

**LEO STRAUSS:
HOBBES AND LIBERALISM**

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN POLITICAL SCIENCE
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

OCTOBER 2018

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Abstract

This dissertation provides the first comprehensive treatment of Leo Strauss's studies of Thomas Hobbes during a period that extended from the early Weimar Republic to mid-Cold-War America. I argue that we should regard Strauss's Hobbes scholarship as part of a life-long engagement with liberalism, taking the form of a mutually informed relation: Strauss's study of Hobbes fuelled his critique of liberalism on the one hand, while his critique of liberalism informed his study of Hobbes on the other. What began as a rejection of bourgeois liberalism and the search for an authoritarian corrective in the Weimar era became over time a cautious endorsement of liberal institutions as found in the post-war United States. I further show that Hobbes occupies not only a central place in Strauss's criticism of the liberal political tradition, but in his critique of modern philosophy at large. This dissertation is thus not only about the development of Strauss's views on Hobbes; it is also an exploration of Strauss's broader conception of politics and philosophy and how he used Hobbes to theorize the political and intellectual climate of the times in which he lived. The method of proof is that of close textual analysis of Strauss's Hobbes texts as illuminated by Strauss's biography and the historical context. I explore the interplay of text and context by treating Strauss as someone for whom scholarship on the history of political thought was often at the same time a way of theorizing politics and addressing what he took to be pressing political and philosophical concerns. This combination of textualist and contextualist approaches to the study of political thought also contributes as a case in point to the greater meta-theoretical debate over how we, as political theorists, are to interpret and use texts in the corpus of political thought.

For my parents

Acknowledgements

This dissertation was long in the making. My psychoanalyst throughout graduate school, and now friend, Deborah Britzman, has said, following Freud, that thinking lessens our suffering. Thinking is on the way out of the university, together with the destruction of public education in general. We will all suffer as a consequence. The university must be defended. What was evident in the wake of the horror of World War II is today forgotten. I have been fortunate to have lived through a time in which thinking was seen as essential to our existence, and have had teachers that cared for science, knowledge, thought and the role of the university. I want this list of the people that influenced my intellect to be as exhaustive as the evidence in the dissertation.

I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to Martin Breugh and David McNally, who both served on the dissertation committee and offered comments on the work, and from whose classes on *Das Kapital* and French democratic thought I learned a great deal. Then there is George Comninel, who generously chaired the defence, and who taught the storied seminar on the long history of the state that he inherited from his teachers at York, Ellen Meiksins Wood and Neal Wood. Comninel's focus on the state was shared by Leo Panitch, as was his emphasis on history. It was Panitch who introduced me to C. B. Macpherson—whose equal role in this project to that of Strauss was removed in the eleventh hour, as the dissertation had expanded beyond what was readable. I promised the external examiner, Daniel Tanguay, who was disappointed upon hearing this, to produce a book that brings their dialogue over Hobbes to light. I owe him that and more for his comments and spirited discussion over my manuscript. Kim Michasiw asked the larger questions at the defence. In the department, Jonathan Nitzan expertly taught us economics and how to read data. Scholars like Ross Rudolph do not come along any longer — his knowledge of Hobbes and erudition of 17th century England is second to none and his comments on chapter three of the dissertation helped frame the entire project. It was an honour to teach his treasured course on 17th century British thought and history after he had retired. Gregory Chin, Susan Henders and Sandra Whitworth helped to broaden my view of International Relations. Shannon Bell, Terry Maley, Richard Saunders, Dennis Pilon, Robert Albritton, Stephen Hellman, Greg Albo and Asher Horowitz enriched the intellectual life of the department. Then there is Marlene Quesenberry, without whom I would never have managed to navigate through the madness called institutional bureaucracy at York. Angie Swartz was the stern and caring department ruler. The department is now in the safe hands of Margo Barreto, who saw me through. Jlenya Sarra-De Meo was always available. Carolyn Cross gracefully helped me with a little bit of everything and Ananya Mukherjee-Reed brought creativity into the department as chair. Liisa North is the model for what a scholar, activist and mentor should be. Nicole Short was a close reader of my Master's thesis in Political Science. Stephen Gill supervised that Masters, as well as overseeing the beginning of the undertaking that is the dissertation that you now hold in your hands. We worked on many projects together. Isabella Bakker became one of my closest friends. And if it hadn't been for Robert Cox, I would not have come to York in the first place.

Some of the most brilliant folks at York were in Sociology: Jesse Carlson, Elisabeth Rondinelli, and Steve LeDrew among them. In the department, my colleagues included Maita Sayo, Sune Sandbeck, Arthur Imperial, Sandy Hager, Joseph Baines, Jeremy Green, Adrienne Roberts, Steve Maher, Julian Von Barga and Megan Dombrowski. Brad Horvath, Guntar Kravis, Natasha Ryan, and Zoja Smutny introduced me to Canada and gave me years of friendship. Barbara Godard took me under her wings and led me through my first Masters in Social and Political Thought. You were an institution in one person and created new fields of studies. You are missed. My other supervisor during that first year, John O'Neill, opened my eyes to the richness of Freud's case studies. It was a good year: Susan Ingram, Frank Scherer, Engin Isin, Paul Antze and John Greyson made it all the more interesting. I wish also to thank Mavis Himes and the other psychoanalysts and psychiatrists in the *Toronto Speaking of Lacan Psychoanalytical Group* for many good workshops and conversations.

At the University of Toronto, Edward Andrew's wit, generosity and encouragement are widely known. Clifford Orwin's course on Nietzsche was an eye-opener into the psychological aspect of philosophy. Both Frank Cunningham, and Ernesto Laclau, whom he invited to teach us for a semester, shared my appreciation for Macpherson. I have had many conversations with my friend Kanishka Goonewardena over the years. Randall Hansen and Till van Rahden taught a summer course at Humboldt in Berlin, and their section on assimilation informed parts of chapter two. My education obviously didn't begin in graduate school; some of the most important of my teachers for my development entered earlier in the formative years.

At Macalester College, Franklin Adler introduced me to the tradition of political philosophy. But the strongest influence, Kiarina Kordela, taught me how to read horizontally across texts and how to not simply narrate critical theory, but to make new theoretical arguments. I was also fortunate to have readers, artists and critics like David Martin, Clarence B. Sheffield, Jr., David Chioni Moore, Beth Cleary, Peter Rachleff, and most generous of them all, Ruthann Godollei, as teachers. Aaron Colhapp, Tanzeen Syed, Danny Schwartzman, Haris Aqeel and Catherine O'Sullivan became family. Amparo Menéndez-Carrión brought me to Latin America, where my training as a researcher continued in Uruguay. In Berlin, Catherine Toal and Théodore Paléologue showed me a different way to approach philosophy and literature. In high school, on the shore Fjord of Norway's West land, Renée Danielson taught me how to read and write about literature and poetry. Sylla Cousineau taught us to think historically. Reidun Bergstrøm and Simon James-Eide taught us how to make art. Kjerstin Thelin was my first teacher back in Sweden.

The dissertation project began at Cornell with Geoff Waite. He was my model as a thinker and became a friend. It was always exciting to read Geoff – divine madness (θεία μανία). Robert Pippin generously invited me as a fellow to the Committee on Social Thought at The University of Chicago. In Chicago, I benefited deeply from conversations with Heinrich Meier, a thinker in his own right, and his seminar on Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. The magnificent Nathan Tarcov spoke with me and helped develop my account of the Strauss and Macpherson connection. Or more precisely, without Tarcov, my dissertation would be much poorer. As a token of gratitude I decided not to cite him once; he speaks between the lines. I am also grateful to the archivists at the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago Library for their help with the archival material of the papers of Leo Strauss. Not that far southeast from Chicago, Michael Zuckert

commented on the second part of chapter two in an earlier form. As did Hannes Kerber, who became my peer in Chicago and with whom I have had many exchanges over Strauss since. Korey Garibaldi and Renata Limon became companions in Hyde Park — we danced a summer.

As anyone who writes a dissertation knows: there are rough stretches and Olena Lyubchenko was there through the longest dip. While her enthusiasm for Strauss and Macpherson might have lessened over time, her support never did. With no one have I spoken so much about thought as with Tania Espinoza. We will die so doing. Klas and Aldara (and Johan and Ebbe) Modin have become family, and it is foremost with Klas that I talk about natural science. Eric George, Christopher Malcolm and Ingar Solty have been intellectual companions since the early days. We share a passion for maintaining an edge in thought. Old-school Kiran Banerjee read and commented on the introduction with his usual care and we have shared a few laughs and adventures over the years. I owe a great deal to the meticulous Samuel Putinja for the texts we have collaborated on. My conversations about orthodoxy and the Torah while walking and biking with Daniella Seltzer have informed chapters two, three and six. Then there was our reading group at *Athens Pastries* on Plato and Aristotle in which, over the years, I slowly worked through *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Meno* together with Baris Karaagac, Paul Gray and Jordan Brennan. Our guide was the best scholar of ancient Greek thought that I have met, Stefanos Kourkoulakos. He read chapters three, four and five of the dissertation and we have had countless discussions about Strauss and philosophy over food. He was a de facto fourth committee member. Much the same could be said of Justin Sully—who corrected the tense of the entire manuscript and offered insightful comments when there was a need. I have shared parts of my life with Federico Helfgott and Katherine Pendakis, they both read parts of chapter two and the now deleted chapter three on Macpherson. Zilan Ghaleb Mohamad, Paul Mazzocchi, Laura Kane, Gabrielle Gérin are now close friends. Gabrielle Israelievitch, Brenda McComb and Elif Genc became family in Toronto. I also wish to thank Cornelia Heidegger for her hospitality and our conversations in and around Freiburg and the Black Forest. Margaretha and Gunnar Herrman, Eva and Luis Young were there from the beginning. Rei Terada and Eyal Amiran gave me support in the moment I needed it the most. Anne-Lise François was the best of intellectual distractions. Ian Balfour knows the sublime. The brilliant Ashli Mullen stepped in at the 59th minute of the 11th hour without me asking and did in a minute to the manuscript what mortals needs weeks for.

Most important for the shaping of this dissertation is Stephen Newman, my *Doktorvater*. Thank you, Steve, for your professionalism, for your liberality, for your support, for everything. Getting comments back from Steve is like entering a boxing ring, but I learned to roll with the punches, and knocked him out in the 12th round. Or, at least, he made me believe so as he prepared and pushed me on my way into the future.

Lastly, family was a product of 20th century Europe. My father's parents were of Strauss's generation and too old for me to remember their words. But I remember their beings. My mother's parents were my greatest supporters and they left us too early. My father, Lars Dahlquist, who always makes arguments about everything (and I don't seem to be able to stop either) taught me how to fix things, from wiring to sailing boats, and not the least, the art of – as Julia Willén would say – *Gestaltung*. Most of all, I want to thank my mother, Marianne Dahlquist, who spent her life in the service of the public good – in defence of the university, culture, nature and the welfare state – for her unwavering support. Without her, this dissertation would not exist.

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1

Introduction

“He [Strauss] wanted a decency in the sense of a respect for the text. If the authors of the great texts in the history of philosophy were worth studying at all, then they were worth studying as exhaustively as possible. [...] You must never be so proud of your own prowess, your own technical prowess in particular, that you come to believe that what you have say is more important than what Kant or Hegel said. Now that’s not an easy point to understand and it even may be partly wrong; that is to say, if you’re going to be respectful to the great members of the tradition, won’t you end up being a mere disciple or a mere slave? How can you retain your integrity and the integrity of the text at the same time?”¹

In this dissertation, I undertake the first comprehensive analysis of Leo Strauss’s studies of Thomas Hobbes and the extended criticism of liberalism that, I argue, Strauss developed and deployed in the course of this engagement. Strauss refined his account of Hobbes’s philosophy over four decades, from the early Weimar years to the depth of the Cold War, making it one of his most enduring intellectual preoccupations and the center of his engagement with liberalism.

Strauss was born into a Jewish home in a village near Marburg, Germany, and died three-quarters of a century later as a prominent professor of political science in Annapolis, Maryland; today he is considered one of the most influential and controversial political theorists of the 20th century. Strauss came of age during the Great War, converted to political Zionism in his late teens, and studied philosophy with some of the

¹ Stanley Rosen, “Interview with Stanley Rosen on Strauss as a teacher”, interview by Stephen Gregory, May 2011, 2, <https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/interviews>.

most influential thinkers of his time; however, it was a lesser-known teacher, Julius Ebbinghaus, professor at the University of Freiburg who introduced him to Hobbes's philosophy in 1921.² Strauss wrote his first text on Hobbes in the late 1920s while based at a Jewish research institute in Berlin. His interest in Hobbes only grew during this time, sending him first to Paris to study Hobbes on a fellowship a year before Hitler seized power, and then to London in 1934 to continue this research. Unable to find employment in Europe after his fellowships had expired, Strauss sailed for America in 1937. He lived first in New York, where he taught primarily at the New School for Social Research for a decade. It is for his tenure at the University of Chicago, where he arrived in 1948 and remained until the late 1960s, that he is best known. At Chicago, he developed a reputation in academic circles as a leading American conservative. It was also here that Strauss published his final studies of Hobbes and gave his final seminar on the philosopher in 1964.

Strauss's novel and highly influential interpretations of Hobbes's thought have remained an enduring feature of his intellectual legacy. In approaching Strauss's scholarship on Hobbes, I have applied Daniel Tanguay's method in his Strauss biography, and aimed to understand Strauss as "he understood himself."³ This was the interpretive method that Strauss would come to champion later in life and for which he became known.⁴ I discovered early on in my research that Strauss, in his studies of

² Eugene Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 21.

³ Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Christopher Nadon (New Haven: Yale University Press 2007), 2.

⁴ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: Revised and Expanded Edition, including the Strauss-Kojève correspondence* edited by Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3-4. Jenny Strauss has also described her father's hermeneutic as: "to understand the author as he understood himself" (Jenny Clay Strauss, "The Real Leo Strauss," *New York Times*, June 7, 2003). The same hermeneutical principle was repeated in Joseph Cropsey, Harry V. Jaffa, Allan Bloom, Ernest J.

Hobbes in the 1930s and 1940s, however, sought to do more than understand Hobbes as Hobbes had understood himself. Because of this, I argue in these pages that Strauss, with the exception of his first and last insights on Hobbes, pursued his own political and philosophical projects through Hobbes. As a result, I explain the significance of Hobbes for Strauss's politics and for his philosophical project, and how Strauss's political commitments informed how he read Hobbes. This dissertation is thus not simply about the development of Strauss's views on Hobbes; rather, it is also an exploration of Strauss's broader conception of politics and philosophy and how he used Hobbes to theorize the political and intellectual climate of the times in which he lived. In particular, I show that we should regard Strauss's Hobbes scholarship as part of a life-long engagement with liberalism, understood as a political regime, a moral and philosophical system, and an educational approach. Hobbes occupies a central place — if not the central place — in Strauss's criticism of the liberal political tradition, as well as of modern philosophy and political thought at large. Over the years, he argued that Hobbes was the founder of liberalism and the modern natural right tradition; in this sense, Strauss's work on Hobbes must be read as part of a broader critical engagement with the tradition of liberal political thought. While Strauss tackles liberalism in other parts of his scholarship, it is on "Strauss's Hobbes" that my study is centered.

In 1962, Strauss wrote: "We are not permitted to be flatterers of [liberal] democracy precisely because we are friends and allies of democracy."⁵ Steven Smith has suggested that Strauss is not simply another "friend of liberal democracy," but "one of

Weinrib, and Thomas L. Pangle, et al., "The Studies of Leo Strauss: An Exchange," *The New York Books of Reviews*, October 10, 1985.

