “the country is unthinkable without the element of compulsion—laws—and therefore punishment.” Human nature seems to be inclined not only to malice but also to domination. “[H]uman life is necessarily political,” Strauss writes paraphrasing Socrates; “living among human beings one must either rule or be ruled by force or by voluntary subjection, for the stronger understand how to use the weaker as slaves.”

Yet, while the political may be manifest in domination, conflict, and war, its ultimate end is human happiness achieved through the pursuit of excellent—and peaceful—activity. Transcending the Schmittian identification of the political with conflict, Strauss argues that:

Politics is the field on which human excellence can show itself in its full growth and on whose proper cultivation every form of excellence is in a way dependent...Since the ultimate end of the city is the same as that of the individual, the end of the city is peaceful activity in accordance with the dignity of man, and not war and conquest.”

The dignity of man, according to Strauss, depends on our capacity to question and thus to think. It is at this point that Strauss’s understanding of the political gains

36 OPS, 8.
37 CM, 5; WPP, 40-43; Letter to Carl Schmitt (Sept. 4, 1932), in Meier, Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss, 125.
38 OPS, 9, 59.
39 XS, 34.
40 NRH, 133-34; “Cohen and Maimonides,” 199-20 (Socrates is “after agreement and harmony...because only with agreement and harmony, with concord of the citizens, can the state truly be a state”). See also Strauss’s letter to Schmitt criticizing Schmitt’s identification of the Right with “bellicose nationalism.” September 4, 1932, in Meier, Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss, 125, and the letter to Gerhard Krüger of August 1932 in GS3, 399 (“the last word ... can only be peace, i.e., understanding in truth. That such an understanding on the basis of reason [Verständigung der Vernunft] is possible—firmiter credo.” My translation.) Political life (at least in a democracy) also entails heterogeneity or plurality. See Strauss’s letter to Hasso Hoffman of January 27, 1965, cited in Robert Howse, Leo Strauss: Man of Peace (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 60-61 (“Schmitt’s dogmatism regarding homogeneity of the democratic people must be criticized...the heterogeneity of...interests is as crucial as a certain kind of homogeneity.”)
41 Strauss, “Cohen and Maimonides,” 411 (“a life that is not questioning is not a life worthy of man”). This is a questioning concerning the right or the good life.
particular depth. The political (this being the third thesis) is constitutive of the ‘world’ as such, that is, of the horizon of human experience. Following Heidegger, Strauss holds that to be human is to be open to an intelligible (and meaningful) world of “things” and “affairs” which command our care.\footnote{NRH, 79; on “political things,” see WPP, 12 (it is of the essence of political things to “raise a claim to men’s obedience, allegiance, decision, or judgment.”)} The “world” is what is primarily given as the element of human life; it is the “articulation of reality” which contains an inexhaustible “wealth of meaning.”\footnote{NRH, 77.}

Now, in contrast to Heidegger, the “world” for Strauss is shaped by the phenomenon of law understood as a “concrete binding order of life.”\footnote{Strauss, “Cohen and Maimonides,” 221; see also PL, 100 (“the Torah itself is a world, in which man lives, to the understanding of which he should apply himself according to his powers…”); on the concept “world” see also ibid, 65, 68, 91, 111.} Law is more than coercive restraint: it is “the way of life of a society.”\footnote{NRH, 136.} Law is that which a city looks up to as consisting of both written and unwritten laws, whereby the latter include “the divine law” and “the gods of the city.”\footnote{CM, 153. See also, 240-1.} It is on this basis—of a given law as a universal phenomenon—that Strauss holds restraint to be as natural as freedom, which is also the basis of our “natural conscience.”\footnote{Cf. NRH, 130, 129 (“It is man’s natural sociality that is the basis of natural right...There is no relation of man to man in which man is absolutely free to act as he pleases or as it suits him. And all men are somehow aware of this fact.”)}

Let us consider, then, what “natural” means in this context and in what sense it constitutes a standard. Strauss’s clearest statements in this regard may be found in his 1935 book on Hobbes. There he refers to the “popular valuations” of “ordinary speech” as “natural valuations.”\footnote{HPP, 163.} Ordinary speech is fundamental insofar as speech alone...originally reveals to man the standard by which he can order his actions and test himself, take his bearings in life and nature, in a way completely undistorted and, in principle, independent of the possibility of realization.\footnote{HPP, 142.}

