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LEO STRAUSS AND THE CLOSED SOCIETY

by
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In the spring of 1941, as Hitler was laying plans for his invasion of the Soviet Union, Leo Strauss gave a lecture at the New School for Social Research as part of a seminar on “Experiences of the Second World War.” The lecture, which was not published until five decades later, marked one of the rare occasions on which the philosopher discussed current events in the classroom. Strauss had arrived in the United States five years earlier, and at the New School he was part of a faculty filled with academic refugees, few of whom shared his conservative politics. But his lecture was not primarily about the war. He instead had in view a problem that he feared was obscured by the conflict and the ideological mindset it encouraged. Strauss’s theme was education, and the place of liberal education in societies engaged in an existential struggle to preserve their way of life.

Strauss was not the only thinker who turned to questions of education in the darkest days of the war. A few months later, Jacques Maritain delivered the Terry Lectures at Yale, calling for the renewal of the modern university through a rediscovery of Christian philosophy. Maritain was joined by T. S. Eliot, Simone Weil, C. S. Lewis, and Dorothy Sayers, whose wartime reflections on education gave voice to religious ideas that would succeed in inspiring postwar democratic movements, if not postwar universities. Among this group, Strauss stood out. Raised in an

orthodox Jewish home—many later suspected he was an atheist—he showed almost no intellectual interest in Christianity, a religious tradition that, in his judgment, had fundamentally misconceived the nature of philosophy. Yet he was to become an intellectual authority revered by American conservatives, who shared his anxieties about the rise of moral relativism and the decline of national self-confidence.

In 1941, whether liberal societies could endure despite their weaknesses was a more than theoretical question. Strauss's lecture addressed the long-standing question of how liberal societies might protect the virtues they need but often struggle to cultivate, and sometimes actively undermine. And his answer, offered in defense of what he called the "open society" (a term Karl Popper would put to different use four years later), was provocative. He argued that many virtues essential to liberalism are best understood in the moral traditions that are most opposed to liberalism. He also suggested that the vices most threatening to liberal societies are often nurtured by liberal ideals themselves. As was his style, Strauss suggested, rather than explicated, his thesis: An open society requires strengthening by moral and political imaginations that have been formed in closed societies.

Strauss's lecture bore the solemn title "German Nihilism"—slightly misleading, since its focus was broader than Germany and deeper than nihilism. Strauss was horrified by National Socialism, and he closed his lecture by expressing his admiration for Churchill and his gratitude toward British combatants. But what most engaged his attention was not contemporary statesmen and soldiers, but a previous generation of teachers and students. Strauss worried that the mistakes made by progressive educators in the decades prior to the rise of National Socialism could be made again, endangering the stability of Western democracies.

Strauss opened with a claim that may be unsettling, even when considered in context. He expressed his regret that National Socialism had been identified with nihilism, a philosophical doctrine whose political goals were said to be purely destructive. His concern was not that Hitler's regime had been denied a fair hearing among intellectuals. For Nazi ideology Strauss expressed

only the severest contempt, and with the interesting exception of Ernst Jünger's early work, he dignified no contemporary German writer with a citation. Nor did Strauss suggest that the regime's goals were less barbaric in theory than they were proving to be in practice.

Strauss's concern was that the brutality of the regime evoked strenuous moral responses that impaired philosophical thinking and historical judgment. The regime posed an obvious threat to its victims and to those resisting its advance on two continents by force of arms. But Strauss argued that it posed a less obvious and potentially more enduring threat to those opposing it by intellectual means. Authoritarianism clouded the thinking of some of its most trenchant opponents, making it difficult for them to understand critiques of modernity as anything other than the "ravings" of the vulgar, the provincial, and the stupid. Strauss lamented that a political movement whose lasting defeat required the deepest philosophical wisdom had, in too many cases, elicited something else. It had given defenders of democracy, among whom Strauss included himself, the opportunity to demonize liberalism's critics as "gangsters," "mentally diseased," or "morbid."

