

THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE AND THE PROBLEM OF PLATONISM IN HANNAH ARENDT AND LEO STRAUSS

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ABSTRACT

This essay compares how Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss interpret the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic*. Such a comparison helps resolve two ambiguities in the scholarship on Arendt and Strauss. First, Arendt is ambiguous about the origins of the tradition of political philosophy that, she argues, distorts the authentic experience of philosophy and politics. I contend that a theme typically associated with Strauss, esotericism, appears in Arendt and helps resolve this ambiguity. In an esoteric reading of Plato's allegory of the cave, Arendt argues that Plato constructs the allegory of the cave to teach a lesson that would make the political situation of the philosopher less precarious. This initiates the formidable tradition of political philosophy. The tradition's prejudice in favour of the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa* originates with Plato's politics. Arendt exposes Plato's esotericism in order to retrieve a purer understanding of philosophy and politics from Platonism's distortions. Second, Strauss is ambiguous toward metaphysics. Strauss expresses this ambiguity in his interpretation of the allegory of the cave, as well as in his treatment of Plato's doctrine of the ideas. Yet a tendency in Strauss scholarship, as well as in Straussian studies of Plato, is to conclude that Strauss aims for a non-metaphysical recovery of Platonic philosophy, where the priority is to resolve the precarious political situation of the philosopher vis-à-vis the city. This interpretation holds that for Strauss, the allegory of the cave and the doctrine of ideas are primarily about political themes. I argue that Arendt's interpretation diverges from Strauss precisely on the emphasis of political themes. It is Arendt, not Strauss, who emphasises political themes. It is Arendt, not Strauss, who primarily interprets the doctrine of the ideas as Plato's solution to the precarious political situation of the philosopher vis-à-vis the city. Showing where Arendt and Strauss diverge on these points deepens our understanding of Strauss. Strauss's interpretation stresses the presuppositions behind the form of questioning that the doctrine of ideas takes. Strauss cannot be characterised as a simply non-metaphysical thinker concerned with the precarious political situation of the philosopher, because his own interpretation of Plato's doctrine of the ideas and the allegory of the cave ultimately raise the question of what nature is.

KEYWORDS

Political philosophy, Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Plato, metaphysics, unpolitical.

As recent scholarship makes clear, the abiding preoccupation in the thought of Hannah Arendt is the relationship between the philosopher and the city.¹ This theme in Arendt's work makes possible more direct comparisons between her thought and that of Leo Strauss, who was similarly preoccupied with the theme of the relationship between the philosopher and the city. Likewise, recent scholarship on Strauss has emphasized the need to distinguish Strauss's "elementary premises" from the impressive edifice of "Straussianism", the body of knowledge inherited from Strauss, but which develops themes that risk covering or concealing Strauss's positions. To recover Strauss's "elementary premises" requires an understanding of the intellectual context that gives rise to his project, as well as a comparison with other thinkers who also share his intellectual context.² This in turn raises the possibility of more direct comparisons between his thought and that of Hannah Arendt.³

While the older tendency in scholarship has been to argue that Strauss and Arendt are radically opposed to each other, newer scholarship has challenged the "all too familiar opposition" by outlining the intellectual context Strauss and Arendt share.⁴ Since both Strauss and Arendt base their projects on unusual readings of seminal texts in the history of philosophy, scholarship now requires a direct comparison of how they interpret the same text. This comparison will sharpen our understanding of their projects.

1 See especially Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, edited by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005); N.B. *The Human Condition*, 2nd Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 12. See also Richard Bernstein, "Arendt on Thinking," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, edited by Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 280; Frederick Dolan, "Arendt on Philosophy and Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Edited by Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Note that Arendt is wary of the term "philosopher", because she holds that the term is compromised by the tradition of the *vita contemplativa*. She prefers to speak about the thinker or the activity of thinking. Strauss, for his part, embraces the term "philosopher." In what follows, to maintain consistency, I shall use the term "philosopher" in the broadest conventional sense, to describe someone engaged in the activity of thinking.

2 Rodrigo Chacón, "Reading Strauss from the Start: On the Heideggerian Origins of Political Philosophy," *European Journal of Political Thought* 9: 3 (2010), esp. 287-88.

3 Earlier comparisons (which generally note the paucity of direct comparisons), include Ronald Beiner, "Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: The Uncommenced Dialogue," *Political Theory* 18:2 (1990); Horst Mewes, "Modern Individualism: Reflections on Oakeshott, Arendt, and Strauss," *Political Science Reviewer* 21 (1992); Dana Villa, "The Philosopher vs. The Citizen: Arendt, Strauss, and Socrates," *Political Theory* 26: 2 (1998).

4 See Liisi Keedus, *The Crisis of German Historicism: The Early Political Thought of Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 135. C.f. Villa, "The Philosopher vs. The Citizen," esp. 147-48; and the veiled reference to Arendt in Nathan Tarcov and Thomas Pangle, "Epilogue," in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. by Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, 3rd Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 928.

In this essay, I compare how Arendt and Strauss interpret the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic*, in order to clarify the distinct "phenomenologies" of philosophic activity each offer.⁵ Specifically, I aim to clarify two ambiguities in the scholarly literature surrounding their "phenomenologies". First, while Arendt recounts the tradition's prejudice in favour of the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa*, she appears to be ambiguous concerning the reasons behind this prejudice.⁶ The resolution to this ambiguity, I contend, comes through understanding that a theme traditionally associated with Strauss, esotericism, plays a role in Arendt's thought. In an esoteric reading of Plato's allegory of the cave, Arendt argues that Plato constructs the tradition for concealed political reasons, to make the political situation of the philosopher less precarious. Arendt concludes that the reasons behind the tradition's prejudice originate with Plato. Exposing Plato's esotericism is part of Arendt's purification of philosophy.

Second, Strauss's recovery of philosophy is often interpreted as "non-metaphysical."⁷ Yet by understanding how the interpretations of Arendt and Strauss diverge, notably in their treatment of Plato's doctrine of the ideas, we sharpen our understanding of Strauss's own views. Strauss, I contend, cannot be characterized as a simply 'non-metaphysical' thinker concerned with the precarious political situation of the philosopher, because his own interpretation of the allegory of the cave points in a different direction. Strauss's own purification of philosophy requires grasping the presuppositions behind the form of questioning that the doctrine of ideas takes. This enables his discovery of nature.

In section I, I describe the similar concerns that impel Arendt and Strauss to reconsider the history of political thought, and the interpretative approaches for which they advocate in reading Plato. In sections II and III, I describe, respectively, the interpretation Arendt and Strauss give of Plato's allegory of the cave. In section IV I contrast Arendt's reading of the cave with Strauss, discussing the role esotericism and the problem of persecution play in each account. In section V I turn to Strauss's account of the ideas. I show the significance of his departure from Arendt, who argues that Plato presents the ideas as he does for political reasons.

5 For a brief statement on phenomenology in Arendt and Strauss respectively, see Steve Buckler, *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory: Challenging the Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 6 and Rodrigo Chacón, "Strauss and Husserl," *Idealistic Studies* 44: 2/3 (2014), 281, 290-91. In focusing on the allegory of the cave, I build upon the study of Harald Bluhm, "Variationen des Höhlengleichnisses. Kritik und Restitution politischer Philosophie bei Hannah Arendt und Leo Strauss," *Deutsches Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 47:6 (1999).

6 Keedus, 174.

7 Catherine Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1996). 116; See also Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics*, 2nd Ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

1. ARENDT AND STRAUSS ON THE REQUIREMENTS FOR INTERPRETING PLATO

As Arendt and Strauss mix interpretative and philosophic concerns in their approaches to reading texts, it is necessary to provide a brief statement on some of the philosophic concerns they share, which bear on how they interpret Plato.