Speech is our only access to standards.\footnote{HPP, 145.} That there are universal standards, according to Strauss, can be seen in the way we speak. To take perhaps the most important example: We all say that we wish the good, and we mean the truly good, not a semblance of it. Thus we imply that we lack the good that transcends us. Furthermore,
when we speak about the good we contradict each other, i.e., we do not simply talk past each other. Thus our speech presupposes a common object, whose existence we somehow divine.\footnote{See David Lachterman, “What Is ‘The Good’ of Plato’s Republic?,” St. John’s Review, Vol. XXXIX, nos. 1 and 2 (1989-90): 139-167, 151.}

Plato’s Socrates famously examined contradictory speech to reveal the “truth hidden in what [people] say”\footnote{HPP, 143.}—and to radically transcend common opinions. Thus, in the Platonic dialogues the “popular ideal of courage,” according to which “the perfect man is the tyrant,” undergoes a dialectical purification which leads to the view that “true virtue” is “essentially wisdom,” the wisdom of the philosopher.\footnote{HPP, 147, 145-6.} It is important to underscore just how deep this purification reaches. The Platonic discovery of standards in ordinary speech leads to paradoxical results, including, famously, the equality of the sexes. This standard is diametrically opposed to the “popular valuation” that links courage to manliness.\footnote{HPP, 147.}

In perhaps the most widespread reading of Strauss, the turn to ordinary speech is anti-skeptical and conservative. Thus, according to Devin Stauffer, the process of dialectical purification described above is meant to remain the preserve of the philosophic few, thus leaving largely intact the “widely accepted views” of ordinary citizens.\footnote{Devin Stauffer, “Reopening the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns: Leo Strauss’s Critique of Hobbes’s ‘New Political Science,’” The American Political Science Review, vol. 101, no. 2, 2007, 223-233, here 230. See also Dustin Sebell, The Socratic Turn: Knowledge of Good and Evil in an Age of Science (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 144 (the aim of the study is to “recover— so as to question, yes, but in due course and on its own terms—the (social) world as everyone is already, prescientifically aware of it”). For a largely opposite reading according to which the turn to ordinary speech is ultimately skeptical, i.e., a way to avoid dogmatism or falling prey to “what people say,” see Pierpaolo Ciccarelli, “Ordinary Language and Transcendence of Ideas. On the Phenomenological ‘Reactivation’ or ‘Repetition’ of Plato’s Dialogues by Leo Strauss,” in A. Corrias (et. als.) (eds.), Platonism and Modernity. From Ficino to Foucault, Brill, Leiden (forthcoming).} The work of political philosophers as traditionally understood was to “clarify and refine, without fundamentally altering, the pre-scientific opinions that guided ordinary political life.”\footnote{Stauffer, “Reopening the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns,” 231.} Thus, the task of political philosophy in this understanding is primarily to “illuminate the limits of politics.”\footnote{Ibid.} What we may call the utopian task—namely, “to make the principles of practical life more scientific and rational”\footnote{Ibid.}—remains secondary.

\[52\] HPP, 143.
\[53\] HPP, 147, 145-6.
\[54\] HPP, 147.
\[55\] Devin Stauffer, “Reopening the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns: Leo Strauss’s Critique of Hobbes’s ‘New Political Science,’” The American Political Science Review, vol. 101, no. 2, 2007, 223-233, here 230. See also Dustin Sebell, The Socratic Turn: Knowledge of Good and Evil in an Age of Science (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 144 (the aim of the study is to “recover— so as to question, yes, but in due course and on its own terms—the (social) world as everyone is already, prescientifically aware of it”). For a largely opposite reading according to which the turn to ordinary speech is ultimately skeptical, i.e., a way to avoid dogmatism or falling prey to “what people say,” see Pierpaolo Ciccarelli, “Ordinary Language and Transcendence of Ideas. On the Phenomenological ‘Reactivation’ or ‘Repetition’ of Plato’s Dialogues by Leo Strauss,” in A. Corrias (et. als.) (eds.), Platonism and Modernity. From Ficino to Foucault, Brill, Leiden (forthcoming).
\[56\] Stauffer, “Reopening the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns,” 231.
\[57\] Ibid.
\[58\] Ibid.
3. THE AMBIGUITY OF THE ‘NATURAL’: KNOWABLE NECESSITY OR QUESTIONABLE COMMONSENSE?

