

influence extended to the State Department's policy planning staff, the Department of Education and the Office of the Vice President.

My thesis that Strauss was an esoteric Nietzschean is contentious; at first glance, Strauss appears to be a passionate *critic* of historicism and nihilism and a believer in natural law. However, there is substantial evidence that he was a secret Nietzschean. The most important indication is his method of interpreting the writers of the past: he says, for example, that they always state their sincere views only at the precise center of their books, and put their own ideas in the mouths of other authors. As a general hermeneutic method, this seems eccentric at best. But Strauss asks us to apply his method to his own works, in which case nihilism emerges like the solution to a puzzle. In addition, Strauss began life as an overt historicist who later attacked this doctrine, but only because of its alleged immoral effects; he never provides an argument against it. Furthermore, although he claims to be a natural law theorist, merely transmitting the doctrines that all great Western thinkers have always held, he never states the content of these doctrines, and the most he says about natural law is that it is always "changeable." Finally, Strauss alludes systematically to Nietzsche without acknowledging his debt in a straightforward way; and in particular, he borrows Nietzsche's methods of writing esoterically.⁹

Like Nietzsche, Strauss began as a historicist, believing that "truth is a function of time (historical epoch) or that every philosophy belongs to a definite time and place (country)." From historicism he moved to nihilism, or the rejection of all truth, including even the "truths" of history; and he continued to hold nihilism as a secret position. But like Nietzsche, he also began to preach an exoteric antihistorical doctrine, which has been widely read and admired. Leo Strauss therefore serves as a quintessential example of a certain kind of *ubermensch*.

The closest Strauss comes to revealing the true nature of his ideas is in a 1961 essay entitled "Relativism." Here he denounces liberals and positivists for claiming to accept relativism, while inconsistently treating tolerance and objectivity, respectively, as absolute standards. Nietzsche-in contrast to these well-meaning but intellectually dishonest versions of "the last man"-is "the philosopher of relativism: the first thinker who faced the problem of relativism in its full extent and pointed to the way in which relativism can be overcome." Immediately Strauss adds, "Relativism came to Nietzsche's attention in the form of historicism..."¹⁰ And the aspect of historicism that concerns Strauss is the belief in *Weltanschauungen*:

11. A "Right" Nietzschean: Leo Strauss and his Followers

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche heaps contempt upon those who misinterpret him, and remarks that if some people don't understand him, this is "perfectly in order." But he adds that part of his audience does understand him, for "... I have even real geniuses among my readers." This sounds slightly optimistic, given the total number of readers Nietzsche had in 1888; but his wish may have come true more recently. (After all, Nietzsche speaks of himself as one of those "posthumous people" who are only truly born after their death.) There is a school of philosophers who, I believe, have entered into a kind of secret discipleship of Nietzsche. This school is composed of followers of Leo Strauss, who have exercised a powerful influence on humanistic education in the United States and to a lesser extent in Germany and Italy. Straussians hold professorships at many major universities in North America. One orthodox Straussian text, Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*, became a best-seller, as did a book by one of his students, Francis Fukuyama. Strauss has been called the "guru of American conservatism"; during the Reagan and Bush administrations, his

i.e., the theory that science (for example) "may depend... on the spirit of the age."³ Strauss' own *Weltanschauung-historicism* is evident, for example, in his belief that "the human species consists by nature of tribes or nations, *ethne*;"⁴ or in his claim that "there can only be closed societies..."⁵ He argues that for Nietzsche, history "teaches a truth that is deadly."⁶ This "truth" is that the norms of each culture are thoroughly arbitrary; but people must nevertheless believe in the transcendent value of these norms, "which limit their horizon and thus enable them to have character and style."⁷ Historical research reveals the contingency of all values, and thereby paralyzes us. The Romantic response—"that one fabricates a myth"—is "patently impossible for men of intellectual probity."⁸ The "true solution" is not Romanticism but Nietzschean philosophy, which reveals, first of all, that historical research is as contingent as everything else: "Objective history suffices for destroying the delusion of the objective validity of any principles of thought and action; [but] it does not suffice for opening up a genuine understanding of history..."⁹ Any such understanding is a chimera; and with the very distinction between truth and lie removed, space is opened up for a "new project—the revaluation of all values... . It is in this way that Nietzsche may be said to have transformed the deadly truth of relativism into the most life-giving truth ..."¹⁰

Strauss, a lifelong admirer of Heidegger, agrees with him that Nietzsche may have faltered in the end and produced merely a new, dogmatic version of metaphysics with his doctrine of the Will to Power. (This seems untrue to me, since the Will to Power was merely Nietzsche's *exoteric* doctrine.) But Strauss describes Heidegger's "existentialism" as an "attempt to free Nietzsche's alleged overcoming of relativism from the consequences of [Nietzsche's] relapse into metaphysics or of his recourse to nature." Thus, according to Strauss, Heideggerian philosophy is simply a more consistent version of Nietzscheanism. Heidegger was a nihilist: in other words, he was a relativist with "angst."¹¹ Strauss summarizes Heidegger's position as a Nietzschean discovery of nihilism, reached through a recognition of relativism, and arriving at last at the following point:

The fundamental phenomenon, the only phenomenon that is not hypothetical, is the abyss of freedom: the fact that man is compelled to choose groundlessly; the fundamental experience, i.e., an experience more fundamental than every science, is the experience of the objective groundlessness of all principles of thought and action, the experience of nothingness.¹²