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Strauss was not alone in wishing for a deeper understanding of the intellectual roots of European illiberalism. In the same semester, a young John Rawls published his first essay, a sympathetic reading of Oswald Spengler's predictions of democratic decline. But Strauss's worry was distinctive of him and his pedagogy, which would play an increasingly important role in American conservatism after his move to the University of Chicago in 1949. Strauss worried that Western

thinkers were no longer capable of contemplating perspectives beyond liberalism, even against liberalism, from which to judge the present. Far from constituting a threat to clear thinking, such a perspective is essential to it—for only outside the open society can we identify its virtues and its vices, and gain the strength to endure its discontents. But if we are to reach this horizon, Strauss argued, a popular prejudice often directed against critics of liberalism must be rejected. For what is mislabeled “nihilism” is not a destructive doctrine at all. It is a protest on behalf of something of the highest human importance—something liberalism dismisses at its peril.

What kind of protest? In answering this question, Strauss reflected on the generation of students who had been intellectually formed and politically radicalized during the interwar period. As his later writings would make clear, these reflections drew on his own experiences as a student in the early 1920s, when he struggled to reconcile his devotion to Max Weber with his growing interest in Martin Heidegger, who seemed willing to address questions about human existence that no other living German philosopher would. These students, Strauss recalled, had been shattered by war, disoriented by the collapse of traditional authorities, and disturbed by a culture that seemed to celebrate transgression. For many of them, the Weimar-era experiment with parliamentary democracy had proven a failure. Only a rejection of the “cancer” of liberalism, as one author called it, could save them.

Strauss’s portrait of his classmates was unsparing, but not disdainful. Strauss described young men full of vehement certainty about what they rejected, but inarticulate and unreflective about what they affirmed. “The prospect of a pacified planet, without rulers and ruled,” he observed, “was positively horrifying to [them].” Strauss lamented that their passions found no outlet other than the crudest propaganda. Unable to understand or express themselves in any other way—Strauss noted that they had largely rejected Christian belief—they gave voice to savage forms of group identity. The mark of barbarism, Strauss explained, was the belief that truth and justice should be defined in terms of ethnic or racial membership.

But Strauss acknowledged that these students, shaped by defeat, conflict, and social disintegration, were inspired by an ideal—an ideal whose dangers they did not understand but whose allure they keenly felt. Here we approach the heart of Strauss’s lecture, which sought to place these interwar students and their ideal in a broader intellectual history. Strauss cautioned that he sought not to pardon what deserved condemnation, but to make intelligible what required understanding. He therefore challenged his class to see in the youthful German protest what many had failed to perceive two decades earlier: its moral basis. This protest against liberalism was not fundamentally inspired by a love of war or a love of nation, Strauss insisted. Nor could it be explained by material or class interests. It was inspired, as he put it in a bracing passage, by “a love of morality, a sense of responsibility for endangered morality.”

Strauss named this outlook the morality of the “closed society.” No sensitive reader of the lecture can avoid being struck by the intensity of the passages in which Strauss describes the gravity of the challenge this “endangered morality” poses to the “open society.” What is the closed society? Strauss didn’t identify it with any one people, tradition, or form of government. By the “closed society” he didn’t mean non-Western cultures, pre-Enlightenment thought, or even undemocratic polities. The closed society represented a perennial moral possibility, whose roots are found in every human soul and whose demands must be confronted by every human community. In its most common expression, the closed society levels a familiar accusation: that the open society is immoral, or at least amoral, because it jeopardizes the very possibility of living a virtuous life.

Strauss assumed his American students might have difficulty seeing the possible strengths, to say nothing of the seductive appeal, of a way of life associated with ignorance and bigotry. He therefore tried to show them how liberal and democratic ideals might appear from a perspective that denies their moral legitimacy—not out of resentment or bad faith, but out of loyalty to a higher order of values. The rights of man, the relief of the human estate, the happiness of the greatest possible number—for advocates of the open society, these are ideals that have inspired social progress. They are part of a shift in modern consciousness, through which we have recognized our power to

change the present, rather than simply accept the authority of the past. But to defenders of the closed society, Strauss argued, the moral prestige of these slogans evinces a different kind of shift. It is a sign that humanity has been debased rather than ennobled.