First, both are interested in the problem of the relationship between theory and practice, as raised through the subversion of the traditional priority of theoretical life over practical life that Martin Heidegger initiates.⁸ Both accept the need to undertake this subversion; both take the additional step of elevating the importance of Socrates and Plato vis-à-vis the traditional account, to address the original meaning of key concepts.⁹ For Arendt, the task is to challenge the hierarchy of the theoretical life over practical life that the tradition has held since Socrates and Plato.¹⁰ Strauss's interest is in stressing that the presupposition held by the tradition of philosophy, that theoretical life is the highest, is itself a problem for Socrates and Plato.¹¹ Yet while both are grateful to Heidegger for initiating this subversion, they depart from him to confirm the distinction between the theoretical and the practical life.¹² Both wish to avoid repeating Heidegger's dissolution of the distinctiveness of theoretical life as a highest kind of practical life. In various ways, they think, Heidegger's project simply intensifies the rule of theory over practice. In a way more radical than Heidegger, then, both aim to liberate philosophy and politics from the claim that theory should rule over practice. This bears on the reading of Plato; both challenge the traditional concept of the philosopher ruler.¹³

8 The two most important book-length studies on how Heidegger influences Arendt and Strauss are, respectively, Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Richard Velkley, *Strauss, Heidegger, and the Premises of Philosophy on Original Forgetting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

9 Bluhm, 925. On their shared interest in Socrates, see Villa, "The Philosopher vs. The Citizen."

10 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 16-17.

11 Chacón, "Reading Strauss from the Start," 292.

12 E.g. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 151. See also David O'Connor, "Leo Strauss's Aristotle and Martin Heidegger's Politics," in *Aristotle and Modern Politics: The Persistence of Political Philosophy*, edited by Aristide Tessitore (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002). In *The Human Condition*, 16-17, Arendt challenges the hierarchy between theoretical and practical life, but affirms the "validity of the experience underlying the distinction." See also Keedus, 174.

13 O'Connor, esp. 165-68; Jacques Taminiaux, *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker*, translated and edited by Michael Gendre (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), esp. 20-21.

The second concern of each is “the tradition,” specifically the tradition of political philosophy. Both agree that understanding the origins of the tradition would help grasp better basic philosophical problems; to understand these origins requires demands a substantive interpretive strategy.¹⁴ Yet each understands this tradition in distinct ways, which leads each to adopt different interpretive approaches. For Strauss, discussion of tradition *qua* tradition draws attention to the fact that traditions essentially obscure genuine phenomena.¹⁵ Strauss’s target is primarily the tradition of modern political philosophy, which obscures its own status as a tradition and obscures the concepts of pre-modern philosophy. The central issue Strauss raises is that the modern tradition alters the understanding of theory and practice, dissolving their distinction.¹⁶

It is necessary to raise awareness of the traditional character of modern philosophy, and then recover pre-modern or classical philosophy. This recovery requires the correct mixture of history (interpretation of texts or attention to their literary character) and philosophy (the critique of texts or the quest for truth). In can be summarised in three steps.¹⁷

Strauss’s first step is to affirm his own ignorance. So Strauss precedes his study of Plato’s *Republic* with this exhortation: “Let us abandon every pretense to know. Let us admit that the Platonic dialogue is an enigma-something perplexing and to be wondered at.”¹⁸ Second, maintaining philosophical concern with the claim to truth, Strauss resolves to remain open to changing his views and rejecting inherited modern prejudices.¹⁹ In interpreting Plato, Strauss stresses the need to distinguish Plato from the

14 Bluhm, 926.

15 Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 31. See also *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 73; *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 9; *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 57; *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 12.

16 Strauss writes to Eric Voegelin: ‘the root of all modern darkness from the 17th century on is the obscuring of the difference between theory and praxis.’ Letter to Eric Voegelin, March 14, 1950, in *Faith and Political Philosophy: the Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1964* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 66.

17 Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, 76-77; *The City and Man*, 52; “On Collingwood’s Philosophy of History,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 5: 4 (1952), 583-84. In the presentation of Strauss below, I am indebted to Nathan Tarcov, “Philosophy & History: Tradition and Interpretation in the Work of Leo Strauss,” *Polity* 16: 1 (1983)^[SEP], 20-27. See also Arthur Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 342; Danilo Manca, “Naturalness and Historicity: Strauss and Klein on the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns,” *Philosophical Readings* 9:1 (2017), 44-45.

18 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 55.

19 An early example of this in Strauss’s writings would be in his 1935 *Hobbes’ Politische Wissenschaft in ihrer Genesis*. See Pierpaolo Cicarelli, “Ordinary language and transcendence of ideas:^[SEP]On the

traditional inheritance of Platonism. In so doing, he aims to understand the dialogue form properly. Moreover, Strauss argues that Socrates's irony presents genuine interpretive problems. Against a modern prejudice, it is not merely a derogatory epithet in the mouths of his detractors.²⁰

The problem of Socratic irony raises one of Strauss's most controversial interpretive tools: esotericism. Against another modern prejudice, the basic claim of esotericism is that in their writings, some philosophers practice a form of rhetoric in which they partly reveal and partly conceal their true beliefs or teachings.²¹ To recover that true teaching or intention requires a combination of careful textual exegesis and study of historical context. The reason it is worthwhile to consider esotericism is that it is the way some philosophers choose to transmit philosophical truths to their interpreters.²²

Strauss's third step is to consider whether the claims within a text in the history of philosophy are true, thereby sustaining philosophic activity throughout his interpretive activity. Plato's use of Socratic irony requires the interpreter to consider the argument critically, acknowledging its weakness and asking why a fuller argument was not given at a particular moment in the text. Understanding Plato's thought is "inseparable from criticism, but that criticism is in service of the striven-for understanding of Plato's thought."²³ In a word, Strauss's view is that to achieve the goal of understanding the text, the interpretation of the history of philosophy demands philosophy.

In contrast with Strauss, Arendt's targets the continuous tradition of political philosophy, which begins with the teachings of Plato and ends with the teachings of Marx. The central issue Arendt raises is how this tradition relates theory to practice. Plato ranks theory above practice; Marx reverses this by holding that theory must realize itself in practice. Platonism, then the negation of Platonism in Marx, constitutes the tradition.²⁴ To understand this tradition requires a particular kind of genealogy.²⁵

phenomenological "reactivation" or "repetition" of Plato's dialogues by Leo Strauss" (Unpublished Paper), 3-4.

20 Strauss, "On Collingwood's Philosophy of History," 576, 582-83; *The City and Man* 51-52, 61.

21 This basic definition of esotericism is drawn from Melzer, 1-2.

22 A succinct statement on Strauss and esotericism can be found in Catherine Zuckert, "The Straussian approach," in *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Political Philosophy*, ed. George Klosko (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). It is not possible here to address all the controversies surrounding esotericism, which raise questions about how Strauss rediscovers this tool in the history of philosophy, and the role esotericism plays in Strauss's own writings. For esotericism's philosophic importance, see Melzer, 205-34.

23 Strauss, "On Collingwood's Philosophy of History," 583.

24 Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age," *Between Past and Future*. (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 17.

25 Jonathan Peter Schwartz, *Arendt's Judgment: Freedom, Responsibility, Citizenship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 21-24.

Arendt's genealogy is premised upon the elevation of narrative history, particularly narrative political history, in which "events" are recounted or narrated.²⁶ It is this political history that discreetly shapes the lived reality of the present.²⁷ The tradition of philosophy, including the tradition of political philosophy, develops as a response to this narration of political events. Philosophy is a reflection on and an evaluation of the changing world.²⁸ Arendt's view is that events change the world, and philosophy registers the shock of the event.²⁹ Philosophy is a response to events.

We are now, however, cut off from this tradition.³⁰ In insisting that the tradition is broken, Arendt insists that contemporary thinkers are unable to grasp in any consistent unity what the thinkers of the past tradition understood. The rupture between the past and present is too great. This places us in an interpretative position where a straightforward recovery of the past is impossible. We can only dive for the fragments or "pearls" of the thought of the past, presented in the texts of the past, which provide the narrative origins of the present.³¹ This means that Arendt often reads the authors against themselves, against what they explicitly say. Such an eclectic reading strategy defies straightforward explanation and Arendt does not offer such an explanation.³² The basic presupposition of her approach, however, is not that she claims to understand the authors better than they understand themselves. Rather, because she eulogises narrative history, the events to which the author responds are a source of authentic phenomena that the text may conceal.³³ This includes the lived experience of the author.³⁴ Thus the historical situation surrounding the author can disclose authentic phenomena that the author may have disregarded or hidden.³⁵

If the tradition is firmly established within the teachings of Plato, Arendt argues that these teachings originate with events that shape Plato's experience, and therefore his

26 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 252; Schwartz, 40-41; Keedus, 187.