Thus even historical scholarship rests, ultimately, on a groundless choice to pursue a certain kind of arbitrary procedure. "Rationalism itself rests on nonrational, unevident assumptions; in spite of its seemingly overwhelming power, rationalism is hollow."¹³ Strauss' article ends almost as soon as he has invoked Heidegger's name, and before he has given any exposition of Heidegger's positive doctrines. "I can allude here only to one point," he writes, "to Heidegger's teaching regarding historical truth." About even this he says practically nothing, except that, for Heidegger, "true understanding of a thinker is understanding him creatively, i.e., understanding him differently from the way he understood himself."¹⁴ This is the key to Strauss' own philosophy, which consists almost entirely of creative (mis)readings of thinkers from the past. Thus Strauss owes much to Heidegger, whose ideas are "of the greatest importance to man as man." Heidegger, he claims, "surpasses in speculative intelligence all his contemporaries and is at the same time intellectually the counterpart to what Hitler was politically [i.e., a nihilist]"¹⁵ Strauss is a nihilist too, esoterically; his only insight is a knowledge of the Nietzschean/Heideggerian abyss. But he wants to turn back from this spectre of groundlessness, *ubermenschlich*, to produce a comforting illusion for the herd. Yet in order that this myth should not to be a mere Romantic fabrication, it must *at the same time* reveal the secret of nihilism to those clever enough to follow Strauss' hints. Strauss' vehicle for preaching this double-edged message is the deliberate misinterpretation of past philosophers, whom (just like Heidegger) he "understands creatively."

A typical Straussian text begins with an apparent denunciation of historicism. For example, in *Natural Right and History*, he contrasts the "self-evident truths" of the liberal Enlightenment, which constituted a version of natural right, against the modern "historical sense," which has led us "eventually to unqualified relativism." According to historicism, he says, "all societies have their ideals, cannibal societies no less than civilized ones."¹⁶ This kind of moral *reductio* is meant to prevent the conventionally moral herd from endorsing historicism. Richard Schacht summarizes Strauss' rhetorical strategy as follows: "These developments [sc. historicism and relativism] lead to Nietzsche. It would be too horrible if Nietzsche were right. Therefore Nietzsche must be wrong."¹⁷ According to Strauss, historicism "asserted that all human thought and action are essentially dependent on historical situations, the sequence of which proves to have no rational goal or meaning."¹⁸ Historicism therefore led inevitably to cynicism about the value of the great philosophies of the past. This, in turn, led to a general

loss of nerve among European intellectuals, a new "doubt about the superiority of the purposes of the West." "In the past, the West had striven to construct "a universal society of free and equal nations of free and equal men and women enjoying universal affluence, and therefore universal justice and happiness, through science understood as the conquest of nature in the service of human power."¹¹² But this had depended on a sure belief in universal principles, among them the "self-evident" values of the American Founding Fathers: liberty, justice, and the pursuit of happiness. Historicism suggested that these principles were culturally-relative and ultimately groundless.

Echoing Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, Strauss writes that a recognition of cultural relativism brings on nihilism by destroying the "protecting atmosphere within which life or culture or action is alone possible." This is a clear disaster for moral theory and practice; but Strauss maintains that "we are able, and hence obliged, to look for a [transcendent] standard with reference to which we can judge of the ideals of our own as well as of any other society." This standard is "natural right," the ostensible subject of Strauss' book. However, the content and consequences of natural right turn out to be remarkably elusive. All we find out for certain is that "all natural right is changeable," an assertion that seems to undercut its status as transcendent and universal. Strauss' true views about natural right are expressed in his essay on Nietzsche:

The philosophers' science of morals claimed to have discovered the foundation of morals either in nature or in reason. Apart from all other defects of that pretended science it rests on the gratuitous assumption that morality can or must be natural (according to nature) or rational. Yet every morality is based on some tyranny against nature as well as against reason."

In an essay entitled "On Natural Law," Strauss explicitly states that the belief in *Weltanschauung* (which he shares) has destroyed natural law. "Since every notion of good and right belongs to a specific *Weltanschauung*, there cannot be natural law binding to men as men." Even "Science... is but one historical, contingent form of man's understanding of the world..."¹³⁷

In works like *Natural Right and History*, Strauss only puts such relativist remarks in the mouths of his purported enemies. His own position is supposed to be antihistoricist. Strauss argues *against* historicism by suggesting that empirical history, "far from

legitimizing the historicist inference ..., seems rather to prove that all human thought, and certainly all philosophic thought, is concerned with the same themes or the same fundamental problems, and therefore that there exists an unchanging framework which persists in all changes of human knowledge of both facts and principles "" Furthermore, Strauss argues that all of historicism's basic slogans are self-contradictory. For example, whenever the historicist says, "Everything is relative," he thereby claims a universal, timeless truth about human history. Whenever he says, "All ideas are the mere product of their time," he posits a description of all ideas, which-he wants us to believe-is not itself a mere product of its time. Thus Strauss argues that historicism must inevitably slip into nihilism, because the historian, just like his historical subject, is conditioned by his cultural context:

Historicism thrives on the fact that it inconsistently exempts itself from its own verdict about all human thought. The historicist thesis is self-contradictory or absurd. We cannot see the historical character of 'all' thought-that is, of all thought with the exception of the historicist insight and its implications-without transcending history, without grasping something trans-historical."

But Strauss is one historicist who is willing to be ruthlessly consistent, to apply historicism to itself and thus to undermine the foundations of all rationality by making no reasons appear better than any other. Describing the genesis of his first major work, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, Strauss admits that he "therefore began to wonder whether the self-destruction of reason was not the inevitable outcome of modern rationality." Thus for Strauss it is possible to "transcend history"" by means of a radicalization of the historical sense-but the Dionysian space one thereby enters is irrational and intoxicating. In his later works, Strauss avoids making this antirational, deconstructive move explicitly, leaving it to readers who recognize his esotericism. Nor does he ever offer any positive account of what a transcendent, "natural" alternative to historicism would be. All he can suggest is that the best societies are those which protect "the highest activity"-that is, philosophy; and that because of its failure to do this, the "contemporary solution" is "*contra naturam*."⁴²

