

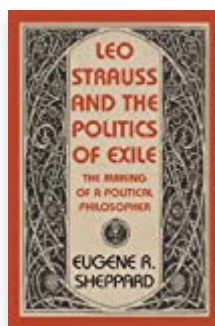
TIMELESS MIND

A review of two new books on the development of Leo Strauss' thought.

by Harvey C. Mansfield



REVIEWED



*Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making
of a Political Philosopher (The Tauber Institute
Series for the Study of European Jewry)*

A review of Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: the Making of a Political Philosopher, by Eugene R. Sheppard and Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography, by Daniel Tanguay, translated by Christopher Nadon

THESE TWO BOOKS ON LEO STRAUSS—TWO MORE!—COVER THE DEVELOPMENT OF Strauss's thought. They differ in two obvious ways. Daniel Tanguay is sympathetic to Strauss and might reasonably be called a Straussian, a particularly supple and elegant one. He works from within Strauss's thought, neither taking him for granted nor rejecting his premises. Eugene Sheppard is an intellectual historian who as such rejects the possibility of the "timeless mind" that Strauss accepts, and who therefore writes from a perspective outside Strauss. But he is not unfriendly to him, and thanks him for having "widened my own horizons."

The other difference is over Strauss's conservatism. Tanguay thinks it to be merely "circumstantial," and to hold otherwise he regards as a "fundamental error." Sheppard, however, believes that conservatism is the key to Strauss and says so repeatedly. Strauss came to America "an obscure conservative immigrant," and there acquired his "American persona" as a conservative. It so happens I can assure Professor Sheppard that these phrases, true or not, would have greatly amused Strauss for the struggle they reveal between honesty and good will. Since Tanguay's book was originally published in French in 2003 (and is now ably translated by Christopher Nadon), Sheppard was in a position to take note of it in his book—which he did, but without commenting on the opposition between his thesis and Tanguay's.

What were Strauss's politics? To answer, one must consider the status of his politics in his thought. By denying the possibility of timelessness, or of permanent questions in human life, Sheppard installs the impermanent, the trendy, as sovereign over us. To do so raises the status of politics. For when well examined, the trends in human life prove to be political in character. Trends may begin as ways of thinking and behaving, but they become trends when they become dominant by taking over the politics of a society. In accepting the historicist view Sheppard is impelled toward exaggeration of the meaning of politics in Strauss's life. Now, Sheppard is aware that Strauss thought himself to be in a sense above politics, that he had (as he said) sworn an oath to the flag of *moriatur anima mea mortem philosophorum* ("may my soul

die the death of philosophers"). But to Sheppard this means that Strauss's devotion to timeless truth compels him to place such truths "beyond question and examination" politically, hence to be a conservative. He assumes that the philosopher's search for truth leads him to fix on truths, as if the search were always successful, and then to want to defend them. But why are fixed truths only conservative? Do not liberals have fixed truths?

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Sheppard is not wrong to suppose that a philosopher must have a political position. But the philosopher is led to it not so much by the conclusions of philosophy as by the conditions that make philosophy possible. The philosopher would choose between liberalism and conservatism not because he is skeptical like a liberal or claims truth like a conservative but because one or the other better protects and tolerates the philosopher's way of life. This concern with his own self-interest gives the philosopher a certain elevation over normal, non-philosophical politics, an elevation that can appear as uncalled-for levity in a serious situation.

An example can be seen in a letter dated May 19, 1933, from Strauss to his friend Karl Löwith, which Sheppard quotes at not-quite-enough length. In it Strauss shows a "shocking" (Sheppard's term) receptivity to conservatism in speaking of how to deal with what he called the "shabby monster" of Nazism. Instead of making a "laughable and pathetic" appeal to the rights of man—the fixed truths of liberalism—Strauss proposes resorting to the principles of the Roman empire, in Virgil's words, "to spare the subjects and subdue the proud." This is what "men of science" should *say*. The shocking thing is that Strauss says they should speak to right-wing Germany (as it has become) in terms of right-wing principles: "fascist, authoritarian, *imperial*." The implication in this progression of terms is that the fascist ordering that consigns Jews like Strauss to the status of natural *Untermenschen* can be best opposed by consenting to the need for authority, but replacing the principles of the Third Reich with those of the Roman empire. Strauss says that the "men of science," including himself, have no place to stay but only seek (*non habemus locum manentem, sed quaerimus*). It is as if they, from their platform above, were refuting Nazi "natural right" with Roman rather than liberal natural right, replacing vicious right-wing principles with benign ones.

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The letter certainly confirms Strauss's disgust with the liberalism of Weimar Germany, a pitiful and cowardly liberalism unable to defend itself against the Nazis because it had abandoned its own fixed truths and absorbed much of the relativism of German nihilism.

According to Strauss in a 1941 lecture, German nihilism was the enemy, not liberalism; but Weimar liberalism, having abandoned Enlightenment liberalism in favor of historicist relativism, had shown itself to be powerless against the enemy. Obviously this was not the case with all liberalism in 1933, for Strauss fled the Nazi enemy to France, then England, and finally, the United States—all liberal democracies and the last two, it turned out, not incurably infected with appeasement. In effect, Strauss's letter warns Löwith against putting his trust in the liberals (and Christians) of Germany who had given false assurance of security to German Jews.