27 Keedus, 187. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of Mind, Vol I. Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 212-213; *Men in Dark Times* (USA: Stellar Books, 2014), 203; "Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought," *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, edited by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 431; "Tradition and the Modern Age," *Between Past and Future*, 26-27.

28 Arendt, "A Reply to Eric Voegelin," in *Essays in Understanding*, 401-404; "Tradition and the Modern Age," *Between Past and Future*, 27, 37-38.

29 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 273.

30 "Understanding and Politics," in *Essays in Understanding*, 309; "Tradition and the Modern Age," *Between Past and Future*, 26; "On the Nature of Totalitarianism," in *Essays in Understanding*, 339-40.

31 Arendt, *The Life of Mind*, 212.

32 Buckler, 4-5.

33 Keedus, 186.

34 Arendt, "Preface," *Between Past and Future*, 14.

35 Keedus, 186.

thinking. Arendt holds that the defining event for Plato is the trial and death of Socrates; it is what Arendt calls the “turning point” for the history of political thought.³⁶ It creates political thought as a tradition. “Far from comprehending and conceptualizing all the political experiences of Western mankind,” Arendt writes, the tradition “grew out of a specific historical constellation: the trial of Socrates and the conflict between the philosopher and the *polis*.”³⁷ Scandalized by the trial and death of Socrates, Plato writes his dialogues as a response to this event. Arendt’s genealogy requires us to read Plato’s dialogues in light of this event. But the presupposition of this reading strategy is that in his dialogues, Plato adopts a form of rhetoric in which he partly reveals and partly conceals his true beliefs or teachings. In other words, Arendt’s reading strategy presupposes Plato’s esotericism.

Although Arendt does not describe it as such, it is appropriate to call her interpretation “esoteric” for several reasons. First, while Arendt neither cited Strauss’s work nor discussed it directly in her published writings, she was familiar with it. In the classroom she included Strauss’s work on her course reading lists, and in private writings, she explicitly praised Strauss for his “esoteric” readings of Plato. Hence she was familiar with esotericism and expressed no inherent hostility to it.³⁸ Second, the theme of esotericism is not exclusively the purview of Strauss: it is a question for the history of philosophy. It can be discussed independently of Strauss’s own formulations.³⁹ Third, some recent Arendt scholarship has already begun this discussion, calling her reading of Plato “esoteric.” This opens the door for her reading to be explored further in these terms.⁴⁰ Nevertheless we must bear in mind that esotericism plays a much more intricate role in Strauss’s thought than it does in Arendt, and that—as we shall see—their specific analyses of Plato’s esotericism differs.⁴¹

Although Arendt never outlines her reading of Plato in a single text, it is clear that from the early 1950s onwards, she had decided that a distinctive interpretation of Plato, notably his allegory of the cave, would play a key role in her philosophic project. Interpreting Plato is a critical task for understanding the origins of the tradition and what it

36 Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 6.

37 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 12.

38 Keedus, 5.

39 For a detailed study of the history of esotericism that moves far beyond Strauss’s own formulations, see Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines*; I rely on Melzer’s classifications below.

40 Schwartz, 95.

41 Esotericism can have different doctrines, motives, purposes, techniques, and strategies. The key issue is attachment to an art of rhetoric of partly revealing and partly concealing one’s true beliefs or teachings. Melzer, 2-3.

obscures. Her interpretation is present in the foreground and background of subsequent lectures and works.⁴²

To summarise, then, Arendt and Strauss share some important presuppositions: their concern with the problem of theory and practice, their interest in assessing the tradition of philosophy and political thought in terms of how it conceives the relationship between theory and practice, and their interest in the origins of the tradition and the place of Socrates and Plato. These concerns lead them to develop their interpretive approaches. This summary, though, should not lead one to simply equating their interpretive approaches. Their different conceptions of “the tradition”—Strauss’s divide between the ancients and the modern tradition, compared to Arendt’s continuous tradition from Plato to Marx—entails a different critical stance to the ancients and to Plato. While Strauss maintains positive references to the ancients, Arendt mixes negative and positive references. In the case of Plato’s allegory, Arendt sees it primarily as a negative model initiating the tradition’s concealment of the right relationship between theory and practice; Strauss primarily sees it as a positive model that precedes the tradition’s concealment of the right relationship between theory and practice.⁴³

2. ARENDT’S READING OF PLATO’S CAVE

Responding to the trial and death of Socrates, Arendt argues that Plato came to the conclusion that the irresponsible actions of the city had killed the finest example of philosophy the world had yet seen. So from the point of view of philosophy, philosophy has a negative interest in politics: politics, wrongly practiced or badly managed, threatens the life of the philosopher and makes it impossible for him to pursue philosophy.⁴⁴ From the point of view of the city, however, the philosopher is a “good-for-nothing,” someone who does not act in the best interests of the city and makes others unfit for political life.⁴⁵ These two opposing views represent the conflict between the philosopher and the *polis*. The conflict between the philosopher and *polis*, and the subsequent danger to the philosopher, leads Plato to conclude that politics must change to keep

42 See Schwartz, 95-96. The key texts that I shall rely on for understanding Arendt’s allegory of the cave are “Socrates” in *The Promise of Politics* (originally published as “Philosophy and Politics” in *Social Research* 57:1 (1990)); *The Human Condition*; and “Tradition and the Modern Age” and “What is Authority?” in *Between Past and Future*.

43 Bluhm, 918, 925.

44 Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 82.

45 Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 9-10.

philosophy safe.⁴⁶ But Plato also wants to make philosophy useful for politics, so that it has the resources to guide politics toward good management—thereby securing the position of the philosopher.⁴⁷ Plato’s intention in creating the allegory of the cave is wholly political—he wants to inaugurate a change in both thinking and action in order to solve the conflict between the philosopher and the *polis*. Yet Arendt’s Plato conceals this political intention, practicing esotericism.

Plato presents the allegory of the cave as the biography of the philosopher, understood through the three “turnings” that philosopher undergoes.⁴⁸ First, in the cave itself, the philosopher frees himself from the chains that oblige the cave-dwellers to look at the screen where the images appear. Turning, he sees the artificial fire, which illuminates the things in the cave. He sees the models being pushed back and forth that project the image onto the screen, and thereby sees the things in the cave as they really are: projections of models. But more decisive is the second turning. Here, the philosopher seeks the causes of things, such as where the fire comes from. He turns and finds an exit from the cave, which leads him to the clear sky and an atmosphere without other people. In this place, seeing in the full light, he becomes a philosopher. In a notable detail for Arendt, he recognises the sun as the source of light, which Plato allegorises as the idea of the good, the idea that illuminates all other ideas.⁴⁹ Third, the philosopher turns back into the cave, to attempt to convince the cave-dwellers that what they see is not real. But the disorientation the philosopher experiences when he returns to the cave entails that his thoughts do not make sense to the cave-dwellers; it contradicts their thoughts. This puts the philosopher in danger.

The allegory of the cave appears to portray how politics looks from the viewpoint of philosophy. But its deeper purpose, its esoteric purpose, is to change philosophy and politics. For Arendt, the depiction of the cave and the cave-dwellers captures Plato’s response to the trial and death of Socrates. Socrates relied on the primacy of persuasion and *doxa*. For Plato, Socrates’s failure to persuade his judges casts doubt on the validity of persuasion, the specifically political form of speech, hitherto the highest art in the Greek world. It also cast doubt on *doxa*, opinion. Socrates submitted his own *doxa* to the *doxa* of the Athenians, to persuade them, but the majority were not persuaded and condemned him. For such an injustice to happen by means of *doxa* showed that *doxa* was a grossly unreliable standard for politics. Plato then yearned for an absolute standard beyond *doxa* that could serve as a reliable standard for politics. Plato’s metaphysical

46 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 229.

47 Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 37.

48 Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 29-31.

49 Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 10.

conclusion, “the most anti-Socratic conclusion,” is to oppose opinion to truth.⁵⁰ The first two turnings of the philosopher indicate the metaphysical teaching Plato promulgates in response to the death of Socrates.