It may seem strange to see societies described as "unnatural" only insofar they are hostile to philosophy. After all, when Strauss describes philosophy as the "highest activity," he seems to imply

that it is far removed from nature. And he says explicitly that "every morality is based on some tyranny against nature... ." ⁴³ But Strauss explains his intentions in an essay on Nietzsche's *Beyond Good And Evil*. Here he quotes Nietzsche-"there has never yet been a natural humanity"-to show that all ideas of nature and naturalness are subjective, human creations. "But, Nietzsche says, man must be "made natural [*vernatiirlicht*]" by philosophy's Strauss follows Nietzsche in redefining nature as the sphere of Dionysus, and therefore as the province of philosophers who are beyond culture, beyond any contingent good and evil. The role of Nietzsche's Overman is to create values, to set up moral and aesthetic criteria which seem to ordinary people to carry the sanction of nature. So "nature" is a myth, the creation of Dionysian Overmen. Therefore, any society that fails to tolerate the Dionysian philosopher is, by definition, "*contra naturam*." Like Nietzsche, Strauss holds that cultures are only justified by the geniuses that they create; and genius means, above all, being beyond culture.

A closer examination of Strauss' idea of "philosophy" reveals that he means by this precisely the radicalization of historicism, the use of historical relativism to undermine the very structures of rationality which gave it birth. He writes, "the enlightenment critique of the tradition must be radicalized, as it was by Nietzsche, into a critique of the principles of the tradition... . The 'historicization' of philosophy is therefore, and only therefore, justified and necessary." Thus the true Straussian philosopher is a Nietzschean nihilist. But he dares not state his view openly, for he depends upon society-at least for leisure and sustenance-and he knows that philosophy, if openly preached, will destroy society. Therefore, Strauss says:

Philosophers or scientists who hold this view about the relations of philosophy or science and society are driven to employ a peculiar manner of writing which would enable them to reveal what they regard as the truth to the few, without endangering the unqualified commitment of the many to the opinions on which society rests. They will distinguish between the true teaching as the esoteric teaching and the socially useful teaching as the exoteric teaching; whereas the exoteric teaching is meant to be easily accessible to every reader, the esoteric teaching discloses itself only to the very careful and well-trained readers after long and careful study."

The epitome of such a philosopher is Nietzsche. It might be objected that Nietzsche certainly tried to undermine his readers'

"unqualified commitment" to the values on which society rests. But Nietzsche's description of his own project includes several comments like the following:

Do we immoralists do virtue any *harm*? As little as anarchists do princes. Only once they have been shot at do they again sit firmly on their thrones. Moral: one must shoot at morals."⁸

True enough, Nietzsche wants his *ibermenschlich* readers to recognize the contingency of all values; but he only wants this message to get through to those who are strong and crafty enough to create *new* morals. Nietzsche's worst nightmare is a herd which has seen all its morals dethroned, but is unable to say a new "Yes." The "Last Man" is Nietzsche's caricature of the relativist, nihilist weakling, who, contemplating the dogmas of the past, can say only: "In the past, all the world was mad." "What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?" thus asks the Last Man and blinks." Rather than suffer the regime of the Last Man, Nietzsche would rather "drive [people] to extremes, pit them one against each other, people against people, and this for centuries; then perhaps, as from a stray spark from the terrible energy thus ignited, the light of genius will blaze up suddenly." Nietzsche's preference for a culture based on commitment (any commitment)-and his abhorrence for the Last Man's nihilistic tolerance-is shared by Strauss. Hence Strauss' decision to embrace Judaism, despite his esoteric atheism." Hence also Francis Fukuyama's nostalgia for the Cold War, despite his lack of commitment to either communism or democratic capitalism. Allan Bloom follows Strauss and Nietzsche when he writes, "it was not necessarily the best of times in America when Catholics and Protestants were suspicious of and hated one another, but at least they were taking their beliefs seriously."⁵² Bloom's target in *The Closing of the American Mind* is the bourgeois nihilist who, open to everything, is in fact closed to any serious commitment.

11. Strauss' Duplicious Texts

But the opponent of nihilism who is himself "beyond" all values cannot simply announce this position openly, without risking the conversion of all his readers to Last Men. Like Nietzsche, therefore, Strauss developed an intricate method for presenting his two-tiered philosophy, such that it would serve a conservative, antirelativist

purpose when read by the many, but reveal the "truth" of nihilism to the sophisticated few. All of his works contain "readings" of political philosophers from the past. These interpretations allegedly reveal that all the great political philosophers possessed esoteric teachings, which they clothed in exoteric garb. These teachings are described in the most elliptical and vague fashion; for example, Bloom merely says that Strauss "enabled [him] to learn strange and wonderful things" from old books.⁵³ What these strange things are, Bloom does not specify; but they seem to involve at least a secret repudiation of God and a privileging of (Nietzschean) philosophy as the only ennobling activity. Strauss provides a series of clues that he believes can be used to reveal his predecessors' esoteric doctrines. For example, he claims that great philosophers always place their "truths" not at the beginning of books, but in the exact middle, surrounded by great quantities of dry and irrelevant material; they use numerological clues to reveal their true intent; and they attribute their esoteric doctrines to past thinkers whom they pretend to attack.

Strauss claimed to have learned his hermeneutic methods by imitating the medieval Islamic and Jewish interpreters of Plato, who read Plato as an esoteric author. Medieval philosophers outside the Christian tradition had been faced with a problem that Plato also faced: the problem of practicing philosophy in an age when philosophy was not tolerated. Socrates had died because he had openly expressed his views, so his disciple Plato had begun a tradition of concealing esoteric philosophical truths under an exoteric cover. Strauss and his medieval antecedents had recognized the esoteric meaning in Plato because they belonged to a transhistorical class of persecuted philosophers, adept at communicating with each other in subtle and esoteric ways. Thus Strauss adopted Nietzsche's vision of the "republic of geniuses: each [intellectual] giant calls to his brother across the desolate intervals of the ages, and, undisturbed by the wanton noises of the dwarfs who carry on beneath them, they continue their high spirit-talk."⁵⁴ Like Nietzsche, Strauss raises "the possibility that all philosophers form a class by themselves, or that what unites all genuine philosophers is more important than what unites a given philosopher with a particular group of non-philosophers [such as the ordinary people of his time]."^{5b} Along these lines, Strauss concluded that, not only was Plato not a mere child of his time; but he was actually a secret critic or -enemy of the world around him—he was Untimely. Strauss further suggested that modern democracies that tolerate philosophy are the exception rather than the rule, so that modern historians, because of their lack of experience with persecution, are unique in not responding to esoteric messages.