One can read Strauss as a conservative thinker who did more than anyone in recent times to recover “an older form of rationalism” grounded in knowledge of what “naturally belongs to moral and political life.” But this reading becomes problematic as soon as it presents itself as knowledge. We can begin to see this in Strauss’s use of quotations around the term ‘natural’. The “natural” (in quotation marks) does not refer to “knowable necessity” as in the ancient conception; it is rather “the typical,” “the world in which we live and act,” a world which is “radically prescientific or prephilosophic.”


In the page Strauss refers to, Klein argues that “Greek scientific arithmetic and logistic are founded on a ‘natural’ attitude to everything countable as we meet it in daily life.” Elsewhere in the book, Klein specifies the meaning of ‘natural’ by reference to those cognitions “implied in a prescientific activity moving within the realm of opinion and supported by a preconceptual understanding of the world.”

The ‘natural’ horizon Strauss and Klein appeal to may be interpreted in various ways. Perhaps the most common interpretation is to see the natural as constituted by experiences which are available to human beings as such. Among the experiences Strauss has in mind are “simple experiences of right and wrong”; the admiration of “human things” which are “by nature noble or admirable”—foremost among them, “the

60 Cf. Sebell’s otherwise brilliant The Socratic Turn, which fails to deliver on the promise implied in the subtitle, viz. “Knowledge of Good and Evil in an Age of Science.” Stauffer similarly implies that we once knew, or were aware, of “basic moral experiences and convictions...[which] naturally belong[] to moral and political life.” Stauffer, “Reopening the Quarrel,” 232. By contrast, Strauss consistently refers to knowledge of the natural as a problem—at least when “nature” is understood as the realm of “unchangeable and knowable necessity” (NRH, 90).
61 NRH, 90, 79.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 119.
well-ordered soul”—and the experience of divine revelation as an “awareness of something absolute which cannot be relativized in any way as everything else.”

This reading, however, has been subjected to important critiques. First, it is not clear whether, according to Strauss, these experiences are actually available or are rather a matter of “recollection.” Second, as Strauss notes, certain experiences may only be available to certain natures, which seems to render his argument circular (only “noble” natures can see the “noble.”) Finally, if the argument is simply that, as human beings, we are naturally oriented towards the good, and are thus aware of the good, it is still not clear how this constitutes knowledge of a “naturally accessible standard.” Indeed, as Strauss notes, what virtue is, remains “essentially controversial”—as controversial as the distinctions between “courage and cowardice, justice and injustice, human kindness and selfishness, gentleness and cruelty”—all of which are “exposed to grave theoretical doubts.”

One way out of this impasse is to distinguish between what is true in practice and what is true in theory. The prescientific world in which we do distinguish between “courage and cowardice, justice and injustice” is the world of everyday practice, and it is also the essential starting point of any kind of theoretical inquiry. Strauss conceives the permanent structure of this prescientific world in very broad terms: there is order—because there are essential “forms” or “essential differences”—and there are human minds capable of discerning that order. This argument does not presuppose the existence of eternal Aristotelian forms, but is instead based on primary evidences, as, for example, that the human mind can count. Nor does it presuppose any kind of agreement, say, on what is good and evil. It does presuppose that there are emergent properties, or “wholes” which are more than the sum of their parts (such as humans or

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66 NRH, 32, 128.
67 SCR, 8.
69 Ibid., 128, cf. WPP, 89.
70 Rosen, Hermeneutics as Politics, 129.
71 WPP, 89.
72 LAM, 213.
74 Ibid., 72.
and it also presupposes that these wholes are permanently present, or at least retrievable from historical experience.

This begins to explain what Strauss means when he speaks of a “natural awareness” of (for example) “permanent distinctions” between right and wrong. Awareness (e.g. of the good) does not constitute final knowledge, and yet it is the basis of all knowledge: what cannot be explained away; what we must either acknowledge or repress under the cover of an ideology.76 This awareness is the element of the practical sphere of common sense, or “the sphere governed by prudence,” which is “in principle self-sufficient or closed.”77 The sphere of human action has its own principles, which are “the natural ends toward which man is by nature inclined and of which he has by nature some awareness.”78 Humans are aware, for example, that “robbing others of their land is not just,” that a caste system is indefensible, and that “the full and unrestrained exercise of [our] freedom is not right.”79