⁵ Leo Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 24; first published, "Liberal Education and Responsibility," in *Education: The Challenge Ahead*, ed. Scott Fletcher (New York: Norton, 1962), 49-70.

the best friends [liberal] democracy has ever had."⁶ The historical relationship between liberalism and democracy and the modern merger of the two intellectual and political traditions into a representative liberal democratic constitutional regime is complex. As we shall see, in his scholarship, Strauss is more precise in his various understandings and articulations of the meanings of liberalism than he is about democracy. Only later in life does he define democracy, but his conceptions of modern democracy and ancient democracy are not as exactly defined and he often uses “liberal democracy” and “democracy” interchangeably. Let it suffice for now to say that if friend is a helpful metaphor to describe Strauss’s relation to liberal democracy, it was a complicated friendship, one which can be said to have started out on the wrong foot, but grew deeper over time in regard to what Strauss conceived of as the liberal tradition, though less so with respect to the democratic tradition.

Complicating the notion of a friendly relationship with liberal democracy is the fact that much of the secondary literature on the young Strauss asserts that the ‘European’ Strauss was a radical conservative critic of liberalism.⁷ Strauss’s extensive criticism in the 1920s and 1930s of cultural assimilation, political emancipation, liberal rights in general, liberal morality, liberal epistemology, and liberal ontology were advanced with the express aim of moving beyond liberalism. As a young political Zionist, however,

⁶ Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss, Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), ix.

⁷ Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, translation by Harvey J. Lomax (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995); See Michael Zank, “Introduction,” in *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings (1921-1932)* (Durham: SUNY Press, 2002); Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*; Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, translation by Harvey J. Lomax (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2006); Nicholas Xenos. *Cloaked in virtue: Unveiling Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Routledge Press, 2008); Laurence Lampert. “Strauss's Recovery of Esotericism,” in *The Cambridge companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven B. Smith (Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Susan Shell. “To Spare the Vanquished and Crush the Arrogant”: Leo Strauss’s Lecture on “German Nihilism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Strauss acknowledged Zionism's debt to liberalism for the secularization process that made the modern Zionist project conceivable in the first place: to envision the creation of a Jewish nation state by human and rational means. With respect to Hobbes, Strauss controversially portrays him as the philosophical founder of liberalism — the first modern, bourgeois philosopher. I argue that the political dimension of Strauss's criticism of liberalism, as it is specifically carried out in his work on Hobbes from the inter-war era, aims to provide the foundation for a non-liberal right-wing authoritarian political theory as an alternative to replace both liberalism and socialism, and after Hitler consolidated power, as an alternative to Nazism.

Strauss's thought on the liberal tradition, however, continued to evolve during this time. As I show, following Susan Shell and others before me, it is after his stay in England that Strauss first comes to support a particular strand of the liberal tradition in writing—the rule of law or constitutional tradition that he thought pre-dated the modern era.⁸ However, Strauss's criticism of Hobbesian liberalism continues in his post-war writing on Hobbes, now emerging from a perspective grounded in a recuperation of a Platonic-Socratic conception of human nature and natural right and law. Strauss argues that Hobbesian liberalism is both contrary to human nature and suppresses what is noble to human society. In these post-war works on Hobbes, Strauss builds on the criticisms that he had formulated in the eleventh hour of the Weimar period, which portray Hobbes as the founder of liberal rights, or what he comes to identify after World War II as the modern natural right doctrine. The modern natural right doctrine, in Strauss's view, historically evolved into historicism, nihilism and relativism, of which Nazism was a symptom. In the 1950s, Strauss expands his definition of liberalism to include the

⁸ Shell, "Strauss's on "German Nihilism,"" 191.

Socratic-Platonic philosophical tradition's pursuit of excellence; that is, the cultivation of the human virtues — highest among the virtues being wisdom or philosophy — through what the ancients called “liberality,” which for the moderns involved the careful study of the great books.⁹ The British and American societies that Strauss experienced allowed for the study of the great books or the liberal arts.¹⁰ Political liberalism, or the liberal regime, can thus also be conducive to the pursuit of the highest good.

Strauss's criticism of the Hobbesian liberal tradition — or what he variously refers to as enlightenment or modern rationalism and individual right doctrine — from the perspective of a Socratic-Platonic rationalism, however, does not cease. Strauss adopts from Hobbes and the moderns the reason that he thinks it had become historically necessary to create the belief that political power or sovereignty is vested in government by the consent of the people. However, this excludes much of what is understood as ancient or modern democracy—both direct (ancient) and representative (modern). Ultimately, it appears that what Strauss described as the preferable constitutional regime during his American period approximates a form of elite or classical republicanism or a mixed regime in the guise of a liberal democracy: “a regime in which the gentlemen share power with the people in such way that the people *elect* the magistrate and the council from *among* the gentlemen [statesmen who are equipped by education, wealth and temperament] and demand an account of them at the end of their term of office.”¹¹

At the center of all his Hobbes's studies — both before and after World War II — is the question of human nature. Leora Batnitzky is right when she observes that for

⁹ See Leo Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), x.

¹⁰ Leo Strauss. “An Epilogue,” in *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*, ed. Herbert J. Storing (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 326.

¹¹ Strauss, “Liberal education and Responsibility,” 15, emphasis added.

Strauss, “rethinking [human] nature is the central issue for rethinking politics.”¹² The way Strauss rethinks human nature in his Hobbes texts elevates the state of nature to a place of intense scrutiny, asking: what causes the state of nature to be a state of war? Or, in other words, why does every individual incessantly seek ever more power over others? The answer that Strauss develops to this question provides him with ontological insights for his conceptualization of the political, and of the state, both of which he developed alongside and in response to the contexts of the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich and the Cold War. With respect to Strauss’s main contribution to the secondary scholarship on Hobbes, Strauss claims that his investigation of the motivations behind the incessant struggle for ever more power over others in the state of nature resolves the main contradictions in Hobbes’s doctrine between his natural science and his political science.

1. 2. *Contribution*

Strauss is still taken seriously as a student of Hobbes and broadly respected as thinker worth reading by both his scholarly critics and defenders. Over the last decades, an increasing number of studies of Strauss’s thought have appeared, a few of which have focused on the nature of Strauss’s engagement with Hobbes. There exists a concise introduction to most of Strauss’s studies of Hobbes by Heinrich Meier.¹³ Devin Stauffer has written on the evolution of Strauss’s understanding of the relation between Hobbes’s political theory, natural science and religion in three of Strauss’s works on Hobbes.¹⁴

¹² Leora Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation*. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 221n 56.

¹³ Heinrich Meier, “Vorwort zur zweiten Auflage,” in Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3: Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften—Briefe*, ed. Heinrich Meier, with editorial assistance of Wiebke Meier (Stuttgart and Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2002), vii-xxxviii.

¹⁴ Devin Stauffer, “Reopening the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns: Leo Strauss’s Critique of Hobbes’s ‘New Political Science.’” *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 2 (May 2007): 223-33; Devin Stauffer, “Strauss’s Discussion of Hobbes in *What is Political Philosophy?*,” *Perspectives on*

Robert Altman, Shadia Drury, David Janssens, Eugene Sheppard, Daniel Tanguay, and Nicholas Xenos, have, to various degrees, commented on Strauss's work on Hobbes in their respective monographs.¹⁵ My dissertation complements this existing literature as the first manuscript-length study of Strauss's entire Hobbes corpus, including unpublished material from the Strauss archive that has never been discussed before in the context of prior work on this subject. My study not only develops an account of Strauss's scholarship on Hobbes, but it also contributes to advancing the broader debate over Strauss's politics and his relation to liberalism and liberal democracy. Strauss provokes expressions of admiration and hostility like few other political theorists, as praise and insult are often hurled by his supporters and critics with little foundation. Strauss's take on liberalism is fiercely debated, especially among Strauss's Anglo-American followers and detractors. The stakes, however, seem higher among his American disciples, especially those who espouse a patriotic alliance to American republicanism and the constitution. The problem with an open scholarly debate on Strauss, as Robert Howse has pointed out, is that there is both a "cult" and a "sect" of Straussians, members of which resist open debate and the clear exposition of his philosophy.¹⁶ There are also detractors who judge or dismiss Strauss with little familiarity with his work and the context in which he wrote.

This dissertation seeks to contribute to establishing ground upon which it is

Political Science 39, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 87-91; Devin Stauffer, "Leo Strauss's 'On the Basis of Hobbes's Political Philosophy.'" In *Leo Strauss's Defense of the Philosophic Life: Reading What Is Political Philosophy?*, ed. Rafe Major (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

¹⁵ Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*; Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*; David Janssens, *Between Jerusalem and Athens: Philosophy, Prophecy, and Politics in Leo Strauss's Early Thought*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 2008; Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*; Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*; William H. F. Altman, *The German Stranger: Leo Strauss and National Socialism* (Lexington Books, 2010).

¹⁶ Robert Howse, *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2014), 4-5.

possible to engage with and critically discuss Strauss's political and philosophical views, as opposed to implicitly suggesting that his thought be clothed in mystery.¹⁷ Strauss is partly to blame for the abstruseness that has characterized much engagement with his thought: he is a complex thinker and at times a convoluted writer, a thinker who mainly wrote commentaries on other thinkers and their work. He is also best known for the rediscovery of a tradition of a multilayered style of writing in philosophical and religious thought, one that provided the reader with two different doctrines: an exoteric doctrine for the general audience or the censor, and an esoteric true teaching for the few. As a result, a number of scholars argue that Strauss practiced this art of writing in his own mature work, a position that introduces a number of important interpretive considerations. In turn, some Strauss scholars and disciples have sought to apply an exo/esoteric hermeneutic in their own work. The widely conflicting state of contemporary scholarship on Strauss is due to a combination of all these factors.

Besides shedding light on Strauss's thoughts about Hobbes and liberalism, the aim of this project is also to contribute to the general scholarship on Hobbes and liberalism. The latter seems especially pressing: beyond narrow scholastic and academic debates, the theoretical and political concerns that led Strauss to Hobbes still matter to us today. We still care about the strengths and weaknesses of liberal democracy, and we still have justified concerns, to paraphrase C. B. Macpherson, regarding the future "life and times" of the liberal democratic project.¹⁸ Religious fundamentalism, authoritarian

¹⁷ Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*; Thomas L. Pangle, *Leo Strauss: An Introduction to His Thought and Intellectual Legacy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 2006); Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*; Janssens, *Between Jerusalem and Athens*; Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*; Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problems of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2014); Howse, *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace*.

¹⁸ Macpherson, C. B., *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

governance, and populist politics are all globally on the rise. On both sides of the Atlantic, explicitly authoritarian, far right, ultra-nationalistic and racist parties have reaped electoral success. In the Anglo-Saxon world alone, over the last few years we have witnessed a favorable referendum triggering Britain's exit from the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as president in the United States, as well as the political rise of two self-identified socialists, Bernie Sanders, who ran for the Democratic Party's nomination for president, and Jeremy Corbyn, the Leader of the Labour Party in the United Kingdom. Income inequality and the private capital share of the national product is similar today to what it was on the eve of the Great Depression, and the traditional socialist and social democratic parties (in or out of government) in the West are doing little to counter this trend. I do not draw historical comparisons between past and present in this dissertation. However, there are enough parallels between the situation in which Strauss found himself in the 1930s and today to warrant a reconsideration of his political analysis. This is particularly the case as Strauss had thought that a return to Hobbes was helpful to understand and criticize the political situation in Weimar Germany.

Historical parallels can also be drawn between Strauss's return to Hobbes in the decades after World War II and today: the present existential threat of the annihilation of much of the earth's biospheres resembles the destructive potential of a thermonuclear Armageddon. There is also the rise of Russia and China as well as increasing discussion of the emergence of a "new Cold War." Perhaps most pertinent for the immediate conjuncture, however, is Strauss's analysis of, and opposition to aspects of German nihilism, or radical right-wing and counter-enlightenment thought, as exemplified by

Nietzsche, Schmitt and Heidegger. Their relativist philosophies posed an existential challenge to rationalism. Strauss argued that this relativist and nihilist worldview not only underpinned the Nazi revolution, but had also conquered the minds of Americans after World War II. In this regard, there is currently a great deal of talk about the relation between epistemological nihilism (“post-fact,” “post-truth,” “alternative-facts”) and rise of the right (such as Trump, the Tea Party movement, and the radicalization of the Republican Party over the last two decades in general) in which irrationalism has been seen to triumph over rationalism, climate skepticism over science, and so on.¹⁹ In responding to a parallel set of political phenomena and challenges that he found present in America, Strauss set out to revive and defend an ancient form of rationalism, while remaining deeply skeptical of enlightenment, scientific, or liberal rationalism. While I revisit and account for Strauss’s ideas in the context of his own understanding of the times in which he lived, I refrain from any attempts to directly apply his ideas to our time, despite the clear parallels I have just enumerated. That work is in the future, or is for someone else to undertake. However, the theoretical core of liberalism as introduced by Hobbes is, in Strauss’s definition, independent of historical developments in the modern period and thus equally relevant today as in the inter-war era and the Cold War.

Another contribution that the present study makes relates to Smith’s observation that

to a greater degree than other competing schools [Rawlsians, Habermasians, Arendtians], Straussians have sought to influence policy, to put their ideas into

¹⁹ The type of nihilism in Trump’s reuse of Regan’s slogan, “Make America Great Again!,” is captured by Strauss in an outline for his 1941 essay “On German Nihilism”: “On the affinity of progressivism to nihilism: progressivism leaves the aim undefined: it therefore opposes an indefinite No to a given order” (Leo Strauss, “German Nihilism”, ed. David Janssens & Daniel Tanguay: *Interpretation*, 26, No. 3 (Spring 1999): 353-378, 356; with corrections by Wiebke Meier, *Interpretation* 28, no.2 (Fall 2000): 33–34; original in Leo Strauss Papers, [Box 8, folder 15], Special Collections Research Center. University of Chicago Library.

practice, either directly through work in the government or indirectly through think tanks and other shapers of public opinion. In fact Strauss is widely regarded both by some of his friends and by his enemies as responsible for shaping the direction of the conservative movement in America.²⁰

My account of Strauss's politics, his conception of the political, liberalism and socialism — as defined through his engagement with Hobbes — should thus be of interest to both conservatives (of whatever variety) as well as their various foes. Much ink has been spilt to link Strauss to neo-conservatism, especially after 9/11. Strauss's disciples were linked to, or his legacy claimed by, members of the Bush administration, and especially, by Paul Wolfowitz, an architect of the Iraq war.²¹ A more recent example of Strauss's influence in contemporary politics is Richard Spencer—one of the main spokespersons for the alternative right (alt-right) in the US. He recently named Strauss as one of his two main intellectual influences from his time as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago.²² Whether or not this legacy is theoretically warranted (i.e., if there is a correspondence in ideas) is a different question. A study of Strauss's influence on Spencer, and the alternative right in general, would need to account for how the movement's main principles (such as rank order or inherited intelligence, protectionism, anti-egalitarianism, anti-democratic and anti-liberalism) correspond to Strauss's preoccupation with human nature, natural intelligence and inequality, liberal democracy, and the closed society. It goes without saying that Strauss is far from the only one to have held these views, and

²⁰ Steven Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss, Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 157. Xenos has made a similar suggestion about Strauss importance: “without hyperbole [...] in terms of the exercise of political power in the United States, this [Strauss] retiring professor may turn out to have been the most influential political philosopher of his generation” (Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 1).