He cited Lessing, Bodin, Hobbes, Burke, Condorcet, and others as his predecessors in the art of "reading between the lines."⁵⁶

Plato was, in Strauss' view, the first esoteric philosopher. His philosophy was, moreover, fundamentally a discussion of esoteric philosophy, rather than a statement of any metaphysical view: it was metaphilosophy. "Strictly," he says, "there is then no Platonic teaching... ." Instead of teaching us anything about justice, Plato merely meditated about the process of meditating about justice, i.e., about the role of philosophy. Thus Plato "succeeds in reducing the question of the possibility of the just city to the question of the coincidence of philosophy and political power."⁵⁷ Plato answers his own question by concluding that philosophy in its pure form is incompatible with politics, as the fate of Socrates proves; but philosophers can still serve a useful purpose if they disseminate their truths skillfully to a chosen few, and try to bring the mass of people around to their opinions by means of rhetoric and even convenient lies. Strauss is able to elicit all of this out of a text, the *Republic*, which says something quite different on the surface. He makes Plato into an antimetaphysical philosopher without a doctrine—in other words, into Nietzsche. To do this, he relies on a number of clues which (he tells us) Plato placed in the text in order to inform the true philosopher that he was speaking ironically. Thus, for example, Strauss says that Plato cannot have been serious about the doctrine of Forms, which "is utterly incredible, not to say... fantastic."⁵⁸ And since the theory of Forms is necessary as a justification for the rule of philosopher-kings, Plato obviously disapproved of the rule of philosophers. Thus the *Republic* was actually a veiled warning against the tyranny of Socratic men; but only those philosophically sophisticated enough to reject the theory of Forms can recognize Plato's ironic intent.

As a tool for interpreting the history of political philosophy, Strauss' method has appeared arbitrary to most critics. Miles Burnyeat, for example, remarks that "Exegesis is Strauss' substitute for argument."⁵⁹ But Strauss' methods can also be applied to his own writing, in which case they reveal his total adherence to Nietzsche. For example, we discover that Strauss does not straightforwardly oppose historicism, as he claims at the *beginning of Natural Right and History*; rather he endorses the cultural relativism that he puts in the mouths of Nietzsche, Weber, and Heidegger, his apparent enemies.⁶⁰ He attacks these thinkers for doing damage to the tradition of natural right, which is the source of the vitality of the West, and therefore for committing a "crime" in the terms of herd morality—but he never claims that they are wrong from a perspective that is beyond good and evil.

What is more, Strauss' hermeneutic tools apply well to Nietzsche, many of whose duplicitous methods he simply borrowed. When Strauss tried to show that Plato was a secret nihilist by arguing that the theory of the Forms was "fantastic," he was offering a deeply improbable interpretation. But Nietzsche's doctrines of the Will to Power and Eternal Return really are fantastic and were deliberately designed to subvert themselves. Strauss' "Note on the Plan of *Beyond Good and Evil*" reveals his understanding of, and indebtedness to, Nietzsche's esotericism. (On his request, this essay was published in the exact center of his *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*.) Since Strauss' death, Michael Allen Gillespie has drawn attention to Nietzsche's use of numerological clues just the kind of signals that Strauss found throughout the canon of great books." Finally, David Allison points out that Nietzsche deliberately undermines the status of his own genealogical method with a comment that appears in the *precise center* of the *Genealogy of Morals*:

All events in the organic world are a subduing, a becoming master, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous "meaning" and "purpose" are necessarily obscured or even obliterated.⁶⁹

This is Nietzsche's most radical statement of his approach to history; it is so radical that it rules out any understanding of the past, and therefore any comprehension of the "meaning" or "purpose" of human life (for Nietzsche constantly reminds us that life is history). This is precisely the nihilistic turn of history against itself which Straussians endorse, but which they labor to hide from their average reader. Nietzsche places it in the exact center of a book that purports to reveal the true "meaning" of morals.

In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss remarks that historicism left Nietzsche with a dilemma: "he could insist on the strictly esoteric character of the theoretical analysis of life—that is, restore the Platonic notion of the noble delusion—or else he could deny the possibility of theory proper and so conceive of thought as essentially subservient to, or dependent on, life or fate." Nietzsche's post-modern followers have "adopted the second alternative," and have become unabashed prophets of the end of morality and metaphysics.⁶⁵ But Nietzsche and Strauss follow the former path, keeping the full "truth" of nihilism a secret. In practical terms, this decision has led Straussians to champion the most traditional

form of humanism imaginable: a canon of great books from the past which—they claim in public—contains a transhistorical set of objectively binding values. Like Nietzsche, they adopt the guise of new "ancients." "One must regard it as possible that we live in an age which is inferior to the past ..., or that we live in an age of decline or decay." "One must be swayed," Strauss writes, "by a sincere longing for the past."⁶ By exposing students to prehistoricist thinkers and interpreting them all as holding precisely the same views, Straussians hope to prevent the spread of relativism and nihilism to the masses.