The letter to Löwith is not Strauss's last or only statement on the liberal democracies he lived in and benefited from, but this is not the place to work out an analysis of Strauss's politics. The default politics of the classical political philosophers is the rule of gentlemen, the rule of moral virtue with which philosophy has for the most part a mutually amiable coexistence. Gentlemen are not always available, however—not even in liberal democracies, where in elections their virtues are often not duly appreciated. So one must search for rougher or smoother types who might approximate gentlemen. Strauss's letter shows the condescension of a philosopher's politics in its levity and flexibility at a very serious moment when the lives of the two correspondents were at stake. To be sure, it also shows thoughtfulness, care, and insight. And it shows that Strauss's politics were not back of his philosophy but rather the reverse.

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Sheppard's book has some good things to say about Strauss. In agreement with Strauss he sees that Xenophon's politic concealment of his distaste for Sparta was bashful accommodation rather than opportunistic pandering. He effectually denies that Strauss was a victim of paranoia. To explain Strauss, he tries to combine the philosopher's elevation with the Jew's isolation in what he calls "the politics of exile." Is exile not a timeless category? Perhaps it is, if the political community is not capable of satisfying every human good; there might always be some left-over person, a Socrates, too outstanding for others to appreciate. "Exile" as an idea by which to understand Strauss is neither crazy nor foolish, but it elides the distinction between philosophy and revelation that Strauss insisted on, and it suggests that exile is caused only by political disaccord. Sheppard suspects that Strauss, who read esoterically, may also have written esoterically, and getting into the spirit of the thing, he attempts with all good will to interpret one of his lectures. And in general his prose is enlivened with frequent quotation from Strauss.

Not so good is Sheppard's disdain for Straussians. He thinks that they (he doesn't name them) have written "clever or boring hagiographies" of Strauss. Well, at least the clever ones are not boring, and the boring ones not clever. He thinks too that Strauss was a "charismatic leader" with an inner circle on the model of the Nietzschean Stefan George, "a circle of devoted disciples" who patterned their "idiosyncratic scholarship" on the insider/outsider approach as opposed to "liberal models of education." Presumably liberal models are public exchanges in which everyone sincerely tells the truth and nobody is excluded or "exiled." Let me confide to Professor Sheppard, however, that if one becomes a Straussian, one learns the meaning of outsider much more quickly than that of insider. To use a euphemism, an outsider is "idiosyncratic." In any case, if there's no harm in telling the truth, what's wrong with teaching it and following it? Or is something so wrong with liberal models of education that they have trouble inducing the very openmindedness they habitually extol? It is of course no great pain in itself to be called idiosyncratic, but the condescension and exclusion in such language can be as effectual as it is polite.

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When Tanguay's book was published in 2003, he could claim to have produced the first comprehensive study of Strauss's thought; now that it has been joined by several others, one can say too that it is the most satisfactory. It is faithful to Strauss's principle that a thinker must be understood as he understood himself, and it is a serious study, with matter and insight helpful even to veterans of the Strauss circle. Yet it is not a book that barks like a dog at intruders, and it will not seem either boring or clever to those who have not read Strauss.

Tanguay notes two obstacles to understanding Strauss's thought, the first being that Strauss wrote studies in the history of political philosophy—interpretive commentaries on great political philosophers in which his own opinion is often left unclear, not identified, never thematic. Strauss asks questions of the author, then answers them himself, jumping back and forth from the role of prompter to that of respondent, and often with several arguments in each role. Who is Strauss himself, given that he is almost never to be seen by himself but rather in the company of a great mind he is talking to? He was a great teacher and certainly sought to have a school of Straussians, but he did not have a doctrine and he did not encourage or even permit his students to write about him in the manner of Oakeshottians, Voegelinians, and Rawlsians. Straussians were to write in the history of political philosophy and to consider their teacher as a mere professor, not as the philosopher he undoubtedly was. Only with time, as Strauss's rank has become clearer—and as he has come under political attack—has his mostly

implicit wish lost its authority and his followers ventured to write about him, in some cases rushing into the breach to defend him. In doing so they have encountered the second difficulty that Tanguay mentions, which almost follows from the first: Strauss writes in a veiled if not hidden manner. He wanted to be admired, it seems, but for reasons that would always be unclear and disputed. Yet you could not make a better start at understanding him than with Tanguay's book nor find a more balanced, finished treatment.

Tanguay finds one guiding theme in Strauss's thought: the theologico-political problem. Other themes—the distinction between the ancients and the moderns, the old quarrel between poetry and philosophy, the conflict between natural right and history—are more obvious and better known, but they lead to the theologico-political problem underneath. The break with the ancients made by modern thought took for granted the possibility of philosophy, indeed of political philosophy. But the possibility of political philosophy needs to be shown by contrast to the claim of revelation and its political branch, political theology. The quarrel between poetry and philosophy was not so much an issue between story and truth as between the gods of the poets and the god of the philosophers. And natural right actually found its opposite in the historicist outlook that was decayed Christianity, as in Heidegger. The more apparent themes are subordinate to the conflict between reason and revelation, each claiming to be the source of authority, that is of authority in politics, for politics is the sum and enforcer of authority. Is politics divinely ordained or humanly chosen?