4. THE NEED FOR UTOPIA, OR THE RADICAL HORIZON

Strauss’s understanding of the political and the natural is full of riddles, which could be summed up in the following tension. On one reading, his writings support the view that there are solid—and sufficient—grounds for thinking and acting in the ‘natural’ conceived as the prescientific horizon of human living together. The natural thus conceived seems to provide a rich and inexhaustible soil for human growth, as Strauss’s metaphors suggest.80 By nature, humans are aware of the good, or at least restrained by a ‘natural conscience’. We are also inclined towards ‘natural ends’, which can be known through the ‘practical science’ cultivated by a long tradition of statesmen and political thinkers. As Strauss notes, “every form of excellence is in a way dependent” on the proper cultivation of the political field, which excellence will be manifest in the the

75 See, e.g., LAM, 207, 217; NRH, 94.
76 Cf. NRH, 129-130 (“Every ideology is an attempt to justify before one’s self or others such courses of action as are somehow felt to be in need of justification, i.e., as are not obviously right.” For example, the Hindus believe in karma “because they know that otherwise their caste system would be indefensible.”)
77 LAM, 206.
78 LAM, 205.
79 NRH 130.
80 Cf. NRH, 133-34 (note 37 above).
regime and its laws. When fleshed out in sufficient detail, this effort to recover a forgotten or neglected tradition of political philosophy to respond to twentieth century nihilism is powerful indeed. However, on another reading ‘the natural’ understanding of the city in Strauss always points beyond itself to a trascendent horizon. We can begin to see this in the following statement on Rousseau, which sums up Strauss’s critique of modern rationalism:

Rousseau’s thought marks a decisive step in the secular movement which seeks to guarantee the actualization of the ideal, or to prove the necessary coincidence of the rational and the real, or to get rid of that which essentially transcends every possible human reality.

The last part is key, and begs this question: just what is it that transcends ‘every possible human reality’? How can we conceive (in human terms) of something that transcends the human? Strauss’s quest to recover ‘natural’ standards may stand or fall on his capacity to spell this out. Suffice it for now to restate his claim that there is a dimension of the ‘rational’ (or ‘the ideal’) which, contra Hegel and his followers, appears to be wholly independent of “the real” and the “merely human.” From this standpoint, the authority of the political—indeed, every authority, including that of the ‘natural’—is open to question, and must be questioned if philosophy is to exist. Thus, the conservative horizon populated by natural standards sketched earlier in this essay begins to clear into an open sky.

Yet we must be more precise. Strauss usually refers to ‘horizons’ (instead of open skies), which denote both a sense of openness and the possibility of orientation. No horizon can become the source of dogma, for there are (in Strauss’s thought) multiple horizons—notably, the ancient Greek and the Biblical—and no horizon can be fully present. But neither do we find ourselves in a void: we can take our bearings by the

81 Ibid.
82 The best example, I think, is NRH as further discussed below.
83 WPP, 51.
84 WPP, 51, 27.
85 NRH, 84, 92 (“philosophy stands or falls [by] the distinction between reason and authority.”)
86 The language of horizons is especially salient in his early work. See GS2, 375, 395, 399, 402, 405, 410, 429; GS3, 238. Cited in Pierpaolo Ciccarelli, Leo Strauss tra Husserl e Heidegger: filosofia pratica e fenomenologia (Pisa: ETS, 2018), 38. But see also OPS, 4 (the new natural sciences “live in an open horizon....As...Nietzsche put it, ‘We are the first men who do not possess the truth, but only seek it’”).
87 Cf. RCPP, 246; Gérald Sfez, Leo Strauss et les choses politiques (Futuroscope: SCÉRÉN-CNCP, 2011).
very structure of the horizon we inhabit—and there is also a “natural horizon,” which Strauss appeals to.88 This combination of openness and orientation is fundamental to Strauss’s philosophic position, which is sustained by two seemingly contradictory commitments. On the one hand, Strauss defends a kind of absolutism of “universal norms” or “true standards”—somehow linked to a ‘natural horizon’—with perhaps unparalleled force in twentieth century thought.89 On the other hand, he displays an equally radical skepticism which refuses to defend any position (including for ‘natural right’), insofar as any such defense entails the loss of “a most important freedom...radically to doubt.”90

As Strauss often suggests, his philosophic position is neither dogmatic nor skeptic but zetetic. This in-between position is harder to conceive than it may seem. As a philosopher, Strauss doubts everything, including (as we saw) such commonsense distinctions as between ‘justice and injustice’.91 As he puts it, “reason compels us to go beyond the ideal of our society.”92 Yet in doing so we must be open to the “possibility” that there may be “a rational and universal ethics or [...] natural right.”93 Paradoxically perhaps, it is those who reject the possibility of natural right that remain beholden to “the actual” or “the given” and are therefore dogmatists.94 If we wish to be truly critical and undogmatic, we must attempt to regard our situation from a transcendent standpoint, sub specie aeternitatis.95

But the question remains, how? That is, how can we conceive of a transcendent dimension which (as Strauss insists) must lie beyond every possible human reality? Where do we find Strauss’s utopia?