On the surface, the canon of Western literature appears to be rife with disagreements and the most fundamental diversity of perspectives. But not (say the Straussians) if one reads these texts esoterically. "The works of the great writers of the past are very beautiful even from without. And yet their visible beauty is sheer ugliness, compared with the beauty of those hidden treasures which disclose themselves only after very long, never easy, but always pleasant work."⁶¹ This work bears little resemblance to what we normally think of as scholarship. One characteristic aspect of Strauss' writing is his

complete abandonment of the form as well as the content of modern scholarship. Strauss no longer felt bound... to see the texts [of the past] through the screen of scholarly method or categories. He had liberated himself and could understand writers as they understood themselves. He talked with them as one would talk with a wise and subtle contemporary about the nature of things.'

Strauss' eagerness to abandon scholarly method is as great as Derrida's, and equally Nietzschean. Strauss' books, like Nietzsche's, avoid the scholarly apparatus of footnotes, bibliographies and references to other scholars. Bloom states that Strauss' "refutation of historicism" consisted in his discovery of "truths" in a subterranean tradition of texts from the past—truths that he could only recognize once he had abandoned the contingent premises of historicist scholarship." Thus Strauss' alleged refutation of historicism was actually a radical version of historicism. He claimed that modern scholars were trapped in a contingent culture, unable to understand the various worldviews of the past on their own terms; but *he* had transcended modernity and understood the ancients as they understood themselves. Thus, for example, he chose to examine Xenophon's view of Socrates, "because Xenophon

seems to us a fool but appeared wise to older thinkers."^o The change in attitudes towards Xenophon revealed a gap between ancient and modern world views; and Strauss, seeking to move beyond his culture, tried to see things as the ancients had. His goal was to escape from the *Weltanschauung* of historicism in order to see attain the perspective of closed societies from the past. "In short," writes Bloom, "Strauss returned to the cave."^o Ostensibly, he found there the universal truths that had been secretly held by philosophers in a tradition begun by Plato.

But if this is what he found, one wonders why Straussians refuse to say what the ancient "truths" are, except to call them "strange and wonderful things." It seems more likely to me that Strauss thought he had gained a vantage point exterior to *all* culture by learning to see things through the eyes of many nonhistoricist epochs. He then embraced the civilization of the "ancients," knowing that they had not actually possessed universal truths, and knowing also that his vision of them was by no means objective. This move was analogous to Nietzsche's praise of the Greeks in *The Birth of Tragedy* and elsewhere. Both Strauss and Nietzsche claim that the "ancients" were homogeneous and noble; but neither thinker believes this. "To be able to reproduce that older thought in full awareness of the objections to it is to philosophize," writes Bloom. "Similarly, Nietzsche had held that the Overman would endorse classical cultural values, *despite* his knowledge that they were merely contingent.

So perhaps Strauss discovered no real "truths" when he learned to understand the ancients as they understood themselves. Or perhaps Strauss discovered Nietzscheanism as the esoteric meaning contained in all canonical texts. In other words, I am not sure whether Strauss "discovered" that Socrates, Plato, and other ancients were nihilists (as he sometimes implies), or that a study of past writers would lead to nihilism by revealing the contingency of all thought. In either case, the "truth" that Strauss discovered was the impossibility of truth, and this explains his reticence about the content of his discoveries. At times, Strauss seems eager to claim that past philosophers were Nietzscheans, but it is hard to know whether this is his real belief or his "noble delusion." Bloom claims that Strauss really believed he was understanding the ancients as they understood themselves. But Strauss praised Heidegger for understanding the Greeks creatively, that is, *not* as they understood themselves. Yet Heidegger wrote as if he *meant* his interpretations to be accurate. Thus it is extremely difficult to decide at what level or levels Strauss (like Nietzsche and Heidegger) is being duplicitous. For example, Strauss claims that Socrates

already knew that reason was groundless and that philosophy would ultimately lead to nihilism. Plato, Maimonides, Spinoza, and the rest of the Straussian canon were all active nihilists, supporters of cultural norms who had seen the abyss that lies beyond culture. If this seems strange, recall that Nietzsche had remarked—admittedly, when he was on the verge of madness—that he was "all the names in history."^o Strauss' vision of a homogeneous tradition of esoteric Nietzschean philosophers allows him to argue for a humanistic education based on a univocal canon. But Nietzsche too had argued for an education based on imitation of the ancients, knowing that his vision of Greek culture was a myth, and that the ancients he described were really just objectified versions of himself.

Since *The Closing of the American Mind* is the best-known Straussian text—and since it has been widely misread as a conservative polemic—it may be worth trying to demonstrate specifically that Bloom, too, is an esoteric Nietzschean nihilist." Bloom begins with a denunciation of modern America that recalls Nietzsche's attack on the Last Man. Nietzschean allusions are rife throughout *The Closing of the American Mind*. "Practically all that young Americans have today," Bloom writes, "is an insubstantial awareness that there are many cultures, accompanied by a saccharine moral drawn from that awareness: We should all get along. Why fight?"^o Our modern sense of "openness has driven out the local deities... ."^o Bloom holds that "not only to prefer one's own way but to believe it best, superior to all others, is primary and even natural... . Men must love and be loyal to their families and their peoples in order to preserve them."^o

According to Bloom, the greatest threat to culture is historicism, which reached its apogee with Nietzsche and Heidegger. These thinkers and their acolytes contributed to the renunciation of liberalism in Germany and the rise of fascism. Bloom denies that historicism is "true" (as would Nietzsche), but he does not argue against it, except by claiming that it produced Hitler. And he suggests that, "while we were fighting [Hitler], the thought that had preceded him in Europe conquered here."^o Carried to America by refugee scholars, made dogma by the counter-culture of the 1960s, Weimar historicism has become the dominant outlook. So, for example, when Louis Armstrong sang "Mack the Knife," he was not only quoting Brecht and Weill directly, but *Zarathustra* indirectly. Similarly, when a rock star tells people to "stay loose," he is inadvertently translating Heidegger's term *Gelassenheit*. "[B]ehind it all, the master lyricists are Nietzsche and Heidegger."⁹

