



## What is Political Philosophy?

*Leo Strauss*

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## **What is Political Philosophy?** Leo Strauss

"All political action has . . . in itself a directedness towards knowledge of the good: of the good life, or of the good society. For the good society is the complete political good. If this directedness becomes explicit, if men make it their explicit goal to acquire knowledge of the good life and of the good society, political philosophy emerges. . . . The theme of political philosophy is mankind's great objectives, freedom and government or empire—objectives which are capable of lifting all men beyond their poor selves. Political philosophy is that branch of philosophy which is closest to political life, to non-philosophic life, to human life."—From "What Is Political Philosophy?"

*What Is Political Philosophy?*—a collection of ten essays and lectures and sixteen book reviews written between 1943 and 1957—contains some of Leo Strauss's most famous writings and some of his most explicit statements of the themes that made him famous. The title essay records Strauss's sole extended articulation of the meaning of political philosophy itself. Other essays discuss the relation of political philosophy to history, give an account of the political philosophy of the non-Christian Middle Ages and of classic European modernity, and present his theory of esoteric writing.

## **What is Political Philosophy? Details**

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## From Reader Review What is Political Philosophy? for online ebook

### ValeBooks says

El autor de este texto Leo Strauss es un pensador elitista, anti liberal y antidemocrático, entre sus ideales tiene visión de sociedad jerárquica basada en desigualdad. Polariza duramente la audiencia ¿Por que su obra crea grandes intereses y a la vez provoca airadas contradicciones? Esta como otra preguntas son resultas a lo largo de este texto. La introducción escrita por el autor Juan Garcia Moran, brinda herramientas que le lector lo llevan a emerger de la filosofía política. Se desarrolla una prosa esotérica que convierte la lectura de sus textos en una tarea ardua y algo complicada. Las obras de este Nihilista alemán que tiene inclinaciones políticas pagano fascistas, sus teorías son influenciadas por la filosofía política clásica; Platon, Aristóteles; Minoría de ricos y mayoría pobres. Es un referente de la filosofía política contemporánea de siglo XX , con su fundador Maquiavelo. La filosofía política como el entendimiento del naturalísimo de las cosas políticas así lo plantea el autor como la esencia del naturalismo de la ciencia política. 1`La filosofía siempre llega demasiado tarde para guiar la acción política; El filosofo interpreta el resultado de la acción política, puede ayudarnos a entender el estado pero no puede enseñarnos lo que debemos hacer respecto al estado. ` Un estudio del pasado de la filosofodia política puede llegar a la hipótesis de que no existe ninguna filosofía política de la que se pueda aprender algo, porque lo evidente es una variedad lamentable de filósofos políticos, luchando entre ellos hasta la muerte. Pero para poder hablar de la utilidad que la filosofía política presta actualmente sino en todo momento, nos muestra cual complicado es asegurar los minamos de decencia, de la humanidad y de justicia que han sido dados por sentados, y se sigan dando en algunos países libres.

1\_\_Leo Strauss\_¿Que es filosofía política?\_\_P.G 58\_\_\_\_Juan Garcia MORAN.

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### Jaspal Rana says

This is an interesting book, more suitable for serious scholars of political philosophy. A casual reader, however, may occasionally feel as if he were chewing on a 60 year old bit of dry parchment.

In it, Strauss has attempted to give an outline of political philosophy and its evolution through ages. Roughly, it may be divided into 4 parts.

The first part (consisting of first 2 chapters) is an introduction, in which he explains the term 'Political Philosophy' and stresses upon its relevance in the modern world. He also shows (though he is beating a dead horse here, so to speak) that the foundation of modern political philosophy had been laid sown in the classical period.

The next part (with the following 6 chapters) deals with a study of classical and (pre-)modern political philosophy - not directly, mind you, but by critiquing some of the contemporary philosophers who had critiqued the former. It becomes quite difficult at times to get a hang of what Strauss is saying because let's face it - only very serious students of political philosophy are going to read the critics who wrote about the classicists almost 70 years ago.

Third part consists of 2 chapters which includes a defense of his philosophical stand and an obituary-cum-analysis of a deceased philosopher friend of his.

Fourth part consists of 16 book-reviews. These books on political philosophy were written almost 60 years

ago and I skimmed through the reviews, not even bothering to read a few.

Overall, you will not lose much if you decide to skip this book. If, however, you decide to read this, I think first and second parts are quite sufficient.

**Final rating: 3.5/5**

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### **Brad Lyerla says**

I read the title essay with my reading group. It took us months as we read paragraph by paragraph together, for ninety minutes, twice a month.

It is a difficult, dense essay. I would have comprehended only a small fraction alone of what I could understand when reading with others. I gather that Strauss himself was an enthusiast for group reading of philosophical texts. And I have learned first hand how powerful it can be.

Now, I am reading Strauss' NATURAL RIGHT AND HISTORY. I will save what more I have to say about WHAT IS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY? for my review of NATURAL RIGHT.