For the philosopher, the key feature of the world of the cave should not be the activities of speech or deed. Plato’s cave-dwellers do not engage in either.⁵¹ Instead, it is that they are looking at a screen of unreal images. For Arendt, an important textual clue that reveals Plato’s true intention is his use of the Homeric vocabulary to describe Hades in this context. Life in the cave becomes the new Hades, the unreal world.⁵²

On account of the world of the cave being unreal, the philosopher must not be content with the world of the cave-dwellers and must seek a different world. The first “turning” of the future philosopher is for him to recognize that the apparent reality expressed through *doxai* is a distortion of reality. He opposes himself to *doxai*. The second turning, leading the future philosopher to the clear sky, is in search of the causes of what things are. Outside the cave of appearances, alone, he discovers causes and the essences of things. The essences are the ideas (*eide*), and the study of them makes the philosopher.

Plato’s allegory of the cave comprises the metaphysical teaching of opposing opinion to an absolute standard of truth reflected in Plato’s doctrine of ideas. In rejecting *doxa*, Plato creates another world devoid of *doxa*, a world of truth. One is a realm of sensory contingencies; the other, the realm of suprasensory, permanent ideas. One is the realm of politics; the other, the realm of the philosopher. One is the realm with other human beings; the other, a realm outside the plurality of men. The philosopher’s activity separates him from other human beings. It is practiced alone. Plato opposes the contemplation of the eternal outside the cave to life in the cave. The former realm is serious, the latter, the “realm of human affairs,” is not.⁵³

This account of philosophy, Arendt argues, entrenches the conflict between the philosopher and the *polis*. In the third turning the philosopher undergoes, he returns to the cave to tell those within it that their world is not the true world.⁵⁴ But Plato does not offer an account of how the philosopher might succeed in persuading the cave-dwellers. The implication is that this is an impossible task. Instead, Plato jumps to his unique solution: that the philosopher rules the *polis*. The solution is political because he insists that the philosopher is still concerned foremost with the eternal, non-changing, non-human affairs. Philosophy’s basic orientation does not change; it still disregards human

⁵⁰ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 8.

⁵¹ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 31; “What is Authority,” *Between Past and Future*, 114.

⁵² Arendt, “Tradition and the Modern Age,” *Between Past and Future*, 36-37.

⁵³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 19, 185.

⁵⁴ Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 29.

affairs.⁵⁵ But Arendt's Plato also claims that the philosopher's concern for the eternal ideas does not make him, as the *polis* thinks, "good-for-nothing."⁵⁶ Instead, the concern with the eternal actually makes the philosopher fit to play a political role. As Plato teaches through the doctrine of ideas, philosophy is in fact useful for politics.

Arendt does not think that the origin of the doctrine of ideas is primarily political, nor that the ideas were primarily a concept of standards and measures. However, she argues that it is Plato who deploys the ideas for political purposes, turning them into a concept of measurement.⁵⁷ For the Greeks, Arendt holds, the ideal is the *kalon k'agathon* (the beautiful and the good). Based on this ideal, Plato, in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, makes the idea of the beautiful supreme. There and in the first books of the *Republic*, the philosopher is defined as the lover of beauty. In the context of the allegory, where what is most real is that which illuminates, the beautiful should have the best claim to be the most important of the ideas, since it simply shines forth. But oddly, this is the one place in Plato's corpus where the idea of the good appears.

Arendt pounces on this textual insertion to insist that it is the place where Plato shows his full political intention, and distorts authentic philosophical experience, in order to make philosophy political.⁵⁸ Decoupling the good from the beautiful, Plato transforms the ideas into standards for politics and elevates the idea of the good over the idea of the beautiful and all others. The notion of *agathos* (good) carries the weight of being useful, beneficial, or "good-for" something. In elevating the idea of the good in the cave allegory, Plato challenges the city in two ways: first, that the philosopher's concern with eternal things, far from making him "good-for-nothing", makes him good for something; and second, that the eternal things are not merely beautiful, but are also useful or valuable.⁵⁹

In this way, the idea of the good is ready to be applied to politics. Plato sets up the dichotomy between the world of human affairs and the world of ideas as a relationship where the former ultimately depends on the latter. Those who inhabit the world of human affairs, the cave dwellers, are in darkness. They require the standards the philosopher has discovered in the world outside.⁶⁰ They require the philosopher ruler. He is the only one who knows the highest, most useful idea for political life: the idea of the

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 8. *The Human Condition*, 226n.

⁵⁸ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 11; "What is Authority," *Between Past and Future*, 112; Schwartz, 99-101.

⁵⁹ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 9-10.

⁶⁰ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 31, 56.

good.⁶¹ The idea of the good provides the philosopher ruler the necessary standard for ruling human affairs with objective certainty.⁶²

Arendt's interpretation, which emphasises how Plato uses the allegory to politicise philosophy, connects with her more famous account in *The Human Condition* about how the tradition of political thought distorts the *vita activa*. This distortion stems from the standard of measurement Platonic philosophy applies to politics, which establishes the ruler-ruled relationship as constitutive of politics. In that conception of rule, foretold by the allegory of the cave's omission of deed and speech, as well as the absence of persuasion, there is no place for action.⁶³

The ruler, in the Platonic model, is the one who knows what is, grasping the idea of what something is. Applied to political rule, the philosopher ruler knows the idea (*eidos*) of what is-to-be in politics, the idea of the good, then organizes the means and executes them to bring about the idea. This is the same structure of action as *poiesis*: one perceives the image or shape (*eidos*) of the product-to-be, then organizes the means to realize it.⁶⁴ Just as the craftsman applies his standards and rules to make the product, so the philosopher ruler applies his ideas. The model of *poiesis* provides the objective certainty that Plato seeks. The city is the statue, while the philosopher ruler is the sculptor.⁶⁵ The best political actor is the man who acts like the craftsman. If certain, clearly indicated standards must result from politics, men can only live together lawfully and politically when some rule and some obey.⁶⁶ Plato's conception of the philosopher ruler is one who dominates others. Arendt thinks the philosopher ruler, as a form of one-man rule, is technically a tyranny.⁶⁷

For Arendt, Plato's allegory of the cave flips the story of the philosopher Thales, mocked by the peasant girl for looking ridiculous, on its head. For Plato, it is not philosophy but politics that deserves mockery.⁶⁸ To flip the story, he transforms the experience of philosophy and politics, and inaugurates the formidable tradition of political thought.

Philosophically speaking, Platonism constructs a series of metaphysical teachings based especially around the two-worlds fallacy: between the suprasensory and sensory worlds. Arendt's goal is not to attack this and other fallacies *per se*. It is rather to observe

61 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 226.

62 *Ibid.*, 226.

63 *Ibid.*, 224.

64 *Ibid.*, 225.

65 *Ibid.*, 226-227.

66 *Ibid.*, 222.

67 *Ibid.*, 221.

68 *Ibid.*, 9.

how that these fallacies emerge from authentic experiences of thinking. Politically speaking, Plato's "city in speech," the commonwealth ruled by philosophers, was never taken seriously by the tradition. The prospect of the philosopher ruling tyrannically was thereby never a live concern for politics.⁶⁹ Plato's intention in presenting the allegory of the cave and the city in speech is for the sake of preserving the safety and flourishing of the philosophical way of life.⁷⁰

For this reason, one must be wary of claiming that Arendt sees continuity between the intention of Plato's *Republic*, the concept of the philosopher ruler, and the history of tyranny into modernity.⁷¹ But the continuity comes through promulgating the teaching that the philosopher should not treat the political world seriously. This teaches prepares the way for further theoretical transformations of the political world, where it becomes conceived of as the realm of mere necessity, the lowest level of human activity.⁷²

Through a combination of historical comparisons to the Greek view and textual analysis, Arendt exposes Plato's esotericism. In exposing this esoteric transformation of philosophy and politics, the conclusion that Arendt draws is that Plato misconstrues the relationship between the philosopher and the *polis*. He introduces an idea of how the *vita contemplativa* should relate to the *vita activa* and political life as a right of the philosopher to return and rule politics. Worked out in the tradition, the realisation of philosophy eventually abolishes authentic philosophy and abolishes authentic politics.⁷³

3. STRAUSS'S READING OF PLATO'S CAVE

In Arendt's reading of Plato, he is fully exposed; her reading does not admit of further Platonic vestments that need to be stripped away. Strauss's reading of Plato, however, never claims to understand him completely. Strauss, unlike Arendt, presents a persistently enigmatic Plato. Strauss invites other scholars to follow him in order to explore Plato's philosophic depths, inspiring a thriving tradition of Platonic studies. Yet

69 Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 27, 84.