²¹ See for example: Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 2; Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*; Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*; Shadia Drury, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

²² Josh Harkinson, “Meet the White Nationalist Trying To Ride The Trump Train to Lasting Power”, *Mother Jones online*, October 27, 2016, <http://m.motherjones.com/politics/2016/10/richard-spencer-trump-alt-right-white-nationalist>.

thus any correlation between Strauss's philosophy and the alternative right at-large is not necessary a causal one. However, the scope of this dissertation is not to provide an intellectual history of Strauss's and Straussianism's influence on politics and the academy; my contribution to these areas of research or larger debates is at best indirect.²³

A final contribution of this study is to the ongoing methodological debates over the merits of a textual analysis versus contextual approaches in respect to both the scholarship on Strauss and the study of the history of political thought in general. On this terrain, my study is less a theoretical contribution (meta-conversation) than a case in point. Strauss is generally known today as a textualist, as someone who approaches the history of political and religious texts through a close textual analysis, who takes into consideration the possible esoteric and exoteric layers of a text, or as someone who ultimately regards the tradition of political philosophy as a trans-historical conversation among philosophers over eternal questions. He defines this approach against what he viewed as the dogma of his time, the historicist worldview which, in one form or another, reduces past thinkers to mere expressions of the intellectual climate (or "caves," as Strauss would call it later in life) of their time. He faults historicized studies for retroactively framing the thought of past thinkers in ways unknown to them, and for missing the trans-historical insights of their works. It is not, however, that Strauss asks the student of the history of political thought to extricate the thought of the thinker studied fully from his or her time. As Pangle has explained:

In every society, in every historical situation, a somewhat different rhetoric, political sensibility, and psychological delicacy will be required; and, contrary to what is often said of Strauss, Strauss never ceased stressing that every text in

²³ For discussion of Straussianism see Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*; Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problems of Political Philosophy*; Keenth L. Deutsh and John A. Murley, *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime* (Lanham, Md.: Rwnan & Littlefield, 1999).

political philosophy must therefore be approached with a view to its primary addresses and hence with a view to the unique, concrete, historical situation and circumstances within which it emerged [...] But what set Strauss apart from all conventional, historicist students of the relation between thinkers and their historical milieu was his insistence that the historical situation must be seen *as it was seen by the thinker under study*.²⁴

Strauss acknowledges that our awareness of the generally acceptable opinions of an age — and with that of which truths might be harmful for the philosopher, or his or her audience — is indispensable to understanding the division the author makes between the exoteric and esoteric dimension in his or her writing.

Strauss's textual approach is exemplified in the secondary literature by Meier's scholarship.²⁵ Meier argues that the heart of Strauss's philosophy is not the quarrel between ancient and modern thought, but between theology and philosophy, or in Strauss's later metaphorical terms, between Jerusalem and Athens. Meier's penetrating textual analysis of Strauss's oeuvre provides a compelling philosophical argument for this interpretation. However, I will stress other — more immediate and concrete — political intentions lying behind Strauss's studies of Hobbes. With respect to Meier's thesis regarding Strauss's exchange with Carl Schmitt, in which Hobbes played a central role, I argue that Meier (in part) reads Strauss's later perspective into this earlier work when he suggests that at the time Strauss relied on Socratic-Platonic rationalism to move beyond liberalism. I show that Strauss, in his book on Hobbes, appeals to biblical morality, and a pre-scientific phenomenological (or immediate experience) of human nature (following Husserl), and moral attitude (following Heidegger) which Hobbes's

²⁴ Thomas L. Pangle, "Introduction", in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: an Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), xviii-xix.

²⁵ See Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*; Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*; Heinrich Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

adoption of modern natural science contradicts. Indeed, I observe that it is not until later that Strauss brings together phenomenology with the Socratic rationalist method.

In approaching Strauss's scholarship on Hobbes, it is important to remember that Strauss began as a contextualist; that is, as someone who grounds his interpretation firmly within a historical context. Of course, the particularly historical factors that are emphasized in a contextualized study depend on the school of thought. Marxist historicists, for example, look at variables such as class interests, or the logic of capitalism, as the factors that (over) determine the political theory in question. The contextualized approach is best exemplified by Sheppard's monograph on Strauss.²⁶ His careful and extensive use of primary, chiefly biographical, sources from the Strauss archive is unparalleled in the field. On the basis of this archival work, Sheppard argues for reading the condition of the Jewish *galut* (exile), as well as Strauss's experience of exile from Germany, into Strauss's philosophical preoccupation with esotericism and the idea of the philosopher as an outsider to society, an interpretation that Sheppard advances despite Strauss never having explicitly stated, or implicitly revealed, that this was the case. In doing so, Sheppard's relies principally on Strauss's biographical and intellectual context to support his thesis, largely at the expense of engaging in a systematic close textual analysis of Strauss's works themselves. However, this is an unavoidable shortcoming: a more extensive textual analysis would have been impossible due to the wide number of materials, debates, biographical and historical details that Sheppard covers in his rich book.

²⁶ Sheppard's biography covers the first 50 years of Strauss's life, up until his departure to Chicago from New York in 1949; overall, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, gives a detailed biographical sketch of the influence of Jewish and non-Jewish aspects of Strauss's thought.

My own approach, which I discuss in more detail below, is derived from the later Strauss's own proposed method to try to understand a thinker as he or she understood him or herself. Accordingly, my analysis is restricted to a close textual engagement with Strauss's conscious intentions in his work—and by this I include both the implicit and explicit intentions. The historical context that I provide to support my approach is limited to an account of Strauss's understanding of the political and intellectual context in which he lived and his work's relation to that broader context. In other words, I strictly situate Strauss's commentaries on Hobbes in relation to the historical situation as Strauss himself understood it, and thus not from an external, objective, or retroactive perspective. Thus, I do not give a symptomatic reading of Strauss in the tradition of Marxism and psychoanalysis. The larger historical and biographical context in which Strauss wrote is only drawn on when it is required to account for Strauss's arguments in these texts.

1. 3. *Method*

Although not characteristic of all such methodologically informed research, genealogical studies — in which a scholar often appears to go hunting for passages that support a preconceived argument — are increasingly popular today. While cherry-picking quotations from an author's corpus might make for a speculative article, such practice adds little to a deeper and comprehensive understanding of the thinker. This is especially true of Strauss, whose commentaries on past philosophical and religious thinkers are riddled with contradictory and inconclusive observations and arguments.²⁷ Without a

²⁷ Xenos has that “Strauss's writings are easy to figure out in the whole, but frustratingly clumsy to untangle in the particular. [...] Strauss had perfected a style of plausible deniability. That style, evident in his books and articles written after his emigration to the United States, forces the commentator into lengthy, often tedious exegesis and convoluted lines of explication. The closer one looks at these writings, the more complicated they become without becoming more enlightening of anything but themselves. Although his many academic defenders do it all the time, Strauss cannot simply be quoted

developed understanding of the logic of the specific text in question, as well as a broader chronological view of the overall development of Strauss's thought, little can be added to our knowledge of what he thought about a certain concept or a thinker, and how his thinking changed over time. Consequently, the aim of this project is to give a comprehensive account of the development of Strauss's scholarship on Hobbes, and the criticism of liberalism contained therein.

Unlike an approach grounded in analytical philosophy or normative political science, I do not seek to update or contest Strauss's moral stance in light of present concerns. I do follow some cues from these schools of thought in my interpretative approach, however, in that I look for the structure and missing propositions that could make Strauss's arguments logically consistent. To this end, my method is straightforward. I assess Strauss's arguments against their own logic. I closely read and reconstruct Strauss's texts to see if I can arrive at the same conclusions, and on this basis piece together the logical steps and propositions that are required for the main thrust of the argument to function. By doing so I aim to detect and trace out what is omitted for the argument to hold together, i.e., account for hidden premises and postulates. An author's stated intentions are not always explicitly delivered in the text they frame, and often such statements are not the only things that the texts perform. This holds true of Strauss's texts. I thus examine the internal logic of Strauss's writings to arrive at his extra-textual concerns when these are not explicitly stated and thus risk what literary scholars call the

on a topic, because there is always a quote available that apparently says the opposite. When this is pointed out, the defenders invariably reach for the Rosetta Stone of plausible deniability: Strauss is being ironic. His gnomic utterances have therefore to be replaced into their total context, and that takes time" (Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, xi).

intentional fallacy.²⁸ Any reader of Strauss proceeding in this manner soon runs into the interpretative difficulty of knowing how to separate Strauss's own views from the author with whom he is engaging. There are three main layers to this complexity in Strauss's Hobbes texts: (i) when Strauss interprets Hobbes's doctrine in-itself, (ii) when he explicitly or implicitly disagrees with Hobbes, and (iii) when he advances his own political philosophy through his commentary. With respect to the last aspect, sometimes these intentions are not explicitly stated, while at other times they are stated, usually at the beginning or the end of his texts. However thorny the hermeneutic challenge of separating Strauss's views from the thinker he is engaging, it is imperative that such distinction be made for the project at hand.

In order to address these interpretive challenges, I have applied the late Strauss's principle of interpretation to his own work. In so proceeding, I have sought to understand Strauss as he understood himself; and, in so doing, found that Strauss did not only attempt to understand Hobbes as Hobbes understood himself. If Strauss does more than provide an understanding of Hobbes as he understood himself, what exactly is Strauss doing in his studies on Hobbes?²⁹ To answer this question, I advance the hypothesis that there were underlying political and philosophical motivations that influenced Strauss's interpretations of Hobbes. I am not the first to make this observation; Meier has argued that Strauss does philosophy by commenting on past philosophers: "For anyone who seriously studies his oeuvre, the *focal point* becomes the intention that the philosopher Strauss pursues when he directs undivided attention, so it seems, to the history of

²⁸ I am grateful to Justin Sully for pointing this out, June 2018.

²⁹ Ross Rudolph helped me to formulate this line of reasoning, December 2015.

philosophy and presents his philosophy in the guise of interpretations of past writings.”³⁰ Strauss indeed presents his philosophy through his studies of Hobbes’s thought. In this regard, Hobbes emerges as a key figure in Strauss’s account of the history of political thought: first as the founder of liberalism as well as the modern (or enlightenment) esoteric writer par excellence, and after the war, as the founder of modern natural right. Hobbes’s doctrine of the state of nature also provides Strauss with a window into the study of human nature and contemporary politics.

Indeed, I argue that it is only in his first and final studies of Hobbes that Strauss predominantly seeks to strictly approach Hobbes as Hobbes understood himself. In this regard, my understanding of Strauss differs from that offered by David Janssens, who states that: “For Strauss, only the text and nothing but the text seems to matter, or more precisely: nothing but the thoughts contained therein. References to the historical context, both of the past and of the present, are very rare indeed.”³¹ Pace Janssens, I contend that this observation does not hold for Strauss’s studies of Hobbes. In his first freestanding article on Hobbes, “Some Notes on the Political Science of Hobbes [*Quelques remarques sur la science politique de Hobbes: à propos du livre récent de M. Lubiński*]” (henceforth, “Notes on Hobbes”), Strauss explicitly indicates that it was present political concerns that lead him to investigate what could be learned from Hobbes.³² Moreover, references to the present and to a larger historical context are not absent from Strauss’s

³⁰ Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, xiv.

³¹ Janssens, *Between Jerusalem and Athens*, 1.

³² Leo Strauss, “*Quelques remarques sur la science politique de Hobbes: à propos du livre récent de M. Lubiński*” [“*Einige Anmerkungen über die politische Wissenschaft des Hobbes*”] translation by Alexander Kojève, *Recherches philosophiques*, 2 (1933): 609-622. In English translation, “Some Notes on the Political Science of Hobbes,” in Leo Strauss, *Hobbes’s Critique of Religion and Related Writings*, trans. Gabriel Bartlett and Minkov Svetozar (Chicago - London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 121-136.

Hobbes texts more generally. Indeed, such engagements with contemporaneous political and philosophical concerns are to be found front, back, and center within most of Strauss's texts on Hobbes.

Since my study is faithful to the hermeneutics of the later Strauss, my analysis does not proceed in applying an alien method to his thought. Sheppard has pointed out that in an "extract attached" to Strauss's 1921 dissertation, *The Problem of Knowledge in the Teaching of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi* [*Das Erkenntnisproblem in der philosophischen Lehre Jacobis*], Strauss apologized for not presenting "Jacobi-in-himself" but rather takes a 'non-Jacobin approach.'"³³ In contrast, here I seek to present Strauss-in-himself. In proceeding in this manner, I acknowledge that the tidy divide between textualized and contextualized approaches in Strauss's mature work has a complex beginning. In his 1936 monograph on Hobbes, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Genesis*, Strauss traces the development of Hobbes's life and work, and places it against the backdrop of historical events, as well as the class and religious formations of seventeenth century Europe. Influenced by G. F. W. Hegel, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Alexander Kojève, Strauss historicizes Hobbes. Consequently, in this treatment, Strauss places Hobbes within his historical context, taking seriously Hobbes's political and class alliances. He reads Hobbes's philosophy as the first bourgeois philosophy. Unlike the young historicist Strauss, however, I do not provide a symptomatic reading of Strauss's thought as the unconscious expression of a specific class interest. My contextualization is restricted to how Strauss consciously understood

³³ Quotation in Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 22. For original see Leo Strauss, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der philosophischen Lehre Fr. H. Jacobis* in Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2: Philosophie und Gesetz: Frühe Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier, with the editorial assistance of Wiebke Meier (Stuttgart and Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 1997), 297.

his own time (including class formations and consciousness) and how this understanding influences his study of Hobbes, rather than to show how his thought and alliances reflected a specific class position.

Some readers might wish for a correction of Strauss's reading of Hobbes, but such an intervention is not necessary for the purposes of this study. As I have explained above, there are other ways to dissect how Strauss differs from Hobbes. This is an important methodological point: I make no claim to know Hobbes better than Strauss, who himself spent large portions of his illustrious career poring over Hobbes's writings. The same assumption applies to any other thinker that Strauss engages with that I turn to in the course of this study. I do not intend or aim to correct his interpretation of, let us say, Plato or Aristotle, Schmitt or Heidegger. When a proper name does appear, it should be assumed to be strictly in the shape of Strauss's "Hobbes," or Strauss's "Heidegger" unless explicitly otherwise indicated. My approach is thus also different from the Cambridge School, with its conceptual and linguistic analysis of synchronically located texts. I only engage with the texts and thinkers that Strauss himself dealt with, and when doing so, strictly in the manner in which he understood their work. As a result, I am not concerned with placing Strauss's work in the context of the general scholarship on Hobbes at the time, or in offering my own interpretations of the contributions of the scholars that he engages with. My study is therefore immune to the complaint that it has gotten Hobbes or any other thinker wrong, whereas Strauss got it right. Indeed, anyone familiar with the secondary literature on Hobbes is aware that the field is highly contested, and thus the task of asking the right Hobbes to stand up is far from a straightforward one. This point is important to emphasize in order to avoid the objection

that what I detect as extra-textual intentions in Strauss's interpretation are simply due to the fact that my interpretation of Hobbes differs from his. My study is of course still open to the criticism that I have misinterpreted Strauss's reading of Hobbes or any other thinker.

This brings us to a final general point about my approach; I intentionally avoid taking up the debates of Strauss's time (with the exception of debates that Strauss himself entered with other scholars) or the historical scholarship on key facets of the period in which he lived. In doing so, I largely eschew any sustained engagement with the historiography of fascism or socialism or liberalism. These are highly contested fields of study that fall beyond the ambit of this project; the point of my dissertation is not to set the historical record of Strauss's context straight, or to analyze the debates to which he contributes, or to evaluate whether or not Strauss makes fair use of the texts he reads. Rather, the aim is to account for the theoretical core and purpose of Strauss's studies of Hobbes, to focus on how he understood Hobbes's thought, and, when the logic of argument requires it, to consider how he understood the contemporary or historical components that he relies on to complete his argument.