Bloom attempts no solution to the crisis of nihilism. He certainly does not propose a philosophical solution, e.g., a refutation of cultural relativism. No Straussian text ever mentions such philosophical critics of nihilism as Wittgenstein or Habermas; Rawls merely makes an appearance as a "parody" of the Last Man." For Bloom, no modern philosophy outside the Nietzschean-existentialist tradition has any value at all; analytic philosophers who discuss relativism and rationality are wasting their time, for Nietzsche has already spoken. But, in the absence of a solution to Nietzschean nihilism, Bloom does at least offer a reasonable paraphrase of Nietzsche's own position:

All ages and places, all races and cultures can play on [the modern] stage. Nietzsche believed that the wild costume ball of the passions was both the disadvantage and the advantage of late modernity... . The advantage hoped for is that the richness and tension present in the modern soul might be the basis for comprehensive new worldviews... . This richness, according to Nietzsche, consisted largely in thousands of years of inherited and now unsatisfied religious longing. But this possible advantage does not exist for young Americans, because their poor education has impoverished their longings, and they are hardly aware of the great pasts [notice the plural: Bloom means cultures] that Nietzsche was thinking of and had within himself."

If Bloom were content to call for better multicultural education in history, art and literature, then he would be a humanist and I would agree with him. But, like Nietzsche, Bloom hopes that the eclectic regime of the Last Man can be replaced by "comprehensive new worldviews." In other words, he looks forward to new authentic cultures, the products, presumably, of charismatic *ubermenschlich* individuals like his master, Strauss.

Strauss' educational program represents an interesting version of Nietzschean esotericism, and it is based on a reasonably accurate reading of Nietzsche. But Strauss' Weltanschauung-historicism is, if anything, even cruder than Nietzsche's. Strauss imagines all humans, except Overmen like himself, as absolutely committed members of herds (cultures) whose values are incompatible with those of other herds. He sees no possibility of communication among cultures, which he imagines as completely discrete entities. One integrated set of values defines each culture precisely and serves as the foundation of all its members' lives; these values

have no validity for members of other cultures. Like Nietzsche, Strauss believes that one either follows herd morality, or else one plunges into an abyss of nihilism. In Chapter IX, I will argue that "cultures" are terms that we use to categorize people according to salient characteristics which they share; but such categories can be conceived in numerous, overlapping ways. We each differ from those around us in fundamental aspects of our character and background, just as we may be similar in some respects to people living far away or long ago. A paradigm that dispenses with reified notions of culture will avoid the nihilist conclusions that Strauss reached because of his crude Weltanschauung-historicism. In order to live and act in the world, we do not require an absolute commitment to values that all the people around us share; in fact, it is rare for such a situation to occur. Therefore, nihilism will not overtake a civilization that is aware of cultural difference; and Strauss' program seems an unjustified exercise in deceit.

IV A "Left" Nietzschean: Jacques Derrida

At the opposite end of the spectrum in the modern quarrel over the humanities are the deconstructionists, who openly endorse Nietzsche's view that "nothing is true." They call for humanistic scholarship to be replaced with a free, creative practice of self-overcoming, just as Nietzsche had argued for philology to be replaced with art and Dionysian philosophy. Their project helps to make clearer what Nietzsche meant by a life "beyond culture." Merely using his own examples-his doctrines of Eternal Return and Will to Power-is not very helpful, because to imitate these doctrines would mean to lack the authenticity and originality of an Overman. So it is instructive to examine the example of a thinker who has tried to move beyond culture in a generally Nietzschean spirit, but without merely appropriating Nietzsche's ideas. One such thinker is Jacques Derrida, whose reading of Nietzsche I have already discussed at some length. In what follows, I will describe his deconstructive method and its relation to Nietzsche's philosophy; I will criticize Derrida for adopting a notion of the Weltanschauung much like Nietzsche's; and I will briefly examine Derrida's work on Husserl in order to reply to a potential objection-that Husserl's phenomenology underlies Derrida's position, rather than any form of historicism.

Derrida has tried to "save" Nietzsche from Heidegger's effort to make him the "last metaphysician," a reading that allowed Heidegger to depict himself as the first non-metaphysical thinker

84. *Nachlap*, in Colli- Montinari, *VIII* (2), pp. 431ff.

85. *Twilight of the Idols*, "How the 'Real World' at Last Became a Myth" (Schlechta II:963f.).

Cf. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 131: "What is going to be called *enslavement* can equally legitimately be called *liberation*." Derrida makes this claim in discussing the turn of structuralist anthropology against itself, which results in the nihilist (but also liberated) position of post-structuralism. For the ambiguous meaning of nihilism in Western civilization, see Heidegger, *Will to Power as Art*, pp. 26ff.

Chapter 8

1. Whether deconstruction really belongs on the Left is a matter of controversy. See, e.g., Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 140-150.

2. *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Write Such Good Books" (Kaufmann), 1-2.

3. *Gay Science* (Kaufmann), V:365.

4. Lewis A. Coser comments that Strauss attracted a "brilliant galaxy of disciples who created an academic cult around his teaching." See his *Refugee Scholars in America* (New Haven, 1984), p. 4. Strauss' friends included Gadamer, Kojeve (who wrote an afterword to Strauss' *On Tyranny*), and Lowith. He studied at Marburg under Husserl and Cassirer, and there "furtively read Schopenhauer and Nietzsche." (See his 1970 lecture, "the Problem of Socrates, quoted in John Gunnell, "Strauss Before Straussianism," unpublished MS.) He wrote that he always remained a "doubting and dubious adherent of the Marburg school," whose great fixation, in his day, was historicism. (See his *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* [Chicago, 1983], p. 31; and Gadamer, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, trans. Robert R. Sullivan [Cambridge, Mass., 1985], pp. 7 ff.) For his relation to Gadamer, see his letter of February 26, 1961 in the *Independent Journal of Philosophy*, vol. I, no. 2, 1978; Gadamer's *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, p. 74 and passim; and *Truth and Method*, pp. 484f.