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### **Erik says**

Recommended by James Schall in Another Sort of Learning, Intro to Part 2, as one of Four Beginning, Though Difficult, Books by Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin.

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### **Alan Johnson says**

The Goodreads listing for the 1959 hardcover edition of this work incorrectly lists the author as "Laura Strauss." The author was, of course, Leo Strauss.

I purchased this 1959 edition on May 27, 1967 at the University of Chicago bookstore. I read most of it during the late 1960s and early 1970s. I have recently read or reread some of the essays. It is an excellent account of Strauss's approach to political philosophy.

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### **Riley Haas says**

I did not write a review when I read this. But I am the furthest thing from a Straussian.

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### **Rutger says**

Somewhat more obscure essays than in 'The Return of Classical Political Rationalism', but just as illuminating.

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## Marts (Thinker) says

Strauss presents a collection of essays, lectures, and reviews examining the theme of political philosophy, and varied aspects of political and human life...

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## Yann says

Érasme m'a appris cet adage que les anciens employaient dans les mêmes situations où nous disons "tu prêches un convaincu" : ils disaient "tu pousses un coureur". C'est ce que m'inspire la lecture de cet ensemble d'essais relatifs à la philosophie politique écrits il y a soixante ans par Léo Strauss, un allemand émigré aux États-Unis. En effet, le point commun de ces écrits est un appel à la lecture des auteurs classiques, comme Platon, Aristote, Cicéron, Maïmonide, Fârâbî, Machiavel, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu et Rousseau. Pouvant me de m'être intéressé à leurs écrits, j'ai même eu du mal à comprendre au début l'intérêt de défendre une telle évidence, mais en prenant du recul, j'ai un peu mieux compris les intentions de l'auteur. Son souci est de combattre un préjugé naturellement répandu suivant lequel au fond, toutes ces vieilleries sont bonnes à jeter, et qu'il vaut mieux se contenter d'un bon résumé des derniers développements de la science que de perdre son temps à ruminer les opinions fausses et éculées de vieilles barbes défraîchies, dont la longueur des discours assomme d'avance, et contre lesquelles l'ancienneté plaide puisque tout conspire naturellement au progrès général des connaissances.

Ce contre quoi Strauss s'élève, c'est un positivisme mal réglé qui prétend à une objectivité irréaliste en voulant séparer complètement faits et valeurs, évacue la morale, et se concentre sur une lecture exclusivement logique et descriptive, manquant ainsi l'essentiel. J'ai été un peu méfiant au début, vis-à-vis de ce que je craignait d'être une criailerie d'universitaire en mal de reconnaissance, ou une réaction obscurantiste contre la science, mais tout bien considéré, il n'en est rien.

J'ai été d'abord un peu gêné par la manière avec laquelle il conduit certaines argumentations, en désarticulant les écrits des auteurs sur lesquels il s'appuie abondamment, citant dans une même phrase des extraits de différents ouvrages, pour en faire ressortir les incohérences. En particulier, Hobbes, Spinoza et Locke sont soumis à ces contorsions pour mettre en lumière les difficultés avec lesquelles ils placent Dieu dans leur systèmes. Mais il ne s'agit pas tant pour Strauss de flétrir ces auteurs - ils avaient déjà subis de telles attaques de leur vivant - que de mettre en lumière leur prudence et leur sagacité. Il ne pouvaient affirmer aussi positivement ce que Kant établira clairement. Et encore Kant s'entoure aussi de précautions infinies, par une difficulté voulue - ce qui écarte bon nombre de querelleurs - , et surtout en ayant le souci de mettre la morale au centre de ses préoccupations.

Au reste, je regrette ma complète ignorance des philosophes des deux derniers siècles : toutes les allusions à Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche et Heidegger me sont, hélas, parfaitement obscures. Au final, je suis assez content de cette petite escapade au XXème siècle.

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## Sam Snideman says

The most confusing political theory book I've ever read in my life. Straussians are weird people.

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## Pedro José says

This book is excellent for anyone interested both in an introduction to political thought as well as some insight into deeper questions. Thus, not all the essays in this volume are equally accessible to someone without any previous knowledge of political theory. The first one, which gives its name to the book, and the second ("Political Philosophy and History") are absolutely worth it.

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## Joe says

Review:

February 2006

The enticing ambiguities of Leo Strauss

For an author who is most often despised, and occasionally revered, one is surprised on how little consensus there is on what Leo Strauss actually thought. In this brief review I would like to give the prospective reader a little taste of the great enigma that is Leo Strauss.

The difficulty is this, in reading Leo Strauss one always gets the feeling that one is either on the edge of a rather large insight or the target of an elaborate, but delightfully subtle, joke. In the essay on Maimonides ("Maimonides Statement on Political Science," p155-169) LS speaks a great deal about the (meaning of the) order of Maimonides' listing of the divisions and subdivisions of Theoretical and Practical Philosophy, all the while taking special note of the central topic. Centers of lists, books, chapters, and so forth are very important to LS - they represent the least exposed position, and thus (perhaps!) the place to look for the philosophers true meaning.