Strauss himself paid some attention to larger academic debates over Hobbes in general, and used the arguments of specific author's' texts to further his own interpretation of Hobbes, as well as his own political and philosophical project. Accordingly, a significant part of his published scholarship on Hobbes is a series of commentaries or reviews of the work of other scholars. The most important of these interlocutors were the German political theorist and professor of jurisprudence Carl Schmitt, the Polish philosopher (and later British educator) Zbigniew Lubieński, the

French philosopher Raymond, and the Canadian political theorist and economist C. B. Macpherson. Having engaged with the above authors, I have not found that the scholarly reception of Strauss's Hobbes texts around the time in which they were published would add much to my argument, with the exception of Macpherson's appropriation and disagreement with Strauss's work.³⁴ The latter entered into an extended, though relatively neglected, exchange with Strauss on Hobbes that began with Macpherson's 1945 essay "Hobbes Today" and ended with Strauss's 1964 review of Macpherson's *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: From Hobbes to Locke*. A few months before the review was published, Strauss taught a seminar on Hobbes that included Macpherson's book as required reading. Macpherson, like Strauss, used Hobbes to further his own political project: the case for a socialist (and later, libertarian socialist) theory of obligation. However, in line with the earlier interpretative rules that guide the approach of this project, I limit my comments on Macpherson, in the same way that I treat the work of Schmitt, Lubieński, and Polin, to how Strauss understood and responded to his work.

The most valuable commentaries on Strauss's Hobbes texts, and more generally on Strauss's life and thought, have been written over the last two decades. I engage with this literature and state clearly when I agree or disagree with the author in question. However, I never adopt concurring conclusions as my own propositions, except when I have worked through the texts that they refer to and reached a conclusion that aligns with theirs. Specifically, in the first part of chapter two, I consult the historically and theoretically informed scholarship of Sheppard, Michael Zank and Tanguay, whose respective works on the young Strauss's Zionist and Jewish thought, and its context, is

³⁴ Michael Oakeshott, "The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Genesis by Leo Strauss," *Philosophy* 12, no. 46 (April 1937): 239-241. Oakeshott's review of Strauss's *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* remains the best overall exposition of this text to date.

unparalleled.³⁵ I also draw on Tanguay's interpretation of Strauss first book, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. In the second part of that chapter, I both converge with and diverge from Meier's philosophical interpretation of Strauss's commentary on Schmitt.³⁶ In chapter three, I arrive at a similar conclusion regarding Strauss's investigation and use of vanity as that which marks human nature as moral evil as that proposed by Xenos in his polemical and penetrating book on Strauss.³⁷ However, I disagree with Xenos over the role of fear in Strauss's own political vision, and argue that Strauss dropped vanity as a moral category after he adopted a version of a Socratic-Platonic virtue ethics. In the same chapter, I also challenge the dominant framing of Strauss's intellectual trajectory, as presented by both Xenos and Janssens, with respect to Strauss's criticism of liberalism in his work on Hobbes. In chapter four, I enter into conversation with an additional number of leading scholars in the field beside Sheppard, Xenos and Tanguay, including Hanes Kerbal, Joel Kraemer, Laurence Lampert, Robert Pippin, Stanley Rosen, Susan Shell, Michael Zuckert and Catherine Zuckert. In the concluding chapter, which examines Strauss's final insight on Hobbes and his exchange with Macpherson, I proceed largely unaccompanied by other interpreters into largely unexamined terrain. Only Stauffer and Meier have commented — and then only briefly — on Strauss's final writing on Hobbes. Pangle has pointed to the exchange between Strauss and Macpherson and Jules Townshend has briefly discussed Macpherson's debt to Strauss.³⁸ My account of

³⁵ See Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*; Zank, *The Early Writings*; Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*.

³⁶ Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*.

³⁷ Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*.

³⁸ Jules Townshend, *C. B. Macpherson and the Problem of Liberal Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000): 32-33; Pangle, "Introduction," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: an Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), ix; Pangle, *Leo Strauss: An Introduction to His Thought and Intellectual Legacy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 100.

Strauss's final work on Hobbes, and his exchange with Macpherson, is thus without a significant counterpart in the secondary literature.

Finally, a few words on how I present my work. In 1940, Strauss wrote that "Heidegger made it clear, not by assertions, but by *concrete* analyses — the work of an enormous concentration and diligence — that Plato and Aristotle have not been understood by the modern philosophers; for they read their own opinions into the works of Plato and Aristotle."³⁹ Whereas I can only aspire to Heidegger's "concentration," I have aimed at a "concrete" analysis of Strauss's texts, rather than resort to "assertions."⁴⁰ Accordingly, I never simply state my own conclusions or findings without textual evidence. There is a great deal of that in the secondary literature, independently of whether or not the writer has earned the trust of the reader. My textual evidence, and each step of the argument, is thus readily available for the reader to scrutinize. To avoid the trap of an idiosyncratic interpretation, and conceptual imprecision, I have largely confined my terminology to Strauss's. I seek to present and recreate Strauss's argument consistently and systematically using his terms and concepts. While Strauss's Hobbes texts often spread out in different directions, my focus is on the main aspect of his overall argument. In presenting my case, I have tried to capture the suspense of thinking, as it moves and unfolds through its own internal logic. Nevertheless, each chapter's introduction provides a broad overview of the chapter's argument.

When looking at the corpus of an author, the development of his or her thought over time is always in danger of getting lost. Such questions of when and where matters

³⁹ Leo Strauss, "The Living Issues of German Post-War Philosophy," *Philosophical Review* 49, no. 4 (1940): 115-139, 134-35, emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Leo Strauss, "An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: an Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. and introduction Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1989), 28.

for two interrelated reasons. On the one hand, Strauss's thoughts on Hobbes change over time, as he builds on and revises his previous interpretations. On the other hand, his interpretations of Hobbes change in relation both to the political and epistemic context in which Strauss wrote, as well as in respect to the overall development of his thought. To capture these important dynamics, I trace the transformations of Strauss's different studies of Hobbes. In doing so, I resist the temptation to read the later Strauss into the younger—a tendency that I find common among commentaries on Strauss; indeed, Strauss is himself guilty of this tendency in some of his autobiographical remarks. Finally, I would like to remind the reader that when we look at the past with the hindsight of how history unfolded, it is important to try to see Strauss then and there, as separated from what we today know about the course of historical events as well as of Strauss's subsequent legacy.

With all this in mind, I have structured the dissertation chronologically so as to make the evolution of Strauss's thought clear, and the textual evidence readily presented to the reader diachronically. Chapter two covers the period from Strauss's birth to his departure from Germany in 1933. Chapter three covers 1933-1936, the years Strauss spent as a research fellow in France and England. Chapter four deviates from the other chapters in that I reach both forward and back in time to account for Strauss's discovery and understanding of esotericism, as well as the overall shift in the orientation of his thought that this represented. The main focus of chapter four, however, is on texts produced between 1940 and 1953, after he had immigrated to America. The final chapter covers the decade from 1954 to 1964.

1. 4. *Overview of chapters*

In *Chapter Two*, I argue that Strauss's first study of Hobbes in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1930) was on the one hand, informed by his Zionist concern with the relation between religion and politics, and on the other, a genuine attempt to investigate Hobbes's political philosophy. I then turn to show that insights from both his writing on Zionism and Hobbes informed his 1932 review of Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*, in which Strauss appealed to Hobbes to advance Schmitt's critique of liberalism.⁴¹ Writing at the time of the disintegration of the Weimar Republic, Strauss was seeking the ground for an alternative to liberalism in his commentary on Schmitt.

In the 1920s and mid-1930s, Strauss rejected bourgeois liberal democracy, first in favor of the creation of a Jewish state, and then in favor of a more authoritarian approach to politics in Germany and elsewhere. I will argue that his engagement with Schmitt was most productive in this respect. In Schmitt's concept of the political, Strauss saw a way of addressing an inherent weakness of liberalism: its attempt to negate the fundamental antagonisms of politics. However, Schmitt's immanent or relativistic conception of the political did not suit Strauss. Rejecting Schmitt's conception of the political on grounds of its dependence on group enmity, or bellicose nationalism, Strauss discovered in Hobbes's state of nature an anthropological qua metaphysical ground for the political that he argues adheres to the moral principle of the political Right.⁴² He takes from Schmitt the idea that politics is defined by deadly conflict and aligns Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction with Hobbes's description of the natural antagonism between individuals in

⁴¹ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, translated an introduction by George Schwab (Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁴² With the use of the term “metaphysics” here, as contrary to Schmitt's immanent conception of the political, I refer to an essentialist view of human nature, and should thus not be confused with a transcendental system or Plato's metaphysics.

the state of nature. Strauss reads Hobbes as positing a universal human nature as the ground of the political, which in its essence is conflict of individuals with one another. It is the state of nature's (in Kant's words) "unsocial sociability" that drives individuals into collective life and demonstrates the need for an authoritarian social and political order.⁴³ This grounding in human nature, Strauss argues, transcends the liberal world-view that human culture is independent from human nature and points toward an unliberal morality.

In *Chapter Three*, I suggest that Strauss's publications on Hobbes in the 1930s that followed his commentary on Schmitt were developed with two primary aims: (i) to further critique and move beyond liberalism, and (ii) to ground a right-wing authoritarian alternative to liberalism, socialism, and Nazism. I will show in this chapter that Strauss's study of Hobbes fuelled his critique of liberalism on the one hand, and that his critique of liberalism drove his study of Hobbes on the other.

Liberalism, as well as socialism, Strauss argues, puts faith in rationality, progress and education, or the good of human nature, over the evils of humans. To move beyond liberalism, according to Strauss's criteria as unpacked by both Meier and Xenos before me, one must establish that human beings are morally evil by nature, whereas Hobbes's natural scientific view of man presents humans as educable or good. In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Genesis* (1936), Strauss presents a pre-scientific Hobbes, whose view of human nature is on display in the state of nature. Hobbes's main invention, Strauss argues, is not his application of a natural scientific method to the study of politics; rather it is that he introduces a new bourgeois morality. The basis for this,

⁴³ Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," in *Political Writings*, translated by Nisbet, H.B., and edited by H. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 44.

Strauss argues, is that Hobbes attaches a natural right to life and grounds his theory of political obligation on the fear of violent death, a fear that ultimately tames human pride or vanity. However, the reason why the state of nature is a state of war according to Hobbes's pre-scientific view, Strauss argues, is because the human animal is the only animal that is vain. Strauss defines vanity in Hobbes as the incessant seeking of ever more power over others because one derives pleasure from the other's recognition of one's superiority. I argue, as Xenos before me, that it is because individuals are vain by nature that Strauss (departing from the later Hobbes) considers them to be morally evil. To unpack this claim, I explain what it is that Strauss means by moral evil and argue that he has transposed a Biblical morality onto human nature. This becomes, for Strauss, the moral-ontological foundation upon which to erect an authoritarian political alternative to liberalism.

In *Chapter Four*, I suggest that Strauss's interpretation of Hobbes changes after World War II in order to fit his account of (i) the history of political philosophy as a quarrel between ancient and modern philosophy and (ii) his discovery of the tradition of philosophical esotericism. More specifically, I argue that Strauss's criticism of liberalism continues in his post-war writing on Hobbes from the perspective of his recuperation of a Socratic-Platonic conception of rationality, human nature, and natural right. During and after the war, Strauss set out to defend rationalism, and specifically ancient rationalism against the German nihilism and historicist tradition of thought that had made inroads into the United States. To do so, Strauss divorces his earlier coupling of morality with nature, and instead attaches rationality to nature. He demotes morality to an exoteric function — a conventional prerequisite for the maintenance of social order. It is against

this return to classical philosophy that Strauss assesses, criticizes, and utilizes Hobbes's political philosophy after the war. Strauss cast Hobbes as the modern esoteric writer par excellence; that is, as someone who writes for the enlightenment of everyone, and hides his thought for fear of religious persecution only. Contrary to his Hobbes, I suggest, like Joel Kraemer and Tanguay before me, that Strauss promotes and adopts an ancient esoteric tradition of reading and writing that is premised on a natural rank of human intellectual capacities.⁴⁴

In his first essay on Hobbes after the war, "On the Spirit of Hobbes's Political Philosophy" (1950), Strauss builds on the criticism that he had first formulated before the war, which portrays Hobbes as the founder of liberal rights, and what he refers to as the doctrine of modern natural right. Strauss argues that Hobbes was the first to subordinate natural law to natural individual right. As Tanguay has pointed out, the shift of primacy from obligations or duties to rights is what prompts Strauss to declare that Hobbes is the founder of liberalism.⁴⁵ However, Strauss makes a distinction between liberal theory, which he argues originates in Hobbes's natural right doctrine, and a liberal regime, defined by constitutionalism. I suggest that Strauss in the late 1930s becomes a supporter of the rule of law, or what he thinks of as classical liberalism. After the war, Strauss embraces a limited version of liberal constitutionalism, while still criticizing the liberal doctrine he argues originated in Hobbes.

In *Chapter Five*, I suggest that, in his last studies of Hobbes, Strauss comes closest to following the hermeneutical principle he champions throughout his late

⁴⁴ Joel L. Kraemer, "The Medieval Arabic Enlightenment", in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven Smith (New York: Cambridge Press, 2009), 137-70; Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*.

⁴⁵ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 102, 106.

writing: to understand Hobbes as he understood himself.⁴⁶ Whereas some of his findings on Hobbes still inform his criticism of liberalism, his final studies of Hobbes have less to do with his own politics and overall philosophical project than we find in his earlier work. Yet, Strauss's take on Hobbes's observations on human nature continued to inform his view on politics and the state. In "Notes on Hobbes" and *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss used vanity to argue that humans are morally (non-innocently) evil by nature, against the anarchist position — to which he claimed both liberalism and socialism belong — that human nature is either good or educable. The anthropological insights about human nature that Strauss extracts from Hobbes — the view that the human animal is a proud and nasty creature, if no longer morally evil in his return to Hobbes after World War II — still prove that coercion is required to assure political obligation. Following his post-war project to alter the liberal regime from within, Strauss argues at the height of the Cold War that liberals should thus abandon the view of human nature as good.

In his last essay on Hobbes, "On the Basis of Hobbes's Political Philosophy," Strauss alters the understanding of the relation between Hobbes's natural science and political science that he had developed in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, and then revised in *Natural Right and History*. From the latter, Strauss maintains the position that Hobbes's natural scientific view of the whole (the physical universe in its entirety), however faulty, supports Hobbes's modern natural right doctrine. In this final essay, however, Strauss also presents the argument that the main contradictions in Hobbes's thought (i.e., the incompatibility between Hobbes's political theory or natural right

⁴⁶ His interpretation still reflected his own philosophical views and interest to some extent, but Strauss did not deliberately seek to use Hobbes primarily as a vehicle to put forth his own philosophy.

doctrine and his account of human nature and behavior), first arises when Hobbes applies his natural science to the study of the physical nature of humans, as opposed to the universe as a whole. Strauss suggests, as he had already done in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, that the natural scientific view of human nature cannot account for the antagonistic behavior described in the state of nature. He upholds his argument from the 1930s that the reason why each individual in the state of nature incessantly seeks ever more power over others is vanity. In so arguing, Strauss arrives at the conclusion that Hobbes's view of the human animal as the peculiar vain animal has its origin in the pre-modern philosophical view of human nature, as opposed to Hobbes's natural scientific perspective. However, in the final insight in *What is Political Philosophy* (1959) and the Seminar on Hobbes (1964), Strauss, contrary to all his earlier studies, suggests that vanity and fear are derivative of Hobbes's scientific description of the human animal as the animal that is capable of "causal thought".