To draw his listeners into anti-liberal ways of thinking, Strauss sketched the development of modern political thought from the perspective of the closed society. This interpretation casts the arc of modernity in a disturbing light, depicting as decline what Enlightenment thinkers hailed as advance. It sees modernity as the story of how and why Western societies chose to *lower* their moral ideals, exchanging the demanding codes of antiquity and biblical religion for the comfortable norms of commercial society, legal proceduralism, and bourgeois life. Heroic ideals, attainable only by the exceptional few, were defined down for the ordinary many; ideals that promoted spiritual or intellectual excellence were balanced by those promoting health and prosperity; ideals that imposed self-denial were replaced by those that indulged self-expression.

As Strauss's reading of modernity suggests, the closed society is defined by what it affirms no less than by what it rejects. He emphasized that its conflict with the open society is ultimately over the most fundamental question: Which way of life is best for man? For defenders of the closed society, human life should be ordered to a political end whose achievement requires the highest and rarest human qualities. So demanding is its vision of moral excellence, so uncommon are the virtues it requires, and yet so necessary is it to the sustaining of human life, that its fulfillment involves the greatest personal risk. As Strauss described it:

Moral life . . . means serious life. Seriousness, and the ceremonial of seriousness . . . are the distinctive features of the closed society, of the society which by its very nature, is constantly confronted with, and basically oriented toward, the Ernstfall, the serious moment. . . . Only life in such a tense atmosphere, only a life which is based on constant awareness of the sacrifices to which it owes its existence, and of the necessity, the duty of sacrifice of life and all worldly goods, is truly human.

Duty, sacrifice, danger, struggle—here we enter the charged atmosphere of a moral world that Strauss feared his students, and not only his students, failed to understand. It saw the best human life as one that dares to risk all for the sake of heroic possibilities. It saw the desire to pledge oneself to a great cause and to prostrate oneself before great authorities as essential to human virtue. In later writings, Strauss would examine a tension between the life of philosophy and the life of faith, a tension that he believed was foundational to Western civilization. But the conflict between the open and closed societies is not a conflict between reason and revelation. It is a conflict over the necessity of life-and-death struggles for human excellence. If the open society is constituted by free argument and equal recognition, the closed society is formed by loyalty, courage, sacrifice, and honor. It celebrates the virtues that it believes make political order possible: the willingness to forgo material comforts, to close ranks against outsiders and oppose enemies, and, above all, to fight to the death with no thought for profit or pleasure. Though these virtues animate other spheres of life, they are, in their deepest origin and highest expression, martial virtues.

At the time of his lecture, Strauss was completing his famous essay “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” which he privately called a “bomb” that would forever change how scholars interpreted the history of ideas. It argued that many Western philosophers had protected themselves from political persecution (and shielded their communities from intellectual harm) by carefully disguising their most subversive and heterodox views from average readers. Strauss’s lecture has an element of indirection that suggests its author’s desire to shield himself from attack. It draws upon his experiences in right-wing movements of the 1920s as well as from his careful study of the controversial legal theorist Carl Schmitt, who interpreted political life in light of moments of supreme crisis that reveal the true nature of authority. Strauss became a Zionist at age seventeen, and his earliest writings evinced a concern that liberal ideals encouraged frivolity and complacency, not least among assimilated Jews. Strauss eventually drifted away from active Jewish life, but he preserved a lifelong distrust of liberalism and its “permissive egalitarianism.”

But in defending the martial virtues of courage, heroism, and loyalty, Strauss was not simply giving guarded expression to past political views. He was giving voice to a moral ideal that defenders of

democracy were jeopardizing, at significant human cost. That ideal insisted that these are the virtues through which, and only through which, a man can prove himself to be a man in full. It contended that what makes us human is not the way we pursue and enjoy the goods of bodily life, however refined our habits might be. Rather, we prove our humanity only by exercising our radical ability to *contradict* those goods, only by risking our lives for a value greater than mere survival. To live as a human being is to fight to the death for something higher than life. Within this moral world—a world so fundamentally hostile to liberal modernity—man is not made for comfort and security. He is tempted by them. The man who wishes truly to live must flirt with death.