89 NRH, 15 (“universal norms”), WPP, 12 (“true standards”).
90 Strauss, “On a New Interpretation of Plato’s Political Philosophy,” 327.
91 For the importance of the freedom to doubt, see also SCR, 130. OPS, 4-5.
92 NRH, 6.
93 RCPR, 12.
94 Cf. NRH, 15. Strauss’s defense of the possibility of natural right is not only anti-dogmatic but also anti-authoritarian. As he suggested it in the 1940s, the fundamental problem that gave rise to his quest is that we (post-Nietzschean humans) lack “the minimum of mutual understanding required for living together,” and therefore we have “turn[ed] away from reason to authority.” But if this is the problem it will not be solved by appealing to authority; only genuine freedom of thought—including radical doubt—can help. Leo Strauss, “Living Issues in German Postward Philosophy,” in Meier, Leo Straus and the Theological-Political Predicament, 127.
To answer this question, we must inquire into the givenness of transcendent stand-
ards, or how they appear in human experience. Is a standard something we can see,
like Aristotle’s “good man,” who is the “measure” of “each thing”? Or is a standard
only discernible in speech, like Plato’s “idea” of justice? Strauss suggests that the answer
may be both, insofar as there are two approaches to “natural right,” namely “by appeal
to the ‘facts’” and “from the ‘speeches’.”

“Facts” or phenomena seem to have a certain primacy. For example, Strauss sug-
gests that we know of human excellence from the phenomenon of admiration. As
Strauss argues, it is simply a fact of human experience that “we admire excellence
without any regard to our pleasures or to our benefits.” Strauss adduces the example
of a “strategic genius” at the head of the “army of our enemies.” We also distinguish
“between better and worse men” or “by rank of human beings.” There are human
beings who care only for their “own” (say, for family and friends), and those who care
for “man as such” or for justice—and we admire the latter, not the former.

Thus, as Robb McDaniel has argued, for Strauss man is constituted socially as “the
animal who compares.” The human being “desires ‘to be’ what it admires—hence,
what it ‘is’ not.” This follows from the fact that we desire happiness, which consists in
its core in human excellence. Thus, to be human is to long for certain possibilities of
being.

But what possibilities? Or what exactly should we admire? To find this out, according
to Strauss, we must turn from ‘the facts’ to ‘the speeches.’ Following the principle
of admiration, Strauss turns to the most admired thinkers, specifically to Plato and his
“idealized” Socrates. Socrates “is” man as he “is” potentially: “the utopian man.”

96 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, (1166a13: “virtue (aretê) and the good man (ho spoudaios) are the measure (metron) of each thing.”) cf. 1176a17.
97 NRH, 126.
98 NRH, 128.
99 Ibid.
101 Ibid., 328.
102 Ibid.
103 NRH, 134.
5. STRAUSS’S NEO-SOCRATIC UTOPIANISM

‘Socrates’ is arguably where Strauss’s thought culminates. Throughout his work, we find several meanings of Plato’s master, of which the most important for our purposes may be the following. Socrates is the “citizen philosopher,” who is both sufficiently attached to his city to live and die according to its laws, and yet sufficiently removed to (in effect) undermine its moral-legal foundations. Socrates is both the embodiment of the life of reason and a pious man. As a world-historical figure, he embodies openness to the problems, or tensions, which constitute “the secret vitality of Western civilization”—the life between reason and revelation, competence and humble awe, divine madness and moderation, legality and legitimacy, realism and utopia. Philosophically, he is the point to which the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger leads back. Finally, and most importantly in this connection, Socrates also stands for the possibility of an alternative—as yet unrealized—conception of philosophy/science, which, following Husserl, “would satisfy the highest theoretical needs and in regard to ethics and religion render possible a life regulated by pure rational norms.”

I shall focus in what follows on the last point. On various occasions, Strauss indicated that the thinkers who attained the greatest awareness of the fundamental problems of Western thought—arguably, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger—all philosophized in a Socratic way, albeit for widely different reasons. Of them, it is Husserl who is most important for the question of a transpolitical utopia in Strauss.