70 Arendt, "What is Authority," *Between Past and Future*, 107-115.

71 Plato's conception arises from "the earnest desire to find a substitute for action rather than from any irresponsible or tyrannical will to power." Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 222. C.f. Michael McCarthy, *The Political Humanism of Hannah Arendt* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2012), 132-33.

72 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 85, 314; *The Promise of Politics*, 82.

73 Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 3.

as noted above, it is necessary to treat this Straussian tradition with caution, as some of its seminal Platonic studies risk obscuring Strauss's "elementary premises".⁷⁴

Since a full account of the "elementary premises" involved in Strauss's study of Plato is impossible here, my intention in this section is merely to identify some of the most important themes Strauss draws attention to from his interpretation of the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic*.⁷⁵

Grasping these themes, I argue, leads us away from the emphases of several "Straussian" interpretations. These interpretations either prioritise Plato's account of the relationship between "the philosopher and the political community"⁷⁶; or Plato concealing his true intentions beneath a series of metaphysical teachings promulgated for political purposes, which carries over into Strauss's own practice.⁷⁷ To that end I shall rely primarily on Strauss's essay "On Plato's *Republic*," in *The City and Man*.

To recover and assess Plato's philosophic themes, Strauss dispenses with received tradition of primarily Christian Platonism to make a question of the dialogue itself. In answering the question of what the Platonic dialogue is, Strauss settles on the interpretive principle of "logographic necessity": nothing is accidental in the Platonic dialogue, and a full consideration of its philosophic themes—which coincides with a full consideration of Plato's intention—requires attending to the speech and deeds of its characters.⁷⁸

Strauss's direct interpretation of the allegory is relatively brief. It comes in the final act of the essay, where Strauss observes that the question of how the good city is possible

74 Seminal "Straussian" studies of the *Republic* include Allan Bloom, "Interpretive Essay," in *The Republic of Plato*, 2nd Ed., translated by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Leon Harold Craig, *The War Lover: A Study of Plato's Republic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1996); Laurence Lampert, *How Philosophy Became Socratic: A Study of Plato's Protagoras, Charmides, and Republic* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Republic: A Study* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2005); Catherine Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

75 For an account of Strauss's reading of Plato as a whole, see Michael Zuckert and Catherine Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 117-143. For the origins of Strauss's reading of Plato, see Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, translated by Christopher Nadon (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

76 See Bloom, "Interpretive Essay," esp. 307.

77 See Lampert, "How Philosophy Became Socratic," esp. 329-336. For the reading that Strauss promulgates metaphysical teachings, which he himself does not espouse, for political purposes (or "political esotericism"), see Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics*, esp. 110; Lawrence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Lampert revises this argument considerably in *The Enduring Importance of Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), yet esotericism still plays a prominent role in his assessment of Strauss's "enduring importance."

78 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 59-60.

in *Republic V* leads to Socrates introducing philosophy. The change that would transform actual cities into good cities is the coincidence of political power and philosophy: either philosophers become rulers or rulers become philosophers.

Socrates's proposal raises two interpretive questions. The first is whether the tension between philosophy and the city can really be overcome through a philosopher ruler, as Socrates claims.⁷⁹ This becomes a question because the rule of the philosophers is introduced as "a means" for the realisation of justice in the city—the just city is possible only if philosophers rule. Philosophy is not introduced as the end of man.⁸⁰ Hence for Strauss, the dialogue has a notable omission. The *Republic's* discussion of justice has for Strauss abstracted from *eros*, especially philosophic *eros*: "the longing for immortality through participation by knowledge in the things which are unchangeable in every respect."⁸¹ In the context of the *Republic*, the *eros* of the philosopher is the quest for the knowledge of the idea of the good. The dialogue's abstraction from *eros* raises the question of how *eros* could be in tension with justice, or how philosophy could be in tension with the city.

The claim that political power and philosophy can coincide seems "incredible," because the city and the philosopher are both antagonistic to one another. This is the one place in the essay where Strauss refers to the fate of the historical Socrates to strengthen the argument of the dramatic Socrates.⁸² Strauss's specific formulation of the problem is whether "the cities become willing to be ruled by philosophers and the philosophers become willing to rule the cities."⁸³ To bring about this change of will requires the right kind of persuasion. In this context, Strauss notes, Socrates declares that he and Thrasymachus have become friends.⁸⁴

The second interpretive question is that of Thrasymachus. The art of Thrasymachus, the art of rhetoric, is a possible solution to the tension between the philosopher and the city. Thrasymachus plays a significant role in Strauss's interpretation of the *Republic*, becoming its central figure. Thrasymachus stands alone in the central place amongst the *Republic's* interlocutors, between the father-son pair of Cephalus and Polemarchus, and the pair of brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus. Elevating Thrasymachus's importance so that his art also points at other dialogues, Strauss makes

79 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 112.

80 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 122.

81 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 110.

82 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 123. The other reference (132) is to weaken the argument of the dramatic Socrates: it concerns the omission of any reference to the fate of Socrates in the account of democracy.

83 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 123.

84 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 123.

Thrasymachus the bearer of a political rhetoric distinctive from Socrates's erotic rhetoric. With this move, Strauss draws Thrasymachus and Socrates closer together, so that the shared interests of each in rhetoric draws them to become allies of the other.⁸⁵

As an ally of philosophy, Thrasymachus's political rhetoric supplies the right kind of persuasion necessary and sufficient to bring about the possibility of philosopher rule; that Socrates has at this stage in the dialogue tamed Thrasymachus shows that Socrates can at least succeed in persuading him or other holders of his art.

Nevertheless, the multitude must be persuaded. Socrates argues that the multitude of non-philosophers appears more persuadable about the worth of philosophy and more good-natured than it was initially thought.⁸⁶ However, it is not clear that the philosopher can learn the art of Thrasymachus. For the many to be persuaded of the value of philosophy, they must be addressed by a Thrasymachus who has listened to Socrates, rather than by Socrates directly. Without a Thrasymachus, the just city would not exist.⁸⁷

The hardest task is not to persuade the multitude that the philosopher should rule. Rather, it is to persuade the philosopher that he should rule the multitude. Non-philosophers must compel the philosopher to rule. The philosophers are unwilling to rule because of their *eros* for knowledge. This desire requires going beyond opinions toward knowledge. However, political life cannot satisfy this desire, so the philosophers are unwilling to rule. But as Strauss writes:

Given the prejudice against the philosophers, this compulsion will not be forthcoming if the philosophers do not in the first place persuade the non-philosophers to rule over them, and this persuasion will not be forthcoming, given the philosophers' unwillingness to rule. We arrive then at the conclusion that the just city is not possible because of the philosophers' unwillingness to rule.⁸⁸

It is in this context, when we learn that the just city is impossible, where the cave allegory is presented. If the philosophers are just, it is precisely because of their contempt for the things the non-philosophers contest.

85 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 73-74, 124, 134. Commentary on Strauss has observed and developed this. See Seth Benardete, "Leo Strauss's *The City and Man*," *Political Science Reviewer* 8:1 (1978), 9; Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, 149; and *The Enduring Importance of Leo Strauss*, 64n, 129n. See 142n for the placement of Strauss's own paragraphs on Thrasymachus.

86 As Strauss sees it, at 497d8-498d4, Socrates concedes that philosophy as it is presently practiced is the opposite of what it should be. At 499d8-500a8, he says the multitude can change their opinion. At 501c4-502a4 he says that the multitude will be persuaded to accept philosophers as rulers. *The City and Man*, 124.

87 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 123-24.

88 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 124.