Strauss was aware of the destructive power of this impulse and its pursuit of meaning through confrontation with annihilation. But before it could be corrected, he believed, its moral critique of liberal modernity had to be confronted. Proponents of the closed society regard the open society as degrading not simply because it places bodily safety and well-being at its political center. They regard it as degrading because it diminishes the soul's need for moral risk, demotes the virtues needed for pursuing and protecting the highest things, and devalues the men who strive to live by its severe code. For those, such as Ernst Jünger, who found the most sublime virtues in the trenches of a world war, the open society was hypocritical. It lived by achievements it did not properly honor, or merely pretended to honor, and in doing so lied about the basic facts of human experience. Its dream of a world of freedom and equality, a world in which everyone was happy and satisfied and at peace—such a world was no dream, but a posthuman nightmare, “in which no great heart could beat and no great soul could breathe.”

Strauss's portrait of the closed society made no claim to originality. As he acknowledged, his account brought together critiques of liberal modernity made by Rousseau, Tocqueville, Nietzsche, and others, who had likewise questioned whether something vital to human life was lost when older moral codes were exchanged for greater freedom and equality. But if Strauss's reading of history was not original, the lessons he drew from it for the American university were. As he brought his seminar to a close, he reflected again on the generation of students who had entered adulthood during the decades before the Second World War, and whose moral passions had been

so poorly understood and so poorly formed. He said that what those students had needed most was “old-fashioned teachers.” It is a startling remark.

Strauss lamented that the teachers who dominated German education between the wars had been trained in new methods of pedagogy, which deprived them of the wisdom and temperament to examine the most serious criticisms of modern life. This disability contributed to the political instability of the Weimar years, and its effects reached beyond the classroom. As Strauss told it, these teachers considered themselves progressive and broad-minded, and they believed that their work advanced Enlightenment ideals. But in the eyes of many students, the intellectual and moral self-assurance of their teachers suggested something else—not only about them, but about other elite institutions. Because they couldn’t imagine the moral legitimacy of other ways of life, even ways of life with roots in their own nation, they appeared defensive, evasive, and lacking in generational self-awareness.

Strauss didn’t doubt the good intentions of these professors, among whom, after all, were his own teachers. But they had failed to shape the minds and characters of many in his generation. Their defect was one of moral imagination: They couldn’t see, or couldn’t bear to see, the moral passions of the young radicals as anything other than primitive or pathological. Strauss certainly saw the potential for savagery in their rebellion against the open society and its intellectual gatekeepers. He was alarmed by the ease with which theoretical attacks on liberalism could turn into excuses for political evil. But as Strauss looked to the war raging in Europe and imagined a future that learned from its mistakes, he proposed a strikingly different form of education. He argued that good teachers should not seek to dispel the allure of the closed society; instead, they should carefully draw students directly inside of it. This pedagogy would enable students to experience the power of the closed society’s moral demands, to sense the appeal of its political life, and to feel challenged by its vision of human excellence.

Strauss didn’t wish to turn his students into sophisticated enemies of liberalism. His goal was to turn them into virtuous defenders of democracy. But to become true patrons of the open society,

they needed qualities of character that could be developed only through a proper appreciation of traditional society. The open society was right to order its common life through the exercise of reason and the arts of civility. But the closed society was also right about some important things. It acknowledged our need to be loyal to a particular people, to inherit a cultural tradition, to admire inequalities of achievement, to reverence the authority of the past, and to experience self-transcendence through self-sacrifice. It acknowledged as well the importance of a leadership class whose decisions expose them to special risk rather than shielding them from it. As Strauss observed, these are permanent truths, not atavisms, no matter how unpalatable they are to the progressive-minded. A society that cannot affirm them invites catastrophe, no less than does a society that cannot question them.