106 OT, 44.
107 Cf. NRH, 93.
108 CM, 20.
109 RCPR, 270.
110 See Strauss’s letter to Gerhard Krüger of December 12, 1932, in GS3, 415.
112 Here I must leave unaddressed a long but important question, namely, the extent to which both Strauss and Husserl, in contrast to Heidegger and Nietzsche, remained committed to a specifically modern conception of science and philosophy. My use of the term “neo-Socratic” is meant to indicate that reason and science for Strauss are ultimately one (and not ‘ancient’ or ‘modern’), and yet his “Socrates” is a construction from the standpoint of modern presuppositions, such as the modern rejection of ancient teleology (a teleology which Strauss’s “Socrates” also did without). Husserl was unambiguously modern—phenomenology being the “longing” (Sehnsucht) of “the whole of modern philosophy”—while still defending a kind of post-metaphysical “Platonism.” See respectively Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie.* Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie 1. Edited by Karl Schuhmann (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), § 62 and Edmund Husserl, Experience and Judgment: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic, trans. James S. Churchill, and Karl Ameriks (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1997), § 87. Thanks
Strauss followed Husserl in several key ways. Most importantly, Strauss adopted the Husserlian critique of the twin spiritual powers that dominate our time—scientistic naturalism (including positivism) and historicism. Both of these powers culminate in forms of skepticism that spell the end of philosophy understood as a “rigorous science.”

Husserl understood naturalism as a “phenomenon consequent upon the discovery of nature” considered as “a unity of spatio-temporal being subject to exact laws.” Taking nature as a unity of being, naturalism assumes that the methods of the natural sciences are the only road to truth. Naturalism treats everything that is as belonging to “psychophysical nature”—including all ideas and ideals, all norms concerning the true, the good, and the beautiful, and consciousness itself. Historicism is a parallel phenomenon “consequent upon the ‘discovery of history’.” It tends to regard all being as “spirit” and as a “historical” creation. Just as naturalism assumes that “in the visible world” there are “no enduring species,” historical science assumes that “whatever seems to be enduring is but a stream of development.”

Naturalism and historicism are fatal to the possibility of objective knowledge of norms or ideals. The traditional answer to this crisis, as understood by Husserl, is the philosophical quest for wisdom, or, more precisely, for a ‘worldview’. Since its beginnings, philosophy has provided “worldly wisdom” gained through experience in domains ranging from religion, aesthetics, and ethics to politics and science. In modern times, “worldview philosophy”—as foremost represented in the “great systems,” such as Hegel’s—constitutes “relatively the most perfect answer to the riddles of life and the world.” The wise or “cultivated” person draws on her “vital experiences of evaluating and willing,” as well as on “all the particular sciences,” to form a “habitus” approximating “perfect virtue.” As such, the wise person has the capacity to “judge rationally”

to an anonymous reviewer for noting the fundamental difference between Husserl and Nietzsche and Heidegger.


114 Ibid., 79.


116 Husserl, Philosophy as Rigorous Science, 79.

117 Ibid.

118 Ibid., 122-23.

119 Ibid., 131.

120 Ibid., 133.

121 Ibid., 130-31.
regarding her objectives, and can also justify them in light of “intersubjective and unifying validities.”

The similarity of the paths followed by Husserl and Strauss is striking indeed. Both regarded the modern situation as dire—Strauss spoke of it as an unprecedented “threat” to “our humanity,” while Husserl considered “the spiritual need of our time” as “unbearable.” For both, modern humanity was like a “blind giant” with enormous powers yet incapable of seeing the most elementary realities, consequently stumbling into an “incredible barbarization.” Seeing only a “confusion of ‘facts’” unconnected to “ideas” or “values,” modern humanity orients itself at best by “progress” in ameliorating the ills of life, and yet remains incapable of giving a clear meaning or rational direction to its striving.

Against our self-inflicted blindness as generated by positivism and historicism both Husserl and Strauss called for a renewal of philosophy from the ground up, that is, from our prescientific experience of the world. Strauss sought famously to recover “natural right” by appealing to “simple experiences regarding right and wrong.” Even more ambitiously, Husserl pioneered an “idealism from below,” which would reconstruct the foundations of every science on the original evidence of the phenomena themselves. Yet, despite the common starting point in prescientific experience, the direction each took seems to differ precisely on the importance of the political: whereas Strauss called for a renewal of ‘political philosophy’, Husserl championed the idea of philosophy conceived as a—radically transpolitical—‘rigorous science’. The remainder of this essay explores this difference to argue that it is not as sharp as it may seem. The ultimate aim of Strauss’s “political philosophy” is a transpolitical science. This is also where we must look for the utopian dimension of his thought.