1. 5. *Notes on texts, translations and archival material*

Strauss's original texts were written in German and English and some of his articles and books were first published as translations. For the existing translations of Strauss's earlier German writings, I make use of J. Harvey Lomax's translation of "Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* [*Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt, Der Begriff des Politischen*]" (henceforth, "Notes on Schmitt") and Elsa M. Sinclair's translation of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*.⁴⁷ Sinclair also translated from the German manuscript,

⁴⁷ Leo Strauss, "Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*," in Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, translation by Harvey J. Lomax (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995): 88-119. First published, Leo Strauss, *Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt, Der Begriff des Politischen*, *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 67, No. 6 (August–September 1932): 732–749; Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, translated by E. M. Sinclair, and with a new preface by Strauss (Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press, 1997). First published as *Die Religionskritik*

Strauss's 1936 book, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Genesis*.⁴⁸ I have also relied upon two collections of translations: Zank's *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings (1921–1932)* and Gabriel Bartlett and Svetozar Minkov's *Hobbes's Critique of Religion and Related Writings*.⁴⁹ For other original texts, I have used the Leo Strauss archive in the Special Collection Research Center of the University of Chicago and Meier's three volumes of Strauss collected works.⁵⁰ In the case when I use an existing translation of Strauss's German texts, I have included the German original in closed brackets if a word is translated inconsistently or if this is necessary to provide conceptual clarity, and if I alter a translation, I note the change. If not otherwise stated or indicated by the works cited, translations are mine. In the final chapter, I make use a course, "Seminar on Hobbes," given in the Winter Quarter, 1964, in the Department of Political Science, University of Chicago. In 2011, Nathan Tarcov, Director of the Leo Strauss Center, generously gave me access to an incomplete transcript from the seminar, which I corrected against the recorded audio tracks — the document from which I quote here.⁵¹ I have also used the Leo Strauss archives for Strauss's letter correspondence.

What follows is a list of Strauss's main texts on Hobbes considered in the dissertation: his first discussion of Hobbes's philosophy appeared in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion [Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft*

Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-Politischem Traktat (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1930).

⁴⁸ Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes*, translation by Elsa M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963). The German manuscript was published first in 1965: Leo Strauss, *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1965).

⁴⁹ Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*; Leo Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion and Related Writings*.

⁵⁰ Leo Strauss Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library; Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 1: Die Religionskritik Spinozas und zugehörige Schriften*, ed. by Meier, Heinrich with the editorial assistance of Wiebke Meier (Stuttgart and Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2008); Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2*; Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*.

⁵¹ Leo Strauss, "Seminar on Hobbes," given in the Winter Quarter, 1964, in the Department of Political Science, University of Chicago, mp3, 16 sessions, <http://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/courses>.

Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-Politischem Traktat] (1930).⁵² Strauss's first freestanding piece on Hobbes was a review essay of a book by Zbigniew Lubieński, "Some Notes on the Political Science of Hobbes [*Einige Anmerkungen über die politische Wissenschaft des Hobbes*]" (henceforth "Notes on Hobbes"), translated into French by Alexandre Kojève and published in France in April of 1933 with the title, "*Quelques remarques sur la science politique de Hobbes: à propos du livre récent de M. Lubieński.*"⁵³ During the first half of the 1930s, Strauss also worked on a series of manuscripts on Hobbes that were never completed or published: "The Political Science of Hobbes: An Introduction to Natural Right [*Disposition: Die Politische Wissenschaft des Hobbes Eine Einführung in das Naturrecht*]" and a "Foreword to a planned book on Hobbes [*Vorwort zu einem geplanten Buch über Hobbes*]", and an unfinished book manuscript of just under one hundred pages, *Planned book on Hobbes* [*Geplanten Buch über Hobbes*], written while still in Germany.⁵⁴ In Paris, Strauss began another book-length manuscript, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion: A Contribution to Understanding the Enlightenment* [*Die Religionskritik des Hobbes Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der Aufklärung*] (henceforth, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion*), which he kept working on after

⁵² Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, translation by E. M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1997; original, Leo Strauss, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-Politischem Traktat* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1930).

⁵³ Leo Strauss, "*Quelques remarques sur la science politique de Hobbes: à propos du livre récent de M. Lubieński,*" translation by Alexander Kojève, *Recherches philosophiques*, 2 (1933): 609-622. In English translation, "Some Notes on the Political Science of Hobbes," in Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion and Related Writings*.

⁵⁴ Leo Strauss, *Planned Book on Hobbes* c) Einleitung, Kapitel I and II, 97 pages 1930-1931. Leo Strauss Papers, [Box 15, Folder 2], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. The first two texts: "The Political Science of Hobbes: An Introduction to Natural Right" and "Foreword to a planned book on Hobbes" are translated by Bartlett and Minkov in Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion and Related Writings*.

moving to London and Cambridge in 1934.⁵⁵ Strauss's inter-war studies of Hobbes culminated in the publication of his monograph, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Genesis* (henceforth, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*), in 1936.⁵⁶ The German manuscript of the book, *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft in ihrer Genesis* [*Hobbes's Political Science and its Genesis*] was finished in London and Cambridge 1934-35 and translated into English by Sinclair, under Strauss's supervision. The German original was published first in 1965, as *Hobbes's Political Science* [*Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft*].⁵⁷ Over two decades later, Strauss gave Hobbes his full attention again in a 1950 article "On the Spirit of Hobbes's Political Philosophy".⁵⁸ The article was reproduced with additions as part one of chapter five, "Modern Natural Right," in Strauss's 1953 book, *Natural Right and History*.⁵⁹ Strauss's final major piece on Hobbes was a review essay, "*Les fondements de la philosophie politique de Hobbes* [On the Basis of Hobbes Political Philosophy]" (henceforth, "On the Basis"), of a book, *Politique et philosophie chez Thomas Hobbes*, by Raymond Polin.⁶⁰ Just as his review of Lubieński, the essay was translated into French and published in Paris. The article is reprinted as chapter seven, "On the Basis of Hobbes Political Philosophy", of *What is Political Philosophy? And other Studies* (1959) (henceforth, *What is Political Philosophy*).⁶¹

Strauss wrote two shorter book reviews of books on Hobbes: "Review of C. B.

⁵⁵ Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion: A Contribution to Understanding the Enlightenment* [Die Religionskritik des Hobbes Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der Aufklärung] is translated by Bartlett and Minkov in Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion and Related Writings*.

⁵⁶ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*.

⁵⁷ Leo Strauss *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft* (Neuwied, Luchterhand 1965).

⁵⁸ Leo Strauss, "On the Spirit of Hobbes's Political Philosophy", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 4, no. 14 (October 1950): 405–431.

⁵⁹ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1965).

⁶⁰ Leo Strauss, "Les fondements de la philosophie politique de Hobbes," *Critique* 10, no. 83 (April 1954): 338–362; Raymond Polin, *Politique et philosophie chez Thomas Hobbes* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1952).

⁶¹ Leo Strauss, "On the Basis of Hobbes's Political Philosophy," in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959).

Macpherson: *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*” (henceforth, “Review”) and “Review of Samuel I. Mintz’s *The Hunting of Leviathan: Seventeenth-Century Reactions to the Materialism and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes*”⁶² The Macpherson review was reprinted as chapter thirteen in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, a book that Strauss was working on when he died in 1973, and which was posthumously published a decade later, in 1983.⁶³ Beside his 1964 seminar on Hobbes, Strauss also taught three courses on Hobbes during his tenure at the University of Chicago: Winter quarter 1950, “Hobbes’s *The Citizen*,” Autumn Quarter 1953, “Seminar in Political Philosophy: Hobbes’s *Leviathan*,” Autumn Quarter 1956, “Seminar in Political Philosophy: Hobbes.”⁶⁴ Transcripts are available from the 1953 and the 1964 seminars, but only the latter have a surviving audio recording.

⁶² Leo Strauss, “Review of C. B. Macpherson, “The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: from Hobbes to Locke,” *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (June 1964): 69–70; Leo Strauss, “Review of Samuel I. Mintz’s ‘The Hunting of Leviathan: Seventeenth-Century Reactions to the Materialism and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes’”, *Modern Philology* 62, no. 3 (February 1965): 253-55.

⁶³ Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, introduction by Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁶⁴ See George Anastaplo, “Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago,” in *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime*, edited by Deutsch, Kenneth L. & John A. Murely (Maryland – Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 14-18.

2

Strauss's Weimar Hobbes and Liberalism

2. 0. 1. *Introduction*

In this chapter, I investigate Strauss's views on liberalism and Hobbes and how he begins to understand the connection between the two in his earliest work on the subject. I first look at Strauss's Zionist writings in the 1920s in order to dissect how Strauss understands liberalism; how his thoughts on the relation between politics and religion inform his first study of Hobbes; and how his criticism of political Zionism inform his 1932 review of Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*. It is necessary to briefly take into account Strauss's contribution to Zionist debates in the 1920s in order to introduce my close reading of Strauss's first engagement with Hobbes and his use of Hobbes in his criticism of liberalism.

In approaching these texts, I engage with the scholarship of Sheppard, Tanguay and Zank. Their studies show that Strauss's association with political Zionism reveals a mistrust of the liberal state and liberal rights, and that political emancipation and cultural assimilation had in Strauss's view, led Jews to forget their collective identity. Yet, Strauss also acknowledges that political Zionism, which aimed to restore to the Jews a

nation, owed its existence to liberalism: it was due to secularization that the creation of a Jewish state could be envisioned through human intervention. However, we shall see that Strauss arrives at the insight that political Zionists, who were eager to found a Jewish state by rational means, had abandoned the core of their Jewish identity. Instead, political Zionism depends, for Strauss, on anti-Semitic enmity for the formation of a collective Jewish political association. To address this shortcoming, Strauss argues that in order for the Jews to see themselves as a distinct people in their own right, they must cling to religion, because this is what authentically distinguishes the Jews from other gentile nations. However, as Tanguay has pointed out, Strauss arrives at an irresolvable dilemma that an authentic neo-orthodox Zionist position must insist, like traditional orthodox groups, on waiting for “divine intervention” for the return to Zion, and as such is incompatible with political Zionism that advocated for human intervention.⁶⁵

The conflict between a politics reliant on reason and a politics grounded in religion is also evident in Strauss’s first discussion of Hobbes in his first book, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, published in 1930. Strauss here presents Hobbes as the first modern critic of religion and the founder of a purely rational political contract, independent of religion. In this book, I will argue, Strauss also begins what became a hallmark of all his texts on Hobbes: he reads morality into Hobbes’s state of nature, or more precisely, into individuals’ behavior prior to the social contract. Here, I am in accord with Tanguay who has argued that, in his Spinoza book, Strauss detects a moral genealogy that informs what Strauss identified as the tradition of the Epicurean critique of religion. The underlying aim behind the Epicurean critique of religion is to attain tranquility. In Hobbes’s case, it is specifically to preserve life and to accommodate material pleasure. In his commentary

⁶⁵ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 14.

on Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*, Strauss adds that the attitude that informs Hobbes's moral attitude is liberal bourgeois. It is this bourgeois innovation that Meier has in mind when he argues that Strauss, in his commentary on Schmitt, both points out the flaws in Schmitt's reliance on Hobbes to critique liberalism, and uses Hobbes's conception of the state of nature to advance Schmitt's critique.⁶⁶ In the words of Tracy Strong, "The approach taken by Strauss and Meier consists in arguing that Schmitt, while attempting a radical critique of liberalism, remains within the liberal framework."⁶⁷

In the second part of the chapter, I unpack the claim that Schmitt remains within this "liberal framework," or in Strauss's own words, the "horizon of liberalism."⁶⁸ More precisely, I follow Meier in arguing that Strauss demonstrates how Schmitt's concept of the political falls back into what I, for heuristic purposes, identify as a liberal *thought* horizon and a liberal *moral* horizon. To make his case, I will suggest that Strauss dismisses Schmitt's understanding of Hobbes as the antidote to liberalism, arguing that Hobbes, despite his proposed absolutist state, is the founder of liberalism. The reason Strauss gave for this is that Hobbes attaches an infeasible natural right to the preservation of life and makes any obligation to the state conditional on this right. I also build on Meier's suggestion that Strauss finds Schmitt's conception of the political, in its most important aspect, analogous to Hobbes's state of nature. Identifying a correspondence between Schmitt's conception of the relation between friend and enemy and the individual antagonism described in Hobbes's state of nature allows Strauss to turn to human nature to escape the liberal thought horizon, and outlines a means of

⁶⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, translation with an introduction by George Schwab (Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁶⁷ Tracy Strong, "Preface", in Schmitt, Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, translated an introduction by George Schwab (Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), xxv.

⁶⁸ Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 119.

escaping the liberal moral horizon that he continues to explore in his consequent work on Hobbes. I, however, diverge from Meier's suggestion that Strauss tacitly brings to view a concealed theological dimension underlying Schmitt's conception of the political.

In order to transcend liberalism in his engagement with Schmitt, Strauss was on the hunt for an illiberal morality (contra Hobbes) to serve as the ground for a right-wing authoritarian political theory. While Strauss agrees with Schmitt that enmity is central to the political, he does not think it sufficient as a ground for a right-wing authoritarian theory of the state. Strauss recognizes in the groundlessness or relativism of Schmitt's theorization of the political Strauss's own earlier theorization over the shortcoming of political Zionism. On this basis, Strauss asks Schmitt to reconsider his theoretical dependence on bellicose nationalism — namely that, in Meier's words, the formation of political association is dependent on political disassociation or enmity — for Schmitt's right-wing authoritarian political theory. He suggests instead that the real divide between left and right comes down to whether or not human nature is perceived as morally good or evil. The foundation for an authoritarian theory is the moral evil of human nature, as opposed to liberalism, which conceives of human nature as good. In this context, Strauss defines moral evil simply in contradistinction to animal evil: animals are rapacious, or innocently evil; humans are evil in that they are not educable.

Part I

2. 1. 1. *Political Zionism, assimilation and emancipation*

Born 1899 in Kirchhain, a rural town near Marburg, Kurhessen, Strauss grew up in a religiously observant, and relatively well-to-do, Jewish family. His parents Hugo Strauss and Jennie David ran a small agricultural business. After his graduation from the gymnasium in 1917, he went on to serve in the military as an interpreter in Belgium. Strauss had begun his own academic studies at the University of Marburg in 1919. He also studied in Frankfurt am Main and Berlin before completing his dissertation, *The Problem of Knowledge in the Philosophical Doctrine of F.H. Jacobi* ["*Das Erkenntnisproblem in der philosophischen Lehre Jacobis*"], at the University of Hamburg in 1921 under the supervision of Ernst Cassirer, whose neo-Kantianism had left little impression, beside disagreement, on Strauss.⁶⁹ With his doctorate in hand, Strauss left for Freiburg to attend Edmund Husserl's lectures. In Freiburg, Strauss began to attend the seminar on Aristotle taught by Heidegger, who came to influence Strauss more than any other living philosopher. He "followed Heidegger back to Marburg, where he befriended the new crop of students of philosophy, among them most prominently Hans Georg Gadamer and Karl Löwith," but also, importantly, for his study of Hobbes, Gerhard Krüger.⁷⁰

At the end of his life, Strauss said that he was "converted" to political Zionism at

⁶⁹ Leo Strauss, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der philosophischen Lehre Fr. H. Jacobis*. Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde der Philosophischen Fakultät der Hamburgischen Universität vorgelegt von Leo Strauss aus Kirchhain (Hessen), Hamburg 1921. See Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 7; Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 14-15.

⁷⁰ Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 7.

age 17. He had joined the Jüdischer Wanderbund Blau-Weiss, a militant middle-class political Zionist youth organization.⁷¹ He wrote polemical articles on Zionism that appeared in “some of the most important organs of the Jewish culture of renewal” between 1923-1928.⁷² Sheppard has argued that there are two main themes in Strauss’s oeuvre which can be traced back to this period: his “conservative, if not radical-conservative, critique of liberalism and the centrality of the problem of *galut* [Jewish exile].”⁷³ It is in his take on the problem of *galut* that Strauss’s criticism of liberalism first takes form, in its relation to cultural assimilation and legal emancipation.