Strauss gave his lecture only months after the institution of a military draft in the United States. But his primary aim wasn't to steel his students for the nation's entry into war. As Western democracies sent young men into combat, they needed to think more soberly about the kind of society they wished to defend after the fighting ended. Strauss warned them against the illusion of building a culture around values of "openness" that scorned the human need for solidarity, sacrifice, and even suffering. As a philosopher, Strauss was a critic of modern thinkers whose ideas encouraged, as he later wrote, the "corrosion and destruction of the heritage of Western civilization." Strauss was therefore both a defender of liberal democracy, as well as a critic of liberal theories of human nature that sought to domesticate the highest longings of the soul. He correctly saw that some of the most serious threats to liberal ways of life do not come from authoritarian regimes. They come from homegrown ideals of equality and freedom, which can exercise their own kind of tyranny over the social customs and habits that make open societies possible.

For Strauss, more was at stake than the West's readiness to shed "blood, sweat, and tears" on the shores of Europe and the islands of the South Pacific. There was also the tradition of education on which the peoples of the West depend for their civilizational identity. Strauss saw liberal education not as a catechesis in liberal pieties, but as a courageous engagement with moral traditions that may be profoundly at odds with democratic life. In this way, a genuinely liberal education served as a

“counterforce” to the leveling pressures of mass culture. It provided reminders, as he later put it, of human greatness, of human possibilities beyond a life of consumption and production.

Strauss wrote frequently about education, and the survival of great books education in our country owes a great deal to his work. But his boldest insight is found in this early lecture, delivered at a time when the future of Western civilization was in doubt. Strauss implied a moral connection between the martial virtues of the closed society and the liberal virtues of the open society—between the life of the warrior and the life of the philosopher. He suggested that only in the search for wisdom could a human being truly achieve the qualities sought by the warrior and the soldier. Strauss did not therefore condemn the man who fights valiantly to the death; he sought to *perfect* the martial ideal, transposing it to the mind’s struggle against its enemies, falsehood and flattery. To pursue the highest truths and the highest goods, he claimed, requires the rarest human excellences. It requires the courage to risk cherished beliefs and self-images in encounters with great authors of the past. Strauss ended his lecture with a remark that is as arresting today as it was eighty years ago. He observed that there is a place in Western culture where the old morality and its noble ideals are still defended rather than subverted. Within its ancient universities, the greatest human battle is carried on bloodlessly and perpetually—as rational debate over the nature of truth and goodness.

Our intellectual life has taken a different course than the one Strauss proposed in 1941. Inspired by different lessons from the twentieth century, we have built our societies around the ideal of the individual’s ability to choose a life free from coercion by authority and tradition. Strauss did not reject this ideal, and he cherished the freedom the open society gave to philosophical inquiry. But he argued that such societies can endure only if they allow moral traditions preserving different visions of excellence to speak to young people, drawing them into their visions of virtue. Strauss was outwardly respectful toward people of faith, and he wrote reverently about his own Jewish heritage. But he tasked the university—rather than religion—with sustaining these traditions philosophically. He did so because he believed that intellectual “probity” prevented his own return to traditional faith. Regardless of his reasons, Strauss was

surely right to insist that students in a democracy need an education that cultivates more than empathy, tolerance, and a capacity for self-expression. They need a conception of themselves as belonging to a tradition, a culture, and a nation to which, and for which, they are responsible. They need a language that helps them make sense of relationships and obligations they have not chosen. They need an understanding of their embodiment as the natural ground of freedom, rather than an obstacle to it. And they need an ideal, higher than mere life, for which they are prepared to die.

Strauss wished to recover classical philosophy and revive the careful study of the great books. He believed that this kind of education could open the aristocratic horizon that citizens of an open society most desperately need, if they wish to save liberalism from itself: not freedom from the past, but freedom from the present. Perhaps education cannot bear the moral weight that Strauss placed on it. And as religious men and women, we should entertain even more serious doubts whether the philosophical life can fulfill our deepest aspirations for wisdom and holiness. But as our politics burns through the ideological firewalls of the postwar era, we should heed Strauss's prescient warning: An education that denies our need to risk our lives for something beyond life will fail students to the extent that it succeeds. It will leave them in a condition like that of Strauss's doomed classmates: angry, lost, and prey to the savagery that will destroy our civilization.

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