5. *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992). Fukuyama first developed his theme in an article that appeared in *The National Interest*, XVI (1989), pp. 3-18. His target in that article is the Last Man, and his rhetoric is full of Nietzschean allusions. He treats the Cold War as a situation in which two naive cultures gain coherence through their mutual opposition. They are like Nietzsche's slave societies, defined by their abhorrence of outsiders. Nihilism inevitably ensues with the end of ideological conflict, for, without communism to oppose, the West has no *raison d'être*. Cf. Bloom, "Alexandre K\$jeve," in *Giants and Dwarves*, p. 273: "After reading [Kojilve], one wonders whether the citizen of the universal homogeneous state is not identical to Nietzsche's Last Man, and whether Hegel's historicism does not by an inevitable dialectic force us to a more somber and radical

historicism which rejects reason." Bloom and Fukuyama (p. 3) worry that the demise of communism has brought about a "universal homogeneous state." However, in Fukuyama's book, he seems to be more sanguine about the possibility of a stable universal consensus that is rational (in a Hegelian sense) rather than nihilistic, *pace* Nietzsche.

6. Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (Basingstoke, 1988), pp. 15ff.

7. See, e.g., *On Tyranny* (New York, 1968), p. 27.

8. *Natural Right and History*, p. 157 (in a passage that lies at the exact center of the book).

9. For the view that Strauss is an esoteric nihilist, see Drury; Gunnell, op. cit.; "The Myth of the Tradition," *American Political Science Review*, LXXII (1978), pp. 122-134; and "Political Theory and Politics: The Case of Leo Strauss" *Political Theory*, XIII (1985), pp. 339-361. This view has also been confirmed by several Straussians with whom I have spoken. See also Werner Dannhauser, "Remarks on Nietzsche and Allan Bloom's Nietzsche," in *Nietzscheana*, I (May, 1989). Dannhauser, a Straussian (see p. 3), admits that Bloom only differs from Nietzsche in his specific strategy for overcoming nihilism. But Bloom's strategy is Straussian and thus basically Nietzschean: see below.

10. Strauss, "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*," in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago, op. posth., 1983), p. 186.

11. Leo Strauss, "Relativism," in Helmut Schoek and James W. Wiggins (eds.), *Relativism and the Study of Man* (Princeton, 1961), p. 151.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

14. "The Problem of Socrates," in Gunnell, "Strauss Before Straussianism," p. 10.

15. *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, p. 107.

16. "Relativism," p. 152.

17. *Ibid.* Allan Bloom writes: "Leo Strauss believed that the Platonic image of a cave described the essential human condition. All men begin, and most men end, as prisoners of the authoritative opinions of their time and place Socrates' assertion that he only knows that he is ignorant reveals that he has attained ... a standpoint [outside the cave], from which he can see that what others take to be knowledge is only opinion, opinion determined by the necessities of life in the cave." (See "Leo Strauss," in *Giants and Dwarves*, pp. 240-241.)

18. "Relativism," p. 152.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Ibid., p. 153.
21. "Relativism," p. 154.
22. Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (New York, 1959), p. 241.
23. Ibid., p. 246. Cf. Laurence Berns, "Aristotle and the Moderns on Freedom and Equality," in Kenneth Deutsch and Walter Soffer, *The Crisis of Liberal Democracy: A Straussian Perspective* (New York, 1987), p. 152.
24. Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago, 1989), p. 43 (cf. his Spinoza's *Critique of Religion* (New York, 1965), p. 29).
25. "Relativism," pp. 155-156.
26. "The Problem of Socrates," quoted in Gunnell, "Strauss Before Straussianism," p. 6.
27. "Unspoken Prelude to a Lecture at St. John's", in *Interpretation*, VII:iii, p. 2.
28. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 1-3.
29. Schacht, "Nietzsche and Allan Bloom's Nietzsche," *Nietzscheana*, I (May, 1989), p. 18.
30. Nathan Tarcov and Thomas Pangle, "Epilogue: Leo Strauss and the History of Political Philosophy" in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, eds., *History of Political Philosophy*, (Chicago, 1987), p. 908.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., p. 907.
33. *What is Political Philosophy?* p. 221. See also Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York, 1968), p. 4. Cf. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, 1987), pp. 38-39: "Cultural relativism succeeds in destroying the West's universal or intellectually imperialistic claims, leaving it to be just another culture Unfortunately the West is defined by its need for justification of its ways or values.... This is its cultural imperative. Deprived of that, it will collapse."
34. *Natural Right and History*, p. 3.
35. Ibid., p. 157.
36. "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*," p. 182.
37. "On Natural Law," in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, p. 137.
38. *Natural Right and History*, pp. 23ff..
39. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 25.
40. Spinoza's *Critique*, p. 31.
41. *Natural Right and History*, p. 25.