The evidence for Strauss’s utopianism has been briefly mentioned in this essay, and can now be expanded. It can be seen first (as suggested earlier) in his recovery of the

122 Ibid., 131-34.
123 Leo Strauss, “Die geistige Lage der Gegenwart,” in GS2, 451 (that we have become incapable of asking radical questions concerning the right and the good, Strauss argues, is “the clear symptom that we are threatened in our humanity in a way that humans have never been threatened”).
124 Husserl, Philosophy as Rigorous Science, 140.
125 RCPR, 299, 241; Cf. Husserl, Philosophy as Rigorous Science, 146 (on blindness to ideas).
126 Ibid.
127 NRH, 105.
ancient understanding of “nature” as “the nonpolitical” “ideal.” It is present, secondly, in the claim that the “natural” in the classical (Platonic-Aristotelian) sense must be understood in “contradistinction to what is merely human, all too human.” Thirdly, as we have seen, Strauss insists on the essential difference between ‘the rational’ and ‘the real’. Finally, there is also the idealized figure of Socrates, who stands for a possibility which “while consistent with human nature, cannot be fully converted to actuality.”

The puzzle is how this ‘ideal’ dimension relates to the sphere of ordinary experience. For Strauss also clearly rejects the traditional metaphysical answer, namely that human beings are somehow capable of apprehending eternal ‘forms’ or ‘species’, which exist on a transcendent plane beyond the phenomenal world. If, as Strauss insists, there is a dimension of the rational that is irreducible to the real, where does it exist? It is here that Husserl’s idealism from below becomes highly relevant.

According to Husserl, the truth “is that all human beings see ‘ideas’, ‘essences’, and see them, so to speak, continuously...” “Ideas,” as Strauss also argues, are the “shapes” or “looks” of things, for example, the shape of a ‘cat’ or a ‘tree’ or a ‘triangle’. These ‘ideas’ constitute universal and invariant structures—a structure that is neither empirically given through “sense data” nor a conceptual construct (as, for example, ‘sodium’ or ‘virus’, which are inconstant insofar as they can be revised as new discoveries are made).

At first sight, there is nothing utopian about this. We all see cats as cats and trees as trees, just as Strauss’s “man from Missouri” is aware “of things as things and of people as people.” But this is just the beginning—albeit the absolutely essential beginning—of science.

‘Rigorous science’ in Husserl’s conception is an infinite task, and it is by no means simple. Indeed, that we are aware of things as things (for example) is no mean achievement. Prior to Aristotle, there were arguably no ‘things’ or no particular objects considered to be the most fundamental entities, what Aristotle called “primary substances.”

130 WPP, 27.
133 NRH, 77.
135 LAM, 213.
136 Husserl, Philosophy as Rigorous Science, 135.
(For Plato, famously, what truly is, is not ‘things’ or ‘people’, but ‘forms’, such that what is truly fundamental is, say, ‘justice’ or ‘humanity’). According to Husserl, science proceeds through such essential discoveries. Most importantly, there must have been a first geometer who saw a ‘circle’ in a round thing-shape, or a smooth surface as ‘even’—just as, to take Strauss’s claim, there must have been a “first philosopher...who discovered nature.” Some centuries later, Aristotle arguably discovered the essence of the city in its (essential) plurality. His quest for a “philosophy of human things” was taken up by Strauss, who sought to bring to light the essence of ‘the regime’ and of such ‘ideas’ as ‘justice’, ‘man’, and ‘natural right’.

If Strauss’s project is Husserlian along these lines, then it is also—on one level at least—essentially nonpolitical and arguably utopian. For essential insights (say, into “the city”) transcend “any possible human reality” and thus a fortiori political reality. They are valid independently of the “natural valuations” of prescientific experience. And they remain essentially “to come”—always an incomplete project—insofar as the quest for a rigorous science “has barely begun [and] it will need centuries, if not millennia, until it 'renders possible in regard to ethics and religion a life regulated by pure rational norms'.”