Strauss identifies the cave with the city. The best of the cave-dwellers, the good non-citizens, are passionately attached to their opinions, “and therefore passionately opposed to philosophy”.⁸⁹ They are thus not ready to consider that their opinions may be false. Despite Socrates’s aspiration that they are open to persuasion, in reality they are not. It is therefore “natural” that “philosophy and the city tend away from one another in opposite directions.”⁹⁰ The allegory of the cave confirms that the tension between philosophy and the city cannot be overcome. The coincidence of philosophy and political power that the philosopher ruler demands to realise the just city is, in the last analysis, against nature. The just city is therefore impossible because it is against nature.⁹¹ Foreshadowed in the dialogue’s setting and in its *dramatis personae*, which includes victims of the Thirty Tyrants, the idea of the just city cannot be actualised.⁹²

If the first philosophical theme raised in the allegory of the cave is the impossibility of the just city, the second is the limitation of the rhetorical art. Strauss puts the philosopher in a position where he lacks the power to compel the multitude, but could persuade some who have the art of rhetoric, like Thrasymachus, who could then in turn persuade the multitude. But rhetoric lacks this omnipotence to persuade, because nature of the many is to be attached to their own opinions.⁹³

The third theme that flows from the allegory of the cave is the duality of justice. In Strauss’s account, the philosopher in the city is just in two senses. In the first sense, the philosopher, with his natural desire, his *eros*, for knowledge, is the only one who can be just as the city is just: self-sufficient and free, and undertaking the most pleasant work regardless of the consequences. Only in the philosopher do justice and happiness coincide. But in the second sense, the philosopher serves his fellow citizens and the city, and obeys the law. Yet he compels himself to do so. The philosopher serves the city not out of his desire to seek the truth, but under compulsion.⁹⁴

The allegory of the cave discloses these two senses of justice. By the fact that the ascent of philosopher is a compelled ascent, the allegory highlights the sense of justice that is merely necessary, that is choiceworthy not for its own sake but for its consequences. This is the justice that the citizens have. That the philosophy is just in this sense too is important. Strauss emphasises that the philosopher is patriotic—he refers

89 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 125.

90 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 125.

91 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 63-65; Michael Zuckert and Catherine Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy*, 119-120.

92 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 127. Hence the question of the ideal city as a practical plan vanishes at Republic 472c-d. The early moderns, by contrast, make the practicality or effectiveness the main issue. See Cicarelli, 14.

93 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 126.

94 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 127-28.

to the *Apology*, where Socrates says he favours his fellow citizens over non-citizens.⁹⁵ Again, though for different reasons, the lesson is that the philosopher must take politics seriously. However, the abstraction from *eros*, characteristic of the *Republic*—and tellingly omitted in the cave allegory—hints at the sense of justice that is attractive or choice-worthy for its own sake irrespective of the consequences. The philosopher's concern for the city can never compromise or replace his quest for knowledge.⁹⁶

The two senses of justice have political implications that push in different directions, as the *Republic's* presentation of democracy indicates. On the one hand, from the perspective of philosophy, it provokes a defence of democracy as the only actual regime in which philosophy is possible. On the other hand, from the perspective of the citizen, it provokes a critique of democracy as a regime that does not induce the citizens, the non-philosophers, to be as good as they can. Both are exaggerations: in fact the Athenian democracy killed Socrates and engaged in violent riots, and the democratic man portrayed is excessively intemperate. As Strauss understands it, these exaggerations again serve to emphasise the natural disharmony between the philosophy and the city.⁹⁷

Yet here there is an important clue toward the fourth theme that the allegory of the cave suggests, though Strauss is very circumspect about it in his concluding remarks. In the bifurcated treatment of democracy, the root of the disharmony between the philosophy and the city stems from the two senses of justice at work in the same person, the philosopher.

In the *Republic*, justice is presented as providing the right order to the philosopher's soul, but this takes place without discussing the nature of the soul. The allegory of the cave, and the *Republic* as a whole, having abstracted from *eros* and therefore having abstracted from the nature of the soul, ultimately point toward back toward the nature of the soul.⁹⁸ The two senses of justice at work in the same soul suggest that the fundamental duality to which Strauss wishes to draw attention, deeper than the dualism between the philosopher and the city, lies in the human soul.

95 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 128; Strauss cites *Apology* 30a3-4.

96 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 128.

97 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 131-33.

98 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 138.

4. EXPOSING THE PROBLEM OF PLATONISM: NATURE, POLITICS, AND THE ORIGINS OF THE TRADITION

Bearing Strauss's interpretation in mind, it is possible to clarify two themes that appear in Arendt: first, her account of the conflict between the philosopher and the city; and second, the character of her esoteric reading of Plato. Both Arendt and Strauss use their interpretation of Plato to draw attention to the antagonism between the philosopher and the city, raised as a concern about the threat politics poses to philosophy. Yet for Arendt, this tension is much more blunt.

Strauss's reading of Plato complicates that tension by arguing that the philosopher can in fact tame those in the city who possess the art of rhetoric, such as Thrasymachus. The tension between philosophers and political rhetors can be assuaged; philosophy can make a friend of rhetoric. However, the tension between the philosopher and the multitude in the city cannot. The multitude contains good citizens who are passionately attached to their opinions, and so are hostile to philosophy. It is this passionate attachment to their opinions that makes the philosopher's political situation precarious, inviting persecution.

In his commentary on medieval political philosophy, Strauss argues that to make the situation of the philosopher vis-à-vis the many less precarious, it is necessary to practice a *politic* philosophy that keeps the philosopher safe. But this is a lesson he draws primarily from Jewish and Islamic philosophers, not from Plato's *Republic*.⁹⁹

In Plato's case, Strauss stresses different lessons. His interpretation of the cave and the *Republic* do not make the persecution of the philosopher at the hands of the city the dialogue's central theme. Strauss only makes one direct reference to Socrates's fate in order to interpret the action of the dialogue.¹⁰⁰ Rather, Strauss's Plato teaches that the art of rhetoric is limited. Persuasion cannot succeed completely. Yet even if it could, the nature of the philosopher is such that his attention remains on what is choiceworthy or just for its own sake, the quest for knowledge. The gulf between the philosopher and the citizen rests on their divergent senses of justice and their basis in nature. Plato's project is to disclose that the natural divide is more important than the political divide. The origins of the philosophic tradition lie not in the political divide between the philosopher and the city, but in the nature of the human soul.¹⁰¹

99 Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 8, 13, 18-20.

100 Note, then, the difference between Strauss's interpretation of the cave and the "Straussian" interpretation of Allan Bloom, "Interpretive Essay," 307-311.

101 C.f. Rosen, *Plato's Republic*, 269-72. Against what he claims to be Strauss's view, Rosen argues that the allegory of the cave is not about the city, about the divide in the human soul. In this respect his

Like Strauss, Arendt subscribes to a sociology in which the philosophers are essentially a natural minority, at risk of persecution from the majority.¹⁰² As Arendt orients her interpretation of Plato in terms of his response to the trial and death of Socrates, she portrays the conflict between the philosopher and the *polis* in a much more direct manner, without Strauss's qualifications. The *polis* is an existential threat to those rare characters such as Socrates. This risk of persecution is the motivation for Plato's project: he wants to make the world safe for philosophy.¹⁰³ Thus for Arendt, Plato's project is almost exclusively based on the precarious political situation of the philosopher. Plato advances his most important philosophical innovation, the idea of the good, as a set of teachings aimed at making this political situation less precarious. Plato's project succeeds, and becomes Platonism. Platonism opens up the gap between the philosopher and the city in such a way that philosophically, the two-worlds metaphysical fallacy defines the gap, and politically, the superiority of philosophy over politics defines the gap. Hence for Arendt, the origins of the tradition are political. They lie in the political division between the philosopher and the city, and Plato's reasons for striving to protect philosophy from this divide.

To reveal the origins of the tradition, both Arendt and Strauss subscribe to an esoteric interpretation of Plato. Both agree that Plato adopts a form of rhetoric that conceals his true meaning.