Unlike France, full civic emancipation of German Jewry was not achieved in the 1848 revolution. It was a gradual process, but by the time Strauss emerged as a political Zionist voice, the German Jews had been emancipated, becoming, in formal political terms, equal German citizens before the law, and many had assimilated.⁷⁴ Assimilation can be described as a two-way process in the case of Jews in Germany: assimilation requires a departure from the religious community into the culture of the host nation as an individual, and it requires acceptance by the dominant national (Christian) community. While civic emancipation ended legal exclusion, it did not stop institutional and cultural anti-Semitism. Discrimination had remained in the Second Reich, most conspicuously in a government “policy” blocking Jews from higher positions within “the military, in the court system, in the administration of the state, and other key areas,” including the university.⁷⁵ While this form of institutionalized (state-sponsored) anti-Semitism eased

⁷¹ Blau-Weiss existed between 1907-1924, and merged into Kartell Jüdischer Verbindungen in 1924.

⁷² Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 10. For the Jewish aspect of Strauss’ early thought, see also Zank’s introduction and editorial notes in his *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*.

⁷³ Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 7.

⁷⁴ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 11.

⁷⁵ Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 6.

after the Great War, private anti-Semitic sentiments increased in the Weimar era.⁷⁶

Suspecting that the liberal contract between the German state and German Jewry had set aside enmity only temporarily, Strauss advocated for the creation of a Jewish state as the only permanent solution to anti-Semitism or what Strauss later called the “Jewish problem.”⁷⁷ For Strauss, like Theodor Herzl (one of the founders of political Zionism) before him, it was the enmity within the host nations that compelled the Jews to become a nation. Over thirty years later, Strauss’s quoted Herzl to this effect: ““We are a nation—the enemy makes us a nation whether we like it or not.””⁷⁸ Strauss agreed with Herzl that Jews needed their own state to defend themselves against their enemies.

In his first publication in 1923, “Response to Frankfurt’s ‘Word of Principle,’” Strauss noted that while both Zionism and assimilation formed a “single front” against the *galut* — seeking to “normalize” Jewish existence — their respective political solutions to the Jewish problem were opposed.⁷⁹ Assimilation sought the absorption of the “*individual*” into a normal political existence of the host nation, whereas Zionism sought a “*collective*” Jewish nation state.⁸⁰ Assimilation was an insufficient solution in Strauss’s eyes. In “The Zionism of Nordau,” published in 1924, Strauss stressed that “[i]n the *galut*, the Jewish people lived as a *Luftvolk* [people living on/in the air]—it lacks the ground beneath its feet in both the literal and figurative senses, and it depends on all of

⁷⁶ Looking back in a semi-biographical preface to the 1965 English edition of *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, first published in 1930, Strauss writes: “the failure of the liberal solution meant that Jews could not regain their honor by assimilating as individuals to the nations among which they lived or by becoming citizens like all other citizens of the liberal state: the liberal solution brought at best legal equality, but not social equality; as a demand of reason it had no effect on the feelings of non-Jews” (Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 5).

⁷⁷ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 12, 15.

⁷⁸ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 5.

⁷⁹ Strauss, “Response to Frankfurt’s ‘Word of Principle’” in Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 68; First published: “Antwort auf das ‘prinzipielle Wort’ der Frankfurter,” *Jüdische Rundschau* 28, no. 9 (30 January 1923): 45-56.

⁸⁰ Strauss, “Response to Frankfurt’s ‘Word of Principle,’” 68, emphasis added.

the contingencies of the behavior of other people [...] Assimilation takes away from the Jews self-assurance of ghetto life, and gives them instead the illusionary surrogate of trust in the humanity of civilization.”⁸¹ Sheppard explains, the “Jews in Germany who are not consciously national Jews, in Strauss’s view, have simply forgotten the fundamental condition of *galut*. They have placed their hopes in a cultured world and the security of a liberal state that leaves behind the intolerance, persecution, and enmity, all of which Jews had suffered in the premodern age of superstition.”⁸² Sheppard further points out that “the complement to this postulate in Strauss’s non-Jewish politics is that liberals and socialists have forgotten that human beings are *inherently evil* and that politics must take into account this underlying fact.”⁸³ As we will see at the end of this and the subsequent chapter, Strauss’s attempt to prove that “human beings are inherently evil” is key to understanding his interpretation of Hobbes and his criticism of liberalism in the 1930s.

On the basis of this pessimistic view of human nature, Strauss mistrusts liberal morality, with its rights of man, as the principle for nationhood. The secular bond of society is premised on universal human morality. Liberal civilizational ideals, Strauss states in his essay on Nordau’s Zionism, are ultimately expressions of secularized Christianity. It is the universalist ideals of the French revolution, Strauss argues in 1923, which “largely gave rise to [legal/political] emancipation.”⁸⁴ He views the enlightenment ideals of reasonable toleration as illusions; and thus, holds that Jews will never be safe in a liberal state with a non-Jewish majority. It is in contrast to the false illusion of

⁸¹ Strauss, “The Zionism of Nordau”, in Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 85-86; First published, “Der Zionismus bei Nordau,” *Der Jude: Eine Monatsschrift* 7, no. 10-11 (October-November 1923): 657-60.

⁸² Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 45.

⁸³ Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 45, emphasis added.

⁸⁴ Strauss, “The Zionism of Nordau”, 80.

individual assimilation that political Zionism proposed a *collective* solution to the *galut*: a Jewish nation-state, realized only by means of “real politics [*realpolitik*].”⁸⁵ In his Zionist writings from this time, Strauss calls upon the German Jews to take their destiny in their own hands and end the condition of the *galut*.⁸⁶ Yet, Zank concludes that Strauss was more interested in the theoretical principles than “acute political content” and thus his writings from the time were “typical of the middle-class intellectualism of the German Zionism youth movement of early 1920s.”⁸⁷

In “The Zionism of Nordau,” Strauss also addresses the international obstacle to the establishment of a Jewish state. He separates political Zionism of the Blau-Weiss from Georg Landauer and Max Nordau’s socialism. Strauss backs Herzl’s tactics of intrigues, as practiced through the art of covert actions or “underhandedness,” against Nordau’s “honesty,” “decency” and “loyalty” politics, and notes: “The sympathy for socialism as well as the antipathy for secret diplomacy have the same roots”.⁸⁸ Socialists, like Landauer and Nordau, were enlightenment rationalists who had embraced Kant’s dictums against secret diplomacy.⁸⁹ In “Ecclesia militans,” Strauss notes that after World War I, England “had an *interest* in a favorably disposed Jewish public,” and “[w]ith the Balfour Declaration in 1917, in which the British crown recognized its support of the Zionist quest for the establishment of a ‘Jewish homeland in Palestine,’ the sought-for extrication from Europe had become a realistic political option, but the process of its

⁸⁵ Strauss, “The Zionism of Nordau”, 85.

⁸⁶ Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 63-64.

⁸⁷ Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 9.

⁸⁸ Strauss, “The Zionism of Nordau,” 84-85.

⁸⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Perpetual Peace: a Philosophical Proposal*, ed. and translated by O'Brien, Helen and Jessie H. Buckland (London: Sweet & Maxwell, Limited 1927).

realization was still delayed.”⁹⁰ To speed up the process, Strauss agrees with Herzl: “playing off of power against power” is necessary for the Zionist cause, “as it is in the case of all politics.”⁹¹ And for a Jewish state to finally come into “existence,” Strauss argues that the movement must be “*entering into reality*,” by means of, “land and soil, power and arms, peasantry and aristocracy.”⁹²

2. 1. 2. *Cultural and religious Zionism*

While Strauss considers assimilation an unsatisfactory solution to the *galut*, and political emancipation as the source of a false sense of safety in the mid-1920s, he argues that it should not be forgotten that political Zionism owes its existence to liberalism: political Zionism was born out of assimilation and political emancipation, which are preconditioned on the secular break between the state and church.⁹³

Strauss unpacks this historical process in his 1924 essay on “Paul de Lagarde,” in which he looks at the Jewish question through the lens of one of its enemies — an Evangelical anti-Semite.⁹⁴ With Lagarde, Strauss asks: “How was it possible for the Jews to become emancipated in Germany?”⁹⁵ Lagarde, Strauss argues, retains Bruno Bauer’s position that “[a]s long as Jews hold on to the religious Law, they cannot become

⁹⁰ Strauss, “Ecclesia militans”, in Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 128. First published: “Ecclesia militans,” *Jüdische Rundschau* 30, no. 36 (May 8, 1925), p. 334; Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 63.

⁹¹ Strauss, “Ecclesia militans,” 129.

⁹² Strauss, “Response to Frankfurt’s ‘Word of Principle,’” 68. And whereas Strauss did not address “socioeconomic” questions in his writings from this period, Zank extracts that from “his affinity” with the Zionist Revisionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky, Strauss “may” have supported a liberal, “capitalist economy in Palestine” (Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 9).

⁹³ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 11, 15.

⁹⁴ Strauss, “Paul de Lagarde”, in Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*. First published: “Paul de Lagarde”, *Der Jude: Eine Monatsschrift* 8, no. 1 (January 1924): 8-15. Zank argues that Strauss looks for the Jewish “essence” in the eyes of the enemy and sees in Lagarde someone that has “set the highest standard in honesty and seriousness in the political arena, a standard he [Strauss] commends for emulation by the Zionists” (Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 98).

⁹⁵ Strauss “Paul de Lagarde,” 95.

Germans.”⁹⁶ Jews, according to this argument, cannot subscribe to a universal moral principle of nationhood, since “[e]xclusiveness is the meaning of the Law [of the Torah], consequently, as long as the Law is in effect, no amalgamation with the host people is possible.”⁹⁷ Political Zionism evolves out of assimilation in that it must also break the covenant with God so as to advocate for the creation of a Jewish state by human means.⁹⁸ The problem is that according to orthodoxy, “[i]n the *galut*, Zionism and Messianism coincide, inasmuch as the return to Palestine is expected to be the work of the Messiah, something miraculous and to-be-prayed-for, something not to be prepared for rationally.”⁹⁹ Thus, Strauss suggests, that “[t]he alliance of Zionism and Orthodoxy will have to be replaced by the alliance of Zionism and *liberalism*.”¹⁰⁰ By liberalism here, Strauss means the process of secularization, which allows for the creation of a Jewish state to be thought of, and acted upon as a rational process.

The political Zionist atheistic proposal to break with orthodoxy was not without its own problems. In “The Zionism of Nordau,” Strauss also confronts the Messianic Zionism that opposed the *rationalism* of political Zionism. For Nordau, “[i]n Zionist matters, theology has no say; Zionism is purely political.”¹⁰¹ Strauss, however, finds Nordau’s political Zionism insufficient, since it does not provide a positive identity for the people of Israel. Political Zionist, Strauss claims, in Tanguay’s words, “had forgotten that the Jewish nation is more than a simple political entity.”¹⁰² The development of

⁹⁶ Strauss “Paul de Lagarde,” 95.

⁹⁷ Strauss “Paul de Lagarde,” 95.

⁹⁸ Strauss, “The Zionism of Nordau,” 85.

⁹⁹ Strauss, “The Zionism of Nordau,” 85.

¹⁰⁰ Strauss, “Comment on Weinberg’s Critique”, in Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 118, emphasis added. First published “Comment on Weinberg’s Critique,” *Der jüdische Student* 22, no. 1-2 (February 1925): 15-18.

¹⁰¹ Strauss, “The Zionism of Nordau”, 87.

¹⁰² Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 17.

cultural Zionism tried to amend this shortcoming by construing a positive identity based on shared Jewish culture. However, as Tanguay has suggested, Strauss thought that cultural Zionism was internally contradictory:

According to cultural Zionism, it is not enough to have a Jewish state; such a state must also be filled with a Jewish culture, for, as Strauss indicated, ‘the Jewish state will be an empty shell without a Jewish culture which has its roots in the Jewish heritage.’ The internal contradiction of political Zionism is to want a Jewish state without taking into consideration that Jewish heritage which has in fact up till then justified the existence of the Jewish people. Cultural Zionism aspires to overcome this contradiction by asserting the need to revive the Jewish heritage. Yet, according to Strauss, cultural Zionism does not itself escape from contradiction. By interpreting the Jewish heritage in terms of ‘culture,’ or as a ‘product of the national mind,’ it betrayed the very spirit of that heritage. More precisely, it interprets that heritage by means of categories that are themselves foreign to Jewish thought. That interpretation therefore remains a prisoner of the categories of modern philosophy—in this particular case, of Hegel and the German historicist tradition. // Thus cultural Zionism does not understand the Jewish heritage as it always understood itself, that is, as a gift of divine revelation, and not as the product of the history of human beings. Cultural Zionism fails to recover the original meaning of the Jewish heritage. According to Strauss, logic dictates that cultural Zionism that truly understand itself becomes religious Zionism.¹⁰³

Since neither political Zionism, nor cultural Zionism had succeeded in binding the Jewish nation together according to its original criteria, Strauss looked at religious orthodoxy as a unifying force that might provide a sufficient existential footing: a nation under the Torah and the Talmud, the revealed law. If the Jews are no longer seen as the chosen and exiled people under the patriarchal authority of the Torah, then the authentic, positive and exclusionary identity for a Jewish nation is lost. The political paradox that arises here is that if it accepts the authority of the Torah, the Jewish state will be the work of Messiah at the end of days, not the work of the human will. Political Zionism owes its existence to cultural assimilation, and to science, the idea that humans should intervene to

¹⁰³ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 17-18; the quotation is from Leo Strauss, “Preface to Spinoza’s Critique of Religion”, in *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 6.

create the Jewish state; the authentic national group identity of the Jewish nation, however, is tied to religious orthodoxy. The contradiction between political Zionism, with its roots in secular or atheistic liberalism, and the necessity of orthodox belief that it nevertheless depends upon for an authentic social glue is a problem Strauss grapples with and cannot not resolve at this time, wavering between different solutions in his polemics.

This conundrum led Strauss to propose a Zionism in which religion remains a decisive feature, but also one which takes into account the historical development of liberalism. In his “Comment on Weinberg’s Critique” from 1925, Strauss responds to “Zionism and Religion,” a text in which Hans Weinberg criticizes Strauss for being a defender of orthodoxy. Strauss writes: “the Zionism that I would like to characterize as primarily political Zionism is *liberal*, that is, it rejects the absolute submission to the law and instead makes individual acceptance of traditional contents dependent on *one’s own deliberation*.”¹⁰⁴ In his first political Zionist article from 1923, “Response to Frankfurt’s ‘Word of Principle,’” Strauss suggests that the contradiction between belief and unbelief could be surpassed by individual deliberation. He describes the historical conditions for this possibility to have arisen: “‘Belief’ may still be decisive, yet belief is no oracle but is subject to the control of historical reasoning.”¹⁰⁵ Inverting his dissertation’s observation that Jacobi had proved that enlightenment *rationality* (and its critique of orthodoxy) rests on an act of *belief*, Strauss proposes that a “*rational*” and “*explicit*” act of faith must take the place of the *belief* in God.”¹⁰⁶ Strauss acknowledges the radical nature of his proposal for a rational ground for faith, noting that indeed, this would have been “absurd in the life of *the earlier times* [in which “life” and “belief” were inseparable], but that is

¹⁰⁴ Strauss, “Comment on Weinberg’s Critique,” 118, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁵ Strauss, “Response to Frankfurt’s ‘Word of Principle,’” 66.

¹⁰⁶ Strauss, “Response to Frankfurt’s ‘Word of Principle,’” 70, emphasis added.

unavoidable given the needs of the *contemporary* Jewish situation.”¹⁰⁷ He thus proposes that a bare minimum of religion is needed to establish a Jewish state: the explicit, rational act of faith must include a minimal doctrinal substance — a belief in God, and a meaningful observance of the law.¹⁰⁸

This radical proposal was short-lived. Tanguay, taking his clue from Strauss’s 1962 American preface to the English translation of his first book, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (1930), argues that Strauss was not satisfied with the neo-orthodox variants of Zionism, and thus began to consider whether a “genuine return to orthodoxy” was possible.¹⁰⁹ More specifically, Tanguay argues that Strauss turns to Spinoza’s critique of religion precisely in order to assess whether the enlightenment criticism of orthodoxy was sound, since the latter rested to such a large extent on Spinoza’s shoulders.