In the development of his thought Strauss approaches the theological-political problem through liberalism, and liberalism through the situation of Jews. The liberal state offered Jews the rights of individuals, but it could not protect Jews from discrimination in the private sphere without violating the distinction between public and private that was vital to liberalism. Jews then would have to make their own liberal state through the movement of political Zionism. But how would they remain Jews in a liberal state? Political Zionism would have to become cultural Zionism, adapting Judaism to the individualist culture of liberalism. In the 1920s Strauss vehemently attacked this adaptive Judaism as adulterated and untrue to the tradition it claimed to revive. Tanguay brings out the uncompromising boldness of Strauss's intent to expose the incompatibility of Judaism and modern liberalism that liberalism tries to soften and cover over. Strauss actually hardened the alternative between them, making revelation and reason each claim its due to the fullest extent in irreconcilable opposition to the other.

Here in his early work Strauss made evident the radicalism that was always to characterize his thought and that, contrary to advice from the sage scholars of liberalism, was always to make a

forceful appeal to his younger readers. While Sheppard expresses his distaste for "overdetermined conceptual binary oppositions" in Strauss's thought, Tanguay explains why they arise and how they are attractive in times of mugwump liberalism. In any case, to see the situation in Weimar Germany clearly—just as to see our situation today—it was necessary to see the nature of liberalism. And for that, it is necessary to follow out the logic of liberalism as opposed to resting satisfied with the comforting assurances of contemporary liberals, whether in Strauss's time or in ours. Despite Strauss's disdain for these assurances, it should be needless to add, but sadly it isn't, that in his radicalism he was free of the active hatred of liberalism that consumed the totalitarians.

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Three notable points emerge from Tanguay's book on Strauss: the stages in his thinking, the "Farabian turn," and the characterization of his "zetetic" philosophy. In describing the stages, Tanguay emphasizes Strauss's formative concern with Judaism in the 1920s, which culminated in the writing of his first book in 1928 (not published until 1930), *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. In it Strauss argues that Spinoza merely ridiculed and did not disprove the miracles in the Bible, hence that his strictures against religious prejudice were themselves caused by a prejudice. This was "the prejudice of the positive mind," the Enlightenment's attack on the past so as to prepare for a new society of science and freedom in the future. Although modern science helped in the critique of miracles, the positive mind is more the cause than the consequence of science.

To oppose this triumph of prejudice in the guise of a triumph against prejudice, Strauss conceived the project of a return, a genuine return, to the ancients. But he made the return indirectly through his discoveries in medieval political philosophy. He looked first in Maimonides and then in the Arabs, particularly in Farabi, whose work Maimonides described as "the purest flour." In *Philosophy and Law* (1935), and in his correspondence of the period, Strauss developed the notion of a Medieval Enlightenment free of the positive mind and friendly to both philosophy and religion. Here was Strauss's Farabian turn. Philosophy would not merely patch up a compromise with religion, nor would it simply dissimulate its atheism because it was true but socially harmful. Instead, Farabi discovered and adopted the figure of the prophet as a *legislator*; thus philosophy came to religion as *political philosophy*. The religious prophet was seen as a legislator of the perfect society, the best regime; his legislation, though not applicable to philosophers, thus not true in the highest case, was necessary to society. It was necessary in politics not only to keep the peace but also to edify, to turn men's souls toward

the highest in them. Philosophy would neither submit to revelation nor reject it with contempt; it would accept the veil over reality as part of reality. By this way, and not so much through philosophers' fear of persecution (as indicated by the title of his book *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 1952), was Strauss led to the rediscovery of esoteric teaching. Esoteric teaching is accompanied by exoteric writing; it is not merely the secure conveyance of dangerous truth among philosophers but also requires a noble rhetoric to help one's country live the best life that it can. Strauss developed the argument of his Spinoza book in another direction too, toward the understanding of modernity and liberalism in his studies of Thomas Hobbes (1936) and, later, of Machiavelli (1958).

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Strauss's genuine Platonism was zetetic, or skeptical: in Strauss's words, "the evidence of all solutions is necessarily smaller than the evidence of the problems." It understands philosophy as a way of life, the life of inquiry, not as a body of doctrine. Strauss took it upon himself to dissolve the so-called doctrines that scholars had imputed to the ancients: the theory of ideas in Plato, teleology in Aristotle, admiration for Sparta in Xenophon. These were reifications, modernized pseudo-clarities, confections of the positive mind, that ignored the distinction between esoteric teaching and exoteric writing, accepted partisan or dialogic assertion as truth, and lacked all sense of humor. Tanguay calls zetetic philosophy "weak philosophy," meaning philosophy that in the end lacks sufficient truth to refute revelation, its opposite. Weak philosophy, a friendly critic and rival of religion, justifies our love of the perfect and respects the human imperfection that comes with our freedom.

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