Maimonides' list:

1. Theoretical Philosophy:

A. Math:

- i. Arithmetic
- ii. Geometry
- iii. Astronomy
- iv. Music

B. Physics

C. Theology:

- i. God, Angels
- ii. Metaphysics

2. Practical Philosophy:

A. Man's Governance of himself.

B. Governance of the household.

- C. Governance of the City.
- D. Governance of the Nations.

Unfortunately, or so it seems, there is more than one center to our list. There are two "centers" to this list considered as a whole. If one only pays attention to the ABC divisions the center is 2A: Man's Governance of himself. However, if one pays attention to the i,ii,iii subdivisions the center of the whole list is 1C.i: God and Angels. Furthermore, the center of theoretical Philosophy itself is either (in the ABC division) 1B - Physics or (in the i, ii, iii subdivision) 1A.iv -Music. Interestingly, of the 3 major divisions within theoretical philosophy only Physics isn't further subdivided. And (perhaps somewhat more alarmingly) there is no center at all to Practical Philosophy considered on its own.

Practical Philosophy has no center but one of its elements (2A, in the ABC division) is a contender to be the center of the whole of philosophy. Of the centers considered (two for the whole of philosophy, Man's Governance of himself and God and Angels; and two for theoretical philosophy, Physics and Music) only one (God and Angels) could, I think, be considered orthodox or religious. Thus one could (perhaps) be forgiven for thinking that what LS is insinuating, by drawing our attention to this list of Maimonides, is that (with the possible exception of Physics, which has no subdivisions) theoretical philosophy & practical philosophy are based on nothing but Man; the different types and needs of men. Psychology, apparently, is indeed the Queen of the Sciences, as Nietzsche much later maintained.

In any case, when LS says that, "[w]e are tempted to say that the Logic [i.e. the book by Maimonides where the above list occurs] is the only philosophic book which Maimonides ever wrote" one is eerily reminded of how LS saw fit to end the previous essay (How Farabi Read Plato's Laws, p134 -154): "[w]e admire the ease with which Farabi invented Platonic speeches." Now, is LS actually denying that Maimonides later work is philosophical? Or, is the speech (or purpose) LS seemingly attributes to Maimonides' list an invention? Has LS here `invented' a Maimonidean speech?

Further, if one takes into consideration the beginning of the Farabi essay (the observations by LS on Farabi's story about the mystic dissembling to escape a city) one is forced to wonder if (or to what degree) LS seriously meant what he indicates, or can be said to indicate, here. Or, another possibility, is LS `criticizing' Maimonides for daring to be so bold? Does a `genuine' philosopher ever dare say what he actually thinks? By not mentioning the youthfulness of Maimonides when he wrote this work (the `Logic' supposedly was written when he was 16!) is LS drawing our attention to it, seemingly to emphasize that no genuine philosopher would ever speak so frankly when mature? Thus, if this line of interpretation were correct, Maimonides, at the height of his powers (i.e. in the Guide), would never, or so LS maintains above, risk writing a philosophic work.

The central chapters, btw, of `What is Political Philosophy' are the essays on Farabi and Maimonides. ...Strauss was not young when he wrote them.

Additionally, I should point out that in the Farabi essay Strauss draws our attention not only to the similarity between philosophers and the pious (i.e. both face persecution) but also to the differences between them.

"We must understand this in the light of the story of the pious ascetic. Plato was not a pious ascetic. Whereas the pious ascetic almost always says explicitly and unambiguously what he thinks, Plato almost never says explicitly and unambiguously what he thinks. But Plato has something in common with the pious ascetic. Both are sometimes compelled to state truths which are dangerous to either themselves or others. Since they are both men of judgment, they act in such cases in the same way; they state the dangerous truth by surrounding it properly, with the result that they are not believed in what they say. It is in this manner that Plato has written about laws."

This last is directly attributed to Farabi by Strauss. Seemingly, LS would want us to choose between two

alternatives: either Maimonides is a pious ascetic/mystic who "almost always says explicitly and unambiguously what he thinks" or he is a philosopher who "almost never says explicitly and unambiguously what he thinks". Eventually, one finds oneself wondering something similar about LS himself.

But why all this ambiguity?

"Farabi's Summary consists of allusions to those thoughts to which, as he thinks, Plato has alluded in the Laws. Farabi's allusions are meant to be helpful for men for whom Plato's allusions are not equally helpful: allusions which were intelligible to some of Plato's contemporaries are not equally intelligible to men of the same type among Farabi's contemporaries."

One can perhaps at this point be forgiven for adding that whereas Plato wrote allusively for ancient pagans and Farabi wrote allusively for medieval monotheists Strauss himself writes allusively for modern atheists. ...Is there then only one Philosophy?

Obviously I do not, btw, mean to claim that this is an exhaustive account of what LS says in these important essays. This is only a snapshot (i.e. a particular, if not peculiar, view) of what is going on in these essays; read and reread these, and the other essays, carefully to try to get a more comprehensive view.

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