CONCLUSION

I conclude by noting some important consequences of the nonpolitical dimension of Strauss’s thought as described in the last section. First, Strauss’s paradoxically nonpolitical political philosophy is not an expression of distance from, or disregard of, real politics or a truly political political theory. One could, after all (with some effort) derive from Strauss’s work a political ethics or a theory of justice. Indeed, if this were not possible, there could hardly be a Straussian school of thought which defends basic theses regarding, for example, the superiority of ‘the ancients’ to ‘the moderns’, the irrefutability of divine revelation, and the threat of historicism. That Strauss himself did not write a political or ethical theory is due in large measure, I think, to his embrace of the

140 SPP, 36.
Husserlian quest for a strict science, which is absolutely opposed to the dogmatism inherent in all “worldviews.” As noted earlier, to defend any position entails for Strauss the loss of the freedom “radically to doubt.”\textsuperscript{141} Importantly, this does not mean that every philosophic position is equally (in)defensible. According to Strauss, we can know certain truths—for example, that there is a hierarchy of ways of life and corresponding virtues\textsuperscript{142}—but even the best-established truths have to be articulated and grounded on evidence, which makes them ultimately revisable.\textsuperscript{143} This is why even “immutable ideas” such as “natural right” have an “origin”—and may also be forgotten.\textsuperscript{144} We cannot claim, pace Kojève’s Hegel, that “the possible alternatives” or “the limits of human possibilities” have been exhausted.\textsuperscript{145}

One may wonder what practical difference this makes—that, say, “in 2200 in Burma”\textsuperscript{146} a great thinker may open up completely new vistas on human possibilities. It makes a huge difference.\textsuperscript{147} As suggested earlier, Strauss’s reference to ‘horizons’ (and ‘vistas’)\textsuperscript{148} implies orientation but also openness, plurality, and inexhaustibility. The horizon of the city is part of a broader horizon of “the whole,” of which (in the classical view) we must be citizens.\textsuperscript{149} The classical view of “the West,” in turn, must be questioned in light of the very principle of civilization, which requires us to be willing to learn from any individual or society “who can teach us something worthwhile.”\textsuperscript{150} Indeed, a Straussian utopia, it seems, would be inhabited by people willing to live the conflict between competing horizons—not only as denoted by “Athens and Jerusalem,” but also by non-Western thought.\textsuperscript{151}

\textsuperscript{141} Strauss, “On a New Interpretation,” 327.
\textsuperscript{142} Cf. NRH, 163 (“The only universally valid standard is the hierarchy of ends.”).
\textsuperscript{143} SPP, 36 (philosophy as rigorous science may be “at all times essentially incomplete and in need of radical revisions.”); RCPR 30 (see below).
\textsuperscript{145} RCPR 30.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{147} For one thing, as Strauss notes, a “legitimate utopianism” is “inherent in philosophy as such.” The utopian longing to discover the “natural” order of civil society as the “perfect” order, is the “wish” or “prayer” of “all decent people.” Strauss, “What can we learn from political theory?,” 522.
\textsuperscript{148} Strauss, “What Can We Learn from Political Theory,” 521 (“...the opening up of new vistas is, and always has been, of the essence of philosophy.”)
\textsuperscript{149} OT, 212.
\textsuperscript{150} Leo Strauss, “German Nihilism,” ed. David Janssens and Daniel Tanguay, Interpretation 26, 1999 [1941], 366 (“Civilisation is inseparable from learning, from the desire to learn from anyone who can teach us something worthwhile.”)
\textsuperscript{151} RCPR, 270.
The classical preference for a “closed society” embraced in part by Strauss, is thus challenged within his own work, attesting to its profoundly dialectical character.\(^{152}\) One can go further: Strauss’s thought as a whole seems to move between fundamental alternatives—reason and revelation, the West and the East, philosophy and politics, theory and practice, Left and Right, relativism and absolutism, natural right and history—alternatives which it seeks to preserve, rather than transcend. One key reason for this is his Husserlian ‘idealism’. Just as ‘nature’ is a permanent ‘idea’—namely, “the first things” or the “essential character” of a group of things\(^{153}\)—so is ‘revelation’— an “awareness of something absolute which cannot be relativized.”\(^{154}\) The content of revelation or politics is, from this standpoint, unimportant.\(^{155}\) What is important alone is preserving—and remaining aware of—the permanent problems and fundamental alternatives in which we move, whether we know it or not. For this is what keeps the questioning and thinking alive on which our dignity and humanity depends.

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152 Cf. NRH, 131-132.
153 NRH, 83.
154 SCR, 8.