Tanguay shows that Strauss concludes that Spinoza does not theoretically refute orthodoxy. This conclusion, in Tanguay’s reading, rests primarily upon Strauss’s assessment of Spinoza’s positivist critique of miracles as the external evidence (as oppose to inner belief) of the existence of God for believers and none-believers alike. This insight, however, does not, in Tanguay’s view, turn Strauss into a believer. Strauss appears to abandon his case for a religious Zionism (rational or orthodox) in one of his final Zionist texts, a 1928 review of Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion* that was published in the same year that Strauss completed the Spinoza manuscript.¹¹⁰ Here, Strauss endorses Freud’s case for “radical atheism,” arguing that “unbelief and belief” are

¹⁰⁷ Strauss, “Response to Frankfurt’s ‘Word of Principle,’” 70.

¹⁰⁸ Strauss, “Response to Frankfurt’s ‘Word of Principle,’” 70.

¹⁰⁹ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 22.

¹¹⁰ Strauss, “Sigmund Freud, The Future of an Illusion”, in Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*. First published, “Die Zukunft enier Illusion”, *Der jüdische Student* 25, no. 4 (August 1928): 16-22.

incompatible.¹¹¹ Political Zionism, Strauss argues in the review, must “ground itself in unbelief” or “reason.”¹¹² Thus, at this moment in time, Strauss moves away from the idea of a rationally willed act of faith or a return to orthodoxy, and toward an advocacy for a rationalist and “atheistic foundation to Zionism.”¹¹³

It is also in *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* that we find Strauss’s first commentary on Hobbes. One of the book’s central themes is the role of religion in politics. As we shall now see, Strauss contrasts Hobbes’s exclusively rational social contract with Spinoza’s theory of political obligation that relies on religion to secure obedience to the state. In the chapter and in other passages devoted Hobbes in *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, I will show that Strauss is unpacking Hobbes’s thought with a genuine interest to dissect its parts, while also seeking to uncover the moral outlook that informed Hobbes’s criticism of religion and his political philosophy. While there is no substantial assessment of the validity of Hobbes’s critique of religion of the kind Strauss offers in the case of Spinoza, I will argue, in line with Tanguay, that Strauss’s analysis is aimed at detecting a moral incentive behind Hobbes’s philosophy, forming part of a broader historical “moral genealogy of the critique of religion.”¹¹⁴

2. 1. 3. *Hobbes’s critique of religion*

In 1925, Julian Guttman, the director of the Academy of Jewish Science (*Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*) in Berlin, had recruited Strauss to study Spinoza’s

¹¹¹ Strauss, “Sigmund Freud, The Future of an Illusion,” 204.

¹¹² Strauss, “Sigmund Freud, The Future of an Illusion,” 204.

¹¹³ Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 64.

¹¹⁴ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 33.

biblical criticism and “edit a jubilee edition” of Moses Mendelssohn’s writings.¹¹⁵ Strauss would remain employed at the Academy until 1931. In 1928, Strauss completes the book manuscript on Spinoza’s criticism of religion at large, situating Spinoza in the long history of religious critiques. The first of Strauss’s reflections on Hobbes’s thought appears in the book’s fourth chapter, devoted entirely to Hobbes, and in chapter nine, “The State and the Social Function of Religion,” the title theme of which echoes the dilemma he wrestled with in his Zionist article.¹¹⁶ Strauss not only investigates the relation between state, politics and religion, but also looks at the place of natural science and its relation to both religion and politics in Hobbes’s philosophy — nexuses that become central to all Strauss’s future studies of Hobbes and to which I will return throughout the next three chapters.

In the book, Hobbes is introduced as Spinoza’s precursor in the “modern criticism of religion.”¹¹⁷ Hobbes, Strauss writes, is the first to advance an “explicit analysis of religion,” by which he means that Hobbes tracks the source of religion to “human nature.”¹¹⁸ It is “[t]he explanation of religion in terms of human nature,” Strauss argues, which forms “the complement and culmination of [the] [Epicurean] critique of religion” prior to Hobbes.¹¹⁹ Strauss offers a reason for Hobbes’s new approach: “If the critic finds himself in radical opposition to religion, he cannot rest content with merely refuting the teachings of religion, so that religion and critique of religion still seem in principle to

¹¹⁵ Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 10. Leora Batnitzky, "Leo Strauss", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/strauss-leo/>.

¹¹⁶ Hobbes is presented as the last of three “precursors” — following Uriel Da Costa and Isaac De La Peyrere — to Spinoza in the “age of the Enlightenment.” Their inclusion in the book is justified on the basis that they make “fundamental” biblical observations,” and in that capacity, make Spinoza’s “founding of biblical science understandable” (Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 52).

¹¹⁷ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 86.

¹¹⁸ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 86.

¹¹⁹ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 86.

belong to the *same plane of thought*.”¹²⁰ Rather than refuting the teaching of religion, Strauss suggests, Hobbes gives a psychological explanation for the source of religion. Hobbes thus “uncover[s] the origin from which the whole complex of fallacious thinking characteristic of religion arises.”¹²¹

Hobbes, Strauss argues, traces the root of natural religion to a natural curiosity innate to all humans. Strauss defines this natural curiosity as a striving for knowledge of causes.¹²² It is this curiosity that distinguishes humans from animals in their capacity to observe causal chains. The human capacity to contemplate causation is the “origin” of both religion and science.¹²³ Strauss thus argues that Hobbes perceives religion and science as two fundamentally “opposed *attitudes of mind*.”¹²⁴ Science and religion, however, are opposed attitudes of the *same mind*, in that both are expressions of the natural *curiosity* unique to the human animal. Science and religion are *opposed* workings of the mind, however, in that “[t]he opposition between science and religion is primarily an opposition not of *content* but of *method*, the opposition of *methodical* and *unmethodical* thought.”¹²⁵ Strauss thus concludes that for Hobbes science is “fundamentally” a “method.”¹²⁶

Like Epicurus, Strauss observes, Hobbes holds that religion arises from the *unmethodical* search for causes. Religion connects fortunate or unfortunate events to a

¹²⁰ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 86, emphasis added.

¹²¹ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 86.

¹²² Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 91. This understanding of natural reason is not entertained in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (1936). It is not until *What is Political Philosophy* (1959) that Strauss returns to discuss the natural ability humans have for causal thought.

¹²³ Religion and science “spring from the *same* root. Both presuppose thinking in terms of causes” (Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 90).

¹²⁴ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 87.

¹²⁵ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 87, 90, emphasis added.

¹²⁶ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 87, 90.

responsible “being.”¹²⁷ The reason for this, in Strauss’s account of Hobbes’s philosophy, is that pre-scientific humans, “living as they do in ever-present anxiety due to their lack of knowledge of the causal relations linking all things, assume as cause of good and evil fortune invisible powers, gods. The gods originate as offspring of human fear.”¹²⁸ Science, contrary to religion, explains, predicts and even produces future outcomes. In Strauss’s account, fear is thus either eased by science’s explanations and predictions and control of natural phenomena, or magnified by religion’s ignorance of the real cause behind these events, wrongly correlating them to gods or a God. It is in light of the search for a scientific method, Strauss suggests, that Hobbes’s critique of religion develops, making his criticism of religion epiphenomenal to the pursuit of a natural scientific method.¹²⁹ In contrast to the “prejudice” that motivates Epicurus’s critique of religion — religion produced false hope that thwarted the individualistic and apolitical striving for hedonistic tranquility — Strauss argues that the motivation behind Hobbes’s scientific critique of religion is his “analyzing and defining” science.¹³⁰ Having traced the origin of religion and science to human nature, Strauss proceeds with his analysis by pointing out that Hobbes separates the seeds of religion from the culture of religion—pagan and revealed religions.¹³¹

2. 1. 4. *The political aspect of Hobbes’s critique of religion*

It is first when Strauss begins to speak of the culture of religion that it becomes clear that he thinks that Hobbes’s critique of religion is not merely a by-product of natural science

¹²⁷ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 91.

¹²⁸ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 91.

¹²⁹ Strauss writes: “His critique of religion is not the object, but only the subsidiary result of analyzing and defining science” (Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 90).

¹³⁰ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 90. For Epicurus science is a more adequate way than religion to maximize pleasure (Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 87).

¹³¹ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 95.

or physics.¹³² Hobbes also approaches religion from the vantage point of political science. Strauss describes a distinction among the sciences, between natural science and political science in Hobbes's system of thought. The difference relates to their respective *method* and *aim*. The method of natural science or physics is "proof (deduction)," while political science relies on "experience."¹³³ Whereas Strauss makes little of this distinction in the Spinoza book, the methodological differentiation between *natural* science and *political* science becomes central to all Strauss's later work on Hobbes. The importance of the difference between natural science/physics and political science for Strauss at this time concerns their different aims: political science deals with "misery," while physics is concerned with "happiness."¹³⁴ I will return to this distinction in detail later. The pressing issue for Strauss is how Hobbes envisions his political science, as a response to both revealed religion and ancient moral philosophy. Let us look at the former first.

Strauss observes that Hobbes's claims that for the pagans "religion was part of politics," while for revealed religion, politics was part of religion.¹³⁵ More specifically, pagan cultures create and allow for religious practices that support the principle of rule, but are incapable of supporting the idea that the people would rebel against the earthly ruler/s based on religious belief. With the rise of revealed religions this changes: "Revelation, the second path opened to the culture of natural religion with its basis in fear and dream, makes politics a part of religion. It thus, if we understand Hobbes aright,

¹³² In respect to Hobbes's personal belief, Strauss points out that Hobbes's criticism of religion is limited to his scientific positivism and the quest for efficient causes: Hobbes is only concerned with what is "truly accessible to the finite mind" (Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 100).

¹³³ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 88.

¹³⁴ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 92-93.

¹³⁵ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 96.

reverses the natural relationship which was realized in paganism.”¹³⁶ Revealed religion introduced a split between spiritual and temporal power, Strauss explains:

This distinction, which in paganism was in principle avoided, and was introduced only by the Jews, originates in the belief in spirits, which is part and parcel of natural religion. This distinction entails that within the realms of the Christian kings there is yet another realm, a realm of ghosts and spirits that walk in darkness. Religion thus leads to the absurdity that every citizen within the realm must obey two powers. It is a threat to the stability of the state that some subjects obey the temporal power, which is visible, and on which plays ‘the fierce light which beats upon a throne,’ while other subjects maintain their allegiance to the spiritual power, in whose favor there speaks the greatest fear, the fear of spirits and of eternal damnation.¹³⁷

The wickedest effect of a belief in spirits is civil war, when it conflicts with the laws of the temporal Sovereign.

The response to (and role of) revealed religion in politics, Strauss argues, features differently in Hobbes’s theory of the state than Spinoza’s. While the two agree that true scientific causality must be separated from the faulty methodology of religion, Strauss argues that Spinoza “recognize[s] religion as an essential means for the maintenance of the state,” since commandments are observed by the “multitude *only* from the belief that the commandment is the directly ‘revealed’ word of God.”¹³⁸ In other words, Spinoza recognizes the necessity of having the civil laws identified with the revealed word of God. Strauss further suggests that Spinoza’s reliance on religious authority is predicated on his distinction between “wise men” and the “vulgar” many, who are incapable of a rational contract.¹³⁹ Strauss points out that no such intellectual separation is at play in Hobbes’s thought, and therefore, “there is no necessity for recourse to religion,” because

¹³⁶ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 96.

¹³⁷ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 96.

¹³⁸ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 101, emphasis added.

¹³⁹ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 101.

the political “bond” is rational.¹⁴⁰ Every individual has the same rational ability to enter a political covenant. Hobbes’s political contract is independent of religion; it is grounded in human rationality alone. The concept of sovereignty that Hobbes introduces is designed through the rational agreement of all parties to the contract to obey an absolute Sovereign. Individuals do not need to be shepherded into the commonwealth by divine command because reason alone is sufficient to persuade them of the benefits of belonging to a state.¹⁴¹

Strauss argues that it is the fear of a violent death that is the affective ground for the individual’s rational conduct. It is the fear that arises from the anticipation of a violent death in a state of nature — an anarchic state without a Sovereign power or law, in which the weakest individual can kill the strongest — that convinces all individuals to enter a social contract. “Reason” in Hobbes’s account, Strauss writes, is the “provident outlook on the future.”¹⁴² The rational contract is formed because individuals fear a possible violent death. Fear is thus intimately connected with reason. Once the covenant is formed, Strauss argues, the citizens “honor” the contract because, all things considered, the cost of breaking the contract (the return to the state of nature) is always greater than the disadvantages of subjecting oneself to the authority of an absolute ruler.

Despite Hobbes’s case that each individual has a natural capacity for rational reflection and conduct, revealed religion remained *the* political issue of his time. Whereas some citizens obey temporal powers, “other subjects maintain their allegiance to the spiritual power, in whose favor there speaks the greatest fear, the fear of spirits and of

¹⁴⁰ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 101.

¹⁴¹ I am in debt to Ross Rudolph for this formulation, December 2015.

¹⁴² Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 89.

eternal damnation.”¹⁴³ The problem Hobbes faced was that religion was more seductive than science. Far too many were still moved by fear of invisible spirits and eternal damnation. Far too many thus acted contrary to their rational self-interest, i.e., were not affected by the fear of violent death, and were thus unconvinced by Hobbes’s natural scientific refutation of spirits and eternal damnation. To “counter” the remaining “threat, contained in revealed religion, to public peace,” Strauss points out that Hobbes also engages in a non-scientific critique (grounded in neither physics, nor political science) of Christianity.¹⁴⁴ The aim of Hobbes’s political exegesis of the Bible is to show that “the distinction between the spiritual and the temporal power is absurd.”¹⁴⁵ To convince citizens to obey the corporeal Sovereign only, Strauss points out that Hobbes is the first to separate the clergy’s teaching from the bible and argue that the true teaching of the bible is that “obedience must be given to temporal powers.”¹⁴⁶ Hobbes then, Strauss notes, moves on to discuss the authority of the scripture as well; or more precisely, Hobbes “sets out to demonstrate that the authority of Scripture is grounded not in Scripture itself, but exclusively in the command given by the temporal power, and is dependent on the temporal power.”¹⁴⁷ It is with the question of which authors of the bible hold most authority that Strauss ends the chapter on Hobbes. He notes that Hobbes, unlike Spinoza, stresses the authority of the scripture prior to the story of Moses. The backhanded reason for this is to rally support for his radical proposal that the right to rule resides in the social contract, and not in paternal authority or a divine right of

¹⁴³ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 96.

¹⁴⁴ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 96.

¹⁴⁵ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 96.

¹⁴⁶ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 102.

¹⁴⁷ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 102.

succession.¹⁴⁸

It is thus not only due to Hobbes's quest for a natural scientific method, but also due to his "political preoccupation" that he wrestles with religion.¹⁴⁹ Unlike Spinoza, in Strauss's account, Hobbes looks at revealed religion as a historically temporary problem—a problem that would go away with the success of the enlightenment: "Only when the fear of spirits is well and truly expelled from men's mind is peace assured, as well as the loyalty of the citizen to his country."¹⁵⁰ Spinoza, on the other hand, Strauss argues, holds that the general populous will never abide by a purely rational political contract because there is an inescapable difference between the rational capacity of the wise few and the many. Religious commands will always be required to assure obedience among the general population. The difference between Spinoza and Hobbes over the role of religion in politics, in the final analysis, thus boils down to their view of human nature.