For Strauss, Plato's decision to write in dialogue form conceals his philosophic teaching, making the dialogue an enigma. Plato's form of writing is an example of what others, commenting on Strauss's esotericism, have termed "classical" or "ancient" esotericism.¹⁰⁴ This is a combination of three kinds of esotericism. First, there is "protective esotericism". Because the political communities are based on passionate attachment to opinion, the philosopher should act so as not to upset these opinions, even if he disagrees. Second, the philosopher must practice "defensive esotericism", protecting himself from persecution. Third, the philosopher must practice "pedagogical esotericism", a circuitous approach to education that moves the student along gradually.¹⁰⁵ While all three play a role in Strauss's interpretation of Plato, it is the last that is most important. When this pedagogical esotericism is downplayed, Plato's circuitous education is

interpretation is closer to Strauss's than it appears. C.f. Craig, 283-84, who interprets the cave as an allegory of the human soul and the human intellectual condition.

102 Villa, "The Philosopher vs. The Citizen," 166; c.f. Melzer 138-39.

103 Arendt, "What is Authority," *BPF*, 104.

104 See Michael Frazer, "Esotericism Ancient and Modern: Strauss Contra Straussianism on the Art of Political-Philosophical Writing," *Political Theory* 34: 1 (2006) and Melzer, 90-91.

105 Melzer, 90-91.

mistaken for a set of systematic doctrines. In short, Plato is mistaken for Platonism, a tradition that obscures its foundations.

In the case of Arendt's Plato, his primary intention is to practice one form of esotericism, defensive esotericism. He seeks to make politics less dangerous to philosophy through the strategy of denigrating politics. Yet for Arendt, it is this strategy that raises the problem of Platonism. Through an elaborate allegory, Plato promulgates a new teaching about philosophy and politics, while hiding that it is in fact a new teaching. With this teaching, he seeks—especially through the idea of the good—to shape not just how philosophers understand themselves, but also how those in the political realm understand themselves. Plato practices a kind of “political esotericism”, because he aims to “subvert and transform traditional society, but in a gradual and orderly way.”¹⁰⁶ This political esotericism constitutes the tradition that denigrates the activities of politics and philosophy, eventually dissolving both.

Strauss's treatment of the origins of the modern tradition identifies the Enlightenment's rhetorical strategy of political esotericism, which advances a veiled political programme. Like Strauss, Arendt aims to expose this rhetoric; but unlike Strauss, she attributes this political esotericism to Plato. In exposing Plato's esotericism, Arendt's aim is to draw attention to the fact that the Platonic allegory distorts the authentic experiences of thinking and action. Seeking to escape Platonism, she searches for the authentic experience that lies behind the allegory.¹⁰⁷

5. THE PURPOSE OF PLATO'S IDEAS

In Arendt's interpretation, Plato did not invent the ideas. Yet Plato presents them in a particular way for political purposes. Prioritising the idea of the good in a way that departs from the Homeric Greek inheritance, Plato presents the ideas with the objective of transforming philosophy and politics. The ultimate soundness of their content is not the issue; it is not clear in Arendt's interpretation if Plato affirms their philosophic content (the ideas do more to obscure genuine phenomena). In any case, in interpreting the ideas Arendt's chief aim is to expose Plato's concealed political intention. This account of Arendt parallels some “Straussian” interpretations, where the philosophic content of the ideas, whether they really disclose the nature of things, is ultimately set

106 Melzer, 92.

107 Schwartz, 89-90.

aside.¹⁰⁸ However, when Strauss discusses the doctrine of the ideas, he does so in a very different way than Arendt. Unlike Arendt, he initiates a long discussion that refers to the philosophic content of the ideas, and their ability to disclose the nature of things.

Strauss's reading of Plato is that the dialogue is "political in more than one sense."¹⁰⁹ To grasp the multiple senses implied requires understanding why the philosopher ruler fails on the dialogue's own terms. As Arendt sees it, the idea of the philosopher ruler gives priority given to the ruler-ruled relationship, and Plato omits giving any account of persuasion either in the city or by the philosopher. But Strauss sees persuasion as precisely the problem with which the dialogue wrestles, as only through persuasion is the coincidence of political power and philosophy possible. Yet recall that persuasion ultimately fails because there is something distinctive about the citizens of the cave that make them resistant to philosophic persuasion. This failure, and the persistence of the tension between the philosopher and the city, raises the need for the philosopher to understand politics and take it seriously in terms of its own distinctiveness. The dialogue points to the question "what is political?" (in the 'what is' language of the ideas) to challenge a homogeneous account of nature with a heterogeneous account.¹¹⁰

This turn towards the 'what is politics?' question stems from Socrates's own speech and deeds in the dialogue. Strauss, drawing from Xenophon, notes two sides to Socrates's art of conversation. When someone contradicted Socrates, he went back to the assumption behind the dispute, raising the question "what is...?" This first side parallels the ideas. The second side takes place when Socrates talks and others listen. Here, he proceeds through accepted opinions to produce agreement through persuasion. Strauss sees the second side as Socrates's "safe speech". It is the first side that exposes the authentic phenomena of philosophy.¹¹¹

In his presentation of philosophy, the elevation of the 'what is' question leads Strauss towards a dramatically different presentation of the ideas than Arendt. To ask, 'what is something,' what is the idea (*eidos*) of a thing, is to ask what the "essence" of the thing is. This essence is grasped "noetically" rather than sensibly: "The ideas are 'visible' only to the eye of the mind." He then contends that Socrates uses "the idea of

108 See Thomas Pangle, "Introduction," *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 2-5. Pangle maintains a studied ambiguity as to the extent the doctrine of ideas discloses the nature of things.

109 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 106.

110 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 17-19, 21.

111 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 53. This shows how Plato in fact makes *doxa* the basis for the ideas—he is not hostile to them as Arendt's reading of the cave suggests. See Cicarelli, 6-7. Unlike Strauss, Arendt sets aside the first side and focuses on the second side to retrieve the authentic phenomena of politics. She thinks this speaking and persuading from *doxai* is the authentic phenomena of philosophy and politics that the two-world metaphysics obscures.

the good” and “the good” synonymously; their noetic character is identical. Thus the key issue is to understand them, not to implement a political ideal.¹¹²

Strauss then challenges the traditional, “Platonist” interpretation of the ideas (*eidê*) as self-subsisting forms dwelling outside the realm of human beings: “It is utterly incredible’ and ‘appears to be fantastic... no one has ever succeeded in giving a satisfactory or clear account of this doctrine of ideas.” In voicing his criticism of the ideas, Strauss adopts Aristotle’s critique of the ideas his own critique. Having dispensed with the Platonism of the ideas, however, the noetic intelligibility of the ideas still persists. This suggests that their noetic character makes the ideas indispensable to the philosophic study of nature—that their noetic character is necessary for correctly understanding the nature of things.¹¹³

The ideas suggest a correct understanding of nature in at least two senses. First, they uphold that the essential differences between things are noetic, not sensible. The essential differences between the things are not due to the material elements out of which they are formed—such as fire, air, water, and earth.¹¹⁴ Second, nature is essentially heterogeneous, which is to say that there is an essential difference between each kind of being. The whole comes to light as the *heterogeneity* of essentially different parts. It is *noetic* heterogeneity, in that each being presents itself through the idea commonly held about it. Having adopted Aristotle’s critique of the ideas, Strauss imitates Aristotle in the sense that the mind or *nous* grasps these essences (and not their material elements), but cannot grasp the whole directly.¹¹⁵ That is what the first side of Socrates’s art of conversation signifies: Strauss’s Socrates identifies the study of nature with what the essence of each being is.¹¹⁶

The ideas are, lastly, the way philosophic activity can give distinctive attention to the seriousness of politics. The *Republic* concludes that politics is distinct; Strauss’s last

112 Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 123; *The City and Man*, 119. See also Cicarelli, 14-15.

113 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 119-120. See Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 154. C.f. Strauss, *The City and Man*, 93. In the footnote Strauss cites Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 991b6-7 (a critique of Plato) but curiously also 1070a18-20 (where Aristotle accepts that a qualified account of the ideas in terms of natural things is correct). Lampert’s interpretation of the cave stresses that the introduction of the ideas prepares a quest that must fail—but that is a different emphasis from Strauss. See *How Philosophy Became Socratic*, 365-66,

114 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 19.