42. *What is Political Philosophy?*, p. 10; *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, p. 107f
43. "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*", p. 182.
44. *Will to Power*, 120. See Strauss, "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*," p. 189.
45. *Gay Science*, 111:109.
46. Strauss, *Philosophy and Law* (New York, 1987; written 1935), p. 112.
47. Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, pp. 221-222.
48. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, Sayings and Arrows, #36 (Schlechta, 11:948).
49. Zarathustra, Prologue, 5 (Schlechta, 11:284).
50. *Human, All-Too-Human* (Faber), 233.
51. See Bloom, "Leo Strauss," p. 242.
52. Closing of *the American Mind*, p. 35 (usefully discussed by Richard Rorty in "On Bloom's Nietzsche," *Nietzscheana*, I [May, 1989], p. 35.) On Bloom's enmity towards the Last Man, see, e.g., Closing *of the American Mind*, p. 194.
53. Bloom, "Leo Strauss," p. 244.
54. "Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks" (Schlechta, 11:356).
55. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, pp. 7-8.
56. Ibid., p. 28.
57. Strauss, "Plato" in Cropsey, ed., *History of Political Philosophy*, p. 33.
58. Ibid., p. 53.
59. Cf. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, pp. 16-17.
60. M. F. Burnyeat, "Sphinx Without a Secret: A Review of Leo Strauss' *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*," *New York Review of Books*, May 30, 1985, p. 32; cf. J. G. A. Pocock, "Prophet and Inquisitor," *Political Theory*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1975), pp. 385-401; and Richard Rorty, "Thugs and Theorists," *Political Theory*, vol. 15, no. 4 (1987), p. 569.
61. John Finnis, in "Aristotle, Aquinas, and Moral Absolutes (Catholics, no. 12, 1990), pp. 7-15, shows that-at the precise center of *Natural Right and History*-lies an alleged paraphrase of Aristotle that (p. 7) "manifestly goes beyond Aristotle into Strauss' own argumentation." At p. 160 of *Natural Right and History* (a 323-page book), Strauss says: "the normally valid rules of natural right are justly changed ...; the exceptions are as just as the rules." He claims that this is Aristotle's position. I assume that he is

referring to *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1134b29-30ff: "although in our world there is such a thing as natural law, yet everything is subject to change." This passage appears very close to the middle of the *Nicomachean Ethics*; and Aristotle is not speaking in his own voice, but reporting what "appears to some" to be the case. Thus the text is grist for Strauss's mill. Nevertheless, his reading seems implausible. As Finnis states (p. 8): "Whatever Strauss' success in articulating the spirit of 'the classics', he certainly conveyed some characteristic elements of the spirit of the mid- and late twentieth century." The Aristotle whom Strauss presents on pp. 160-162 resembles Nietzsche.

62. See: Michael Allen Gillespie, "Nietzsche's Musical Politics," in *Nietzsche's New Seas*, p. 124; and Christopher Middleton, "Nietzsche on Music and Meter," *Arion*, VI (1967), pp. 58-65.

63. *Genealogy of Morals* (Kaufmann), 11:12 (middle of the section), discussed in David B. Allison, Introduction to *The New Nietzsche*, p. xxiii. Strauss' note on *Beyond Good and Evil* is discussed in Drury, pp. 171ff. Dannhauser (*Nietzsche's View of Socrates*, p. 270) points out Nietzsche's esotericism.

64. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 26.

65. Ibid. Strauss is thinking of Heidegger's *Lebensphilosophie*, not of contemporary postmodernists such as Derrida; but the same point applies to them, and has been made by Bloom (see, e.g., "Western Civ.," p. 28).

66. Strauss, "On Collingwood's Philosophy of History," *Review of Metaphysics*, V, 4, 1952, p. 576.

Bloom, in the final section of *The Closing of the American Mind* (p. 373), brings up the eighteenth-century querelle in order to defend the "ancient" position against Bentley. And in the Preface to his *Giants and Dwarves* (p. 11), he claims that Swift "climbed from the shifting sands of his culture to a firm footing in timeless greatness." Thus Bloom adopts the rhetoric of the "ancients" to praise an "ancient."

67. Strauss, "Plato," p. 37.

68. Bloom, "Leo Strauss," p. 247.

69. Ibid., p. 247.

70. Ibid., p. 246.

71. Ibid., p. 242.

72. Ibid., p. 249.

73. Letter to Jacob Burekhardt, January 6, 1889 (Schlechta 111:1351).

74. Bloom seems to deny Walker Percy's charge that he is a nihilist ("Western Civ.," pp. 18-19). But: (1) an esoteric nihilist would deny his secret position when giving a public speech at Harvard; and (2) Bloom

avoids saying point-blank that he is not a nihilist, producing instead a convoluted piece of rhetoric whose meaning is very difficult to pin down.

75. Closing of *the American Mind*, p. 35. Cf. Zarathustra's Prologue, 5: "Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both are too much of a burden" (Schlechta 11:284).

76. Closing, p. 56. Cf. *Will to Power*, 427: "one thereby loses faith in the sole prerogative of the *deus autochthonous*" (Kaufmann).

77. Closing, pp. 36-37. Cf. *Will to Power*, 354: "it seems to be all over for a species of man (people, races) when it becomes tolerant, allows equal rights and no longer thinks of wanting to be master" (Kaufmann).

78. Closing, p. 214.

79. Ibid., p. 152.

80. Ibid., p. 30. See also "Justice: John Rawls Versus the Tradition of Political Philosophy," in *Giants and Dwarves*, pp. 315-345.

81. Ibid., p. 156, alluding to *The Gay Science*, IV:337, which I quote on the last page of this book.

82. Derrida, *Grammatology*, p. 19 (see also p. 143).

83. Spivak notes in her Preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (p. xlix), that in the first edition of this work, Derrida used "destruction" (a direct translation of Heidegger's "*Destruktion*"), rather than "deconstruction."

84. *Spurs*, p. 36. See also *ibid.*, pp. 78, 80, 114. Derrida views the loss of all truth as having both affirmative and negative consequences. "Turned toward the presence, lost or impossible, of the absent origin, [the] structuralist thematic of broken immediateness is thus the sad, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauist aspect of the thought of play of which the Nietzschean affirmation—the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation—would be the other side." (*L'Écriture et la différance*, p. 427, in Spivak, p. xiii). Derrida gains his own affirmative attitude through a kind of *amor fati*, a joyous embrace of meaninglessness (see Spivak, p. xxx).

85. Derrida believes that his project is compatible with Nietzsche's effort to discover the valuations ("good and evil") that he behind cultural institutions. He recognizes this project in psychoanalysis as well: see *Grammatology*, p. 88.

86. *Grammatology*, p. 109.

87. Ibid., pp. 7-8.

88. Ibid., p. 3.

89. Ibid., p. 79.

90. Ibid., p. 8.