115 C.f. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1070a18-20. See also Gregory B. Smith, “The Post-Modern Leo Strauss?” *History of European Ideas* 19:1 (1994), 193. For Strauss’s description of this issue, see *NRH*, 30-31; see also Richard Kenington, ‘Strauss’s Natural Right and History,’ *Review of Metaphysics* 35:1 (1981), 67; Velkley, 122. I would argue that Strauss’s imitation of Aristotle allows him to address the problem he outlines in *Natural Right and History*, 30-31. Through Aristotle, he is able to say that the whole is intelligible, yet direct knowledge of it is unavailable.

116 Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 122.

word in his essay is that the *Republic* reveals the nature of the city or the nature of politics.¹¹⁷ The *Republic* teaches that to know nature, it is necessary to know the distinctiveness of the nature of politics. The *Republic* hints at “The Socratic Turn” and a presentation of political philosophy that defines it in two ways. First, political philosophy is the study of politics as a branch of philosophy, so that philosophy is in a sense prior to politics; second, political philosophy begins from political phenomena, so that politics is in a sense prior to philosophy. These two mutually supporting definitions, with their complementary beginnings, establish the way in which political philosophy is “first philosophy.”¹¹⁸

6. CONCLUSION: HOW THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE CLARIFIES THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF PHILOSOPHY IN ARENDT AND STRAUSS

Arendt’s quarrel with the tradition of political philosophy is with its prejudice towards politics. This prejudice is pithily expressed by Pascal, who remarks that when Plato and Aristotle write about politics, “it was as if laying down rules for a lunatic asylum; if they presented the appearance of speaking of great matters, it was because they knew that the madmen, to whom they spoke, thought they were kings and emperors.”¹¹⁹ Seeking the origins of this prejudice and therefore the origins of the tradition, Arendt concludes that the primary reason for this prejudice is Plato’s desire to make the precarious position of the philosopher more secure. Through an esoteric interpretation of Plato (implied in Pascal’s own remarks) Arendt exposes Plato’s political intention, his transformation of philosophy and politics.

Arendt aims to challenge this. Philosophy, as Plato conceived it, was too political. Platonic philosophy hides the authentic phenomena of philosophy and instrumentalises philosophy for political purposes. The notable omission in the allegory of the cave’s account of philosophy that motivates Arendt’s phenomenological retrieval is the experience of wonder.¹²⁰ Arendt thus reinforces the is a gap between authentic philosophy, or thinking, and politics. She elevates the pre-traditional understanding of both

117 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 55.

118 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 13-20; *What is Political Philosophy?*, 10-11 (the beginning from politics to philosophy) and 11-12 (the beginning from philosophy to politics).

119 See Schwartz, 96 and 224 for a list of places where Arendt quotes these remarks from Pascal.

120 Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 32; “Tradition and the Modern Age,” *Between Past and Future*, 39-40.

the activities of thinking and politics, while preserving the particular purity of each. Neither dominates the other, and neither is reducible to the other.¹²¹

Analysing Arendt's interpretation of Plato makes clear that for Arendt, Plato's distortion of philosophy is just as important as his distortion of politics. This suggests that the traditional theme of Arendt studies, the distortion of politics and her subsequent elevation of the *vita activa*, needs revision.¹²² The task for future scholarship must be to address how the distortion of philosophy in the origins of the tradition is a fundamental problem for her, and reconstruct her solution to it.¹²³

One theme in "Straussian" interpretations is that authentic philosophy should regard the study of politics as unserious, except to ensure that philosophy is safe from political persecution. Strauss's fascination with political philosophy is ultimately about a prudent or *politic* philosophy.¹²⁴ This reading is partially true. Strauss's own interpretation of Pascal's remarks is that Pascal is right, in a sense; the study of political things, political philosophy, seems unserious at first. Philosophy must be compelled to be concerned with political things.¹²⁵ But the philosopher discovers that political things defy a presumption that nature is homogeneous. This problem motivates the philosopher's *eros* for knowledge, the desire to know "what is..." to develop the *eros* to know what politics is.

Through analysing Strauss's reading of Plato's cave, it becomes clear why Strauss cannot be interested solely in a *politic* philosophy.¹²⁶ The issue of making philosophy safe from politics is not Strauss's interpretive emphasis. Strauss speaks of the tension between philosophy and the city, yet this tension is derivative. The ultimate source of this tension is in the dual understanding of justice at work in the human soul. At its most profound level, political philosophy is understood by reference to this duality in the human soul. The *Republic* reveals that the nature of the soul is the question for

121 C.f. George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa, NY: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), 6-7. See Hannah Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, edited by Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St Martin's Press 1979), 304.

122 C.f. Jürgen Habermas, "Hannah Arendt: On the Concept of Power," *Philosophical-Political Profiles* (MIT Press, 1985), 171. C.f. Kateb, 188-89; Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 42.

123 In this respect, see Robert Burch, 'Recalling Arendt on Thinking,' In *Action and Appearance: Ethics and the Politics of Writing in Hannah Arendt*, edited by Anna Yeatman et al. (USA: Continuum Press, 2011).

124 E.g. Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics*, 109, 111.

125 Strauss, *The City and Man*, 18. Strauss implies that Pascal's real mistake is to make the desire to know impossible to satisfy by invoking the doctrine of original sin.

126 Also absent in Strauss's Plato is an account of how the pious life is the most serious alternative to the philosophic life. This absence challenges the interpretation of Strauss for which Heinrich Meier advocates. See Velkley, 161.

political philosophy. Platonic political philosophy for Strauss is not, as it is for Arendt, primarily about the political situation of the philosopher.¹²⁷

Analysing Strauss's interpretation of Plato's cave challenges the view that Strauss recovers a simply non-metaphysical Platonic philosophy. The clue for this revisionary conclusion about Strauss lies in the doctrine of ideas. Unlike Arendt, Strauss does not argue that the doctrine of ideas serves a concealed political project. The reading of the cave exposes the authentic phenomenon of philosophy as posing the 'what is' questions, with an emphasis on the question, 'what is politics?' This question raises the issue of how the nature of politics is distinct from the nature of other things. Plato's *Republic*—and the other dialogues—teaches us that the sophists and other pre-Socratics are wrong about the nature of the whole or the cosmos. It is heterogeneous, not homogeneous. Elevating the question of 'what is' presupposes noetic heterogeneity. The ideas are a way of acknowledging noetic heterogeneity as the basis of genuine philosophy. The restoration of what Strauss calls, in a letter to Eric Voegelin, "the Platonic-Aristotelian level of questioning" in this sense establishes what philosophy is, with political philosophy at its core. The defence of noetic heterogeneity draws Strauss close to Aristotle's classical metaphysics, insofar as Strauss grants that it is the way of asking the questions identified in Aristotle's metaphysics that enables us to identify certain fundamental problems as problems.¹²⁸

Now, Strauss's proximity to classical metaphysics must be qualified, as he also draws from the phenomenological tradition inaugurated by Edmund Husserl. While Strauss holds that the task of philosophy is to clarify these noetic experiences, at the same time, he moves in the direction of non-foundationalism by imposing severe limitations on what can be intelligible.¹²⁹

Knowledge of the whole remains elusive. There is no noetic understanding that can grasp the whole directly. To pursue knowledge of the ideas is to pursue knowledge of the part of the whole, not the whole itself. As the whole is essentially heterogeneous, knowledge of the whole can only be pursued through the knowledge of the parts. This leaves knowledge of the whole unavailable. This, in turn, means that we only have partial knowledge of the parts.¹³⁰

127 James Stoner, "Aristotelian Metaphysics and Modern Science: Leo Strauss on What Nature Is," in *Leo Strauss and His Catholic Readers*, ed. by Geoffrey Vaughan (Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 281.

128 Strauss's letter to Eric Voegelin is cited in Chacón, "Strauss and Husserl," 287. See also Stoner, 288-89.

129 See Chacón, "Strauss and Husserl," esp. 289.

130 Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, 39.

If Aristotle's metaphysics intends the quest for the whole, Strauss seeks to recover that. But if Aristotelian metaphysics assumes that the whole is intelligible and that it has knowledge of that whole, Strauss rejects a return to that tradition.¹³¹ Strauss's ambiguous opening to Aristotle's metaphysics is no doubt why Arendt (whose critique of metaphysics closes off this ambiguity in her own thought) judges that Strauss's reading of Plato is "Aristotelian."¹³²

131 Velkley, 69, 122 (c.f. 54).

132 Cited in Keedus, 5.