Judging from Strauss's 1928 Zionist article on Freud, Strauss seems to have arrived, in the process of completing his Spinoza book, on the side of Hobbes's case for a purely rational basis for a political contract, or at least for the formation of a Jewish state. During the 1920s, Strauss wavered between the position that the political community needed religion (in order to form a national identity and as a principle for obedience) and his agreement with Hobbes's that, due to secularization, a rational and atheistic political proposal was possible. Strauss openly atheistic proposal in 1928 turned out to be temporary: Tanguay has shown that Strauss in his study of Maimonides and other Jewish and Arabic mediaeval enlightenment thinkers in the 1930s found a solution that could solve the contradiction between a rational and atheistic position and the need for religion.

¹⁴⁸ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 104.

¹⁴⁹ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 104.

¹⁵⁰ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 96.

As I will return to in Chapter four, by the late 1930s, Strauss seems to have adopted in part Spinoza's position that belief is required for social and moral cohesion and order for the populous, and that the atheistic rational view must be kept a secret from the many. But that is to jump ahead. Let us stay with his analysis of Hobbes for now. Having outlined the scientific and political dimension of Hobbes's philosophy in relation to religion, Strauss further investigates Hobbes's conception of human nature and its relation to revealed religion and science. What informs this discussion is Strauss's attempt to read a moral dimension into Hobbes's state of nature. Unlike Spinoza, who equates right to might and does not make a moral distinction between human actions in the state of nature, Strauss argues that Hobbes connects right with acts oriented at self-preservation only.

2. 1. 5. *Morality and the striving behind the quest for ever more power over others*

The project of reading a moral distinction into Hobbes's state of nature informs all of Strauss's studies of Hobbes and, as we shall see in the next chapter, becomes the key aspect of his understanding of liberalism. Strauss states that the "essential content of Hobbes's *moral philosophy* is the peaceable attitude."¹⁵¹ Hobbes, he argues, defines the "essence of man" as being concerned with "self-preservation."¹⁵² Reason is equated with the individual's self-preservation, and the *raison d'être* of the state is "peace and security."¹⁵³ The two most important laws of nature (rational precepts), Strauss argues, are the stipulation that individuals should seek peace and the stipulation that the contract should be honored. The contract is the rational agreement by which individuals transfer

¹⁵¹ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 230, emphasis added.

¹⁵² Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 230.

¹⁵³ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 230.

their natural right or liberty in the state of nature to a Sovereign in order to secure peace. Based on this, Strauss argues, contrary to Hobbes's own assertion that it is the agreement between parties to the social contract (the obligation owed to all other contracting parties) and the Sovereign's command that distinguishes "justice" from "injustice," that Hobbes conceives of a moral distinction at play already in the state of nature.¹⁵⁴ Strauss thus opposes the idea that Hobbes's natural right is disconnected from morality, and suggests instead that the natural right of individuals in the state of nature is limited to rational actions in accord with self-preservation:

[N]atural right, as seen by Hobbes, is truly adapted to the founding of right and the State: it is itself a legal concept. When he teaches that justice and injustice, and right and wrong, have no place in the state of nature, he is saying neither more nor less than that *on the basis* of natural right as of a reasonable and intelligible claim, every man may, as he thinks fit, use all means for preserving his life, that every man may *rightfully* apply any act to any other. The difference in value between damage done to another 'in accord with right reason,' i.e., in self-defense, and such damage done 'for the sake of vainglory and a false estimate of power' — the difference in value between the root of justice and the root of injustice — is not canceled by the authorization, founded in natural right, to do anything whatsoever to anyone whomsoever. Rather than being canceled, it is asserted.¹⁵⁵

Strauss here accounts for the two different motivations of individuals who deliberately try to harm each other in the state of nature, drawing a distinction between unjust and just behavior in the state of nature despite the fact that Hobbes explicitly denies that such is the case. How exactly does Strauss make his case?

As we saw in the passage quoted above, Strauss identifies two strivings behind the war of all against all in the state of nature: (i) the vain striving for reputation and (ii) the rational striving for self-preservation. Both strivings have their "foundation in the

¹⁵⁴ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 233.

¹⁵⁵ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 233.

striving after pleasure.”¹⁵⁶ To strive for something, however, is not the same as actually obtaining the thing that is desired: attainment depends on one’s power. Hobbes defines power as the “sum total” of the “means at the disposal.”¹⁵⁷ However, to this initial *objective* definition of power, Strauss adds a *relational* definition of power: “in any conflict between two human beings for the same good, the excess power of one contestant over the other is decisive, that *excess* is power simply.”¹⁵⁸ Not the sum total, but the remaining sum or “excess” power after one individual’s means are subtracted from another’s, is power simply. The definition of power as excess is representative of the condition in which individuals in the state of nature are at war with one another. It is through his interpretation of why individuals are in competition with one another in the first place that Strauss connects the two different strivings for ever more power over others in the state of nature to a moral distinction between justice and injustice.

2. 1. 6. *The striving for reputation and the root of revealed religion*

The source behind the first will for ever-more power over others in the state of nature, Strauss writes, is an “irrational striving” for “honor,” “reputation,” “fame,” and is captured by one term: “*vanity*.”¹⁵⁹ The vain striving for reputation is met by the attainment of “excess” power. The reason for this it that the “[r]ecognition of this *excess* or superiority [of power] by others is called honor.”¹⁶⁰ Thus the desired end — the striving for reputation/honor — is inseparable from the means (the power) to attain it.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 88.

¹⁵⁷ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 88.

¹⁵⁸ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 88-89, emphasis added.

¹⁵⁹ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 89, emphasis added.

¹⁶⁰ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 89.

¹⁶¹ In striving for reputation, the means (the “attainment” of power and recognition) are the end. It is not the object that gratifies one’s desire, it is the attainment of the object, “either as mean to power, or to the recognition of one’s power” (Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 89).

This, Strauss argued, is a “reversal” of a “natural relationship” between means and ends, in that it is the power itself that brings happiness; power is no longer a means to an end (happiness) but has been transformed into the end itself, that which it was meant to attain. The end has thus become the perpetuation of power for the sake of reputation *qua* (excess) power. Acquired reputation/honour is the excess power one holds over another individual, and therefore the striving for reputation is always for power *over others*. It is thus not because the state of nature is a zero-sum game (i.e., resources are scarce and therefore competed for) that every individual incessantly seeks for ever more power over others; rather, the war of all against all is the result of the fact that vain individuals must obtain more power than their competitors for their vanity to be satisfied.

To make the case that there exists a moral distinction in the state of nature despite Hobbes’s explicit statement to the contrary, Strauss argues that the striving for reputation is a deviation from the quest for *material* goods, since the recognition of a person’s excess power is an *immaterial* object of desire. Using Hobbes’s materialism as the standard, Strauss argues that vanity is an “illegitimate” striving for power since it provided the means to *illusory* “pleasures of the mind.”¹⁶² Strauss contrasts the striving for “immaterial” or “non-sensual” objects to satisfy *immaterial* “pleasures of the mind,” on one hand, with the second motivation behind the incessant striving for power over others, on the other: the “*rational*” striving for power as such, in which power remains a legitimate means to attain a “*material*” or “sensual good” for the pleasure of the body.¹⁶³ The distinction between a *legitimate* and *illegitimate* striving in Strauss’s discussion depends on whether the pleasure attained was material (body) or immaterial (mind), as

¹⁶² Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 89.

¹⁶³ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 88-90, emphasis added.

well as on the ontological status of the object desired. Strauss then ties this materialism to reason. Reason is defined as that which is concerned with bodily self-preservation: what is rational is what preserves life. In accord with this aim, vanity or the striving for reputation is thus contrary to reason since it is immaterial, not life enhancing, and results in a war of all against all. For this reason, Strauss states: “Reason does not justify, but indeed refutes, all striving after reputation, honor, fame”¹⁶⁴

Importantly, Strauss points out that Hobbes also ties vanity to the source of revealed religion. Vanity manifests itself as *gloriatio* [glory]: “*Gloriatio* is the basis of prophecy, of the claim to revelation.”¹⁶⁵ Revealed religion is thus the result of curiosity, fear and dreams, infused by vanity: one’s illusion of attracting the attention of spirits.¹⁶⁶ Since vanity is at the root of revealed religion (next to natural reason, fear and dreams) Strauss argues: “Religion is rejected [by Hobbes] as a creation of vanity, desire for status and reputation, overestimation of one’s own power, the tendency to over-tender self-assessment.”¹⁶⁷ So what about the rational desire to self-preservation?

2. 1. 7. *Rational striving for power as such and the root of physical science*

There are two rational strivings, Strauss suggests, or, two “justified” “determinants of willing”: (i) the rational desire for “domination over things” or “power as such,” of which natural science is an expression, and (ii) the “desire for *security*,” of which political science is an expression.¹⁶⁸ Physics (i.e., natural science), he wrote, is ultimately concerned with *happiness* (produce happiness through the cultivation of nature).¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁴ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 89.

¹⁶⁵ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 97.

¹⁶⁶ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 96-97.

¹⁶⁷ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 95.

¹⁶⁸ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 88, 94-95, emphasis added.

¹⁶⁹ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 88.

Political science is ultimately concerned with *misery* (as to overcome the state of nature). Natural science or physics “serves man’s dominion over things”, while political science serves peace.¹⁷⁰

Strauss explains that, for Hobbes, “happiness” “consists in the *limitless* increase of power over men and over things.”¹⁷¹ In Hobbes’s moral philosophy, Strauss points out that unlike his ancient predecessors, “there is no highest good, no final goal for desire, for life itself is desiring. But there remains nevertheless, a *primary* good, a *conditio sine qua non* of all other goods: life, bare life itself.”¹⁷² The “primary” good is thus to be alive. “The work of reason justifies the continuing process of advancing from one desire to the next, from attainment of the one object desired to that of the next object desired, with a view to the fact that man strives not only toward the unique pleasure of the moment, but toward ensuring enjoyment in the future.”¹⁷³ The *rational* striving is to ensure future material enjoyment. To obtain present and future “material good” excess power is required; and thus, Strauss argues, just like the illegitimate vain striving for reputation, “[t]he legitimate striving after pleasure is [also] sublated into striving after [excess] power.”¹⁷⁴

What Strauss refers to as the striving for power as such was the *legitimate* striving for ever more power over others.¹⁷⁵ It is impossible, Strauss further notes, to distinguish between self-defense and aggression in the state of nature, since in a competitive situation goods are “maintained only through the acquisition of more power.”¹⁷⁶ “Reason, the

¹⁷⁰ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 94.

¹⁷¹ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 88.

¹⁷² Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 92.

¹⁷³ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 89.

¹⁷⁴ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 90.

¹⁷⁵ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 89-90.

¹⁷⁷ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 89, emphasis added.

provident *outlook on the future* thus justifies the striving after power, possession, gain, wealth, since these provide the means to gratify the underlying desire for the pleasures of the senses,” which procures the “comfort and convenience of life.”¹⁷⁷ It is out of this striving, Strauss argues, that natural or physical *science* grows. For the decisive means to acquire the comfort and convenience of life is physics.¹⁷⁸ Physical science thus exists “for the sake of power”: that is, as a vehicle to realize a comfortable life through the scientific domination of nature, and to do that requires (excess) power. Yet, unlike in the case of vanity, the rational quest for excess power does not become the end in-itself but remains a means to an end (that of material survival and comfort).

The vain *immaterial* striving for reputation is considered illegitimate from the viewpoint of the rational striving for ever greater power, whose end is to attain future *material* goods for the maintenance of life. Vanity is unjustified striving, since the quest for reputation is a striving for power over others and thus leads to the greatest of all evils — violent death (the premature end of life). But so too does the rational and scientific striving after power. Individuals who act to secure their self-preservation (in accord with reason) are forced to enter into in competition with each other over scarce resources. It is impossible to distinguish between self-defense and aggression in the state of nature, since in a competitive situation goods are “maintained only through the acquisition of more power.”¹⁷⁹ The rational “striving after power of enjoyment of things turns into striving after power over other men”, which, just like the vain striving for excess power, leads to war against all.¹⁸⁰ Perhaps it is helpful to think of the situation as an inverted invisible

¹⁷⁷ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 89, emphasis added.

¹⁷⁸ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 92.

¹⁷⁹ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 89.

¹⁸⁰ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 94.

hand: while in Adam Smith's conception, the aggregated self-interested actions of individuals result in the unintended overall good of the community, the opposite is the result in Hobbes's state of nature: the aggregated result from individuals acting according to their rational self-interest is a war of all against all. Unchecked rational striving undoes its life-enhancing purpose, and thus the "distinction between [rational] striving after power and [irrational] striving after reputation loses its importance."¹⁸¹ Science can be used to life-enhancing ends, but if left to its own devices, the natural scientific pursuit — the limitless quest for ever more power (the domination over both things and individuals) — results in a war against all.¹⁸²

The rational striving to maintain present and future material goods "is however entirely illusory, as it leads to the war of all against all, in other words to a state in which the preservation of life and health becomes impossible."¹⁸³ Here, Strauss seems to suggest that both vanity and the rational striving for limitless power as such are illegitimate, since they both lead to a violent death. If this is the case, it is not the type of ontic *source* (bodily/material or mind/immaterial) or the ontic quality of the *object* desired (material or illusory/immaterial), or whether or not the striving is *rational* or *irrational* motivated, but the *end* result that differentiates justified from *unjustified* striving. Nevertheless, Strauss maintains that there is a moral distinction between rational and irrational striving in the state of nature: "But that Hobbes even at this juncture still sees the root of evil in the striving after reputation is shown plainly enough by his opposing the due evaluation of one's own power, reason, desire for security, fear of death

¹⁸¹ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 92.

¹⁸² Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 94.

¹⁸³ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 234.

by violence to the *inanis gloria et falsa virium aestimatio*.”¹⁸⁴ The source of all just acts in accordance with self-preservation is rational; the false estimation of one’s power is not.

Based on this definition, Strauss suggests that the “natural right” is “the rational human behavior in the state of nature,” while the striving for reputation is not a “natural right” because it is “contra-rational.”¹⁸⁵ How then does Strauss come to argue that Hobbes secures self-preservation in accord with reason?

For this cause, it is a command of right reason to seek peace. And this is the fundamental ‘law of nature’ as distinct from the right of nature. The meaning of this distinction is that natural right is the expression of human behavior in accord with reason in the state of nature, while the laws of nature are the expression of the conditions which underlie the transformation (required by reason) of the state of nature into the civilized state.¹⁸⁶

Strauss here suggests that both natural right and the law of nature are in accord with reason, but in the state of nature the natural right or rational pursuit for ever more power over others leads to a state of war, while the behavior in accordance with the rational law or command of nature (to seek peace) results in a social contract (peace) in which individual self-preservation is secured. Individuals in the state of nature, Strauss then explains, surrender their striving for excess power and to act in accordance with the rational precepts that secure life due to the “desire for security,” their “fear of violent death,” and “through regard of the fragility of the human body.”¹⁸⁷

2. 1. 8. *Political science: the striving for security of life and fear of violent death*

It is with the striving for security that Hobbes’s political science enters the discussion. The aim of Hobbes’s “civic” philosophy is *peace* — which ultimately concerns the

¹⁸⁴ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 94.

¹⁸⁵ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 230.

¹⁸⁶ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 234.

¹⁸⁷ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 95.

maintenance of the primary good or “bare life,” not theory *per se*; and it is for this reason that Strauss argued Hobbes refers to political science as anthropology.¹⁸⁸ While physics was concerned with the primary good — namely, human survival — Strauss argues that political science is concerned with the primary evil: death by violence.¹⁸⁹ Given the fact that humans are mortals (i.e., that death is inevitable) and that Hobbes tells his readers that death is at times preferable over misery, Strauss argued, it is not death *per se* that constitutes the greatest misery; rather, it is the violent death in “pain” in particular.¹⁹⁰

The emphasis is not on the sensation of *pain* (as in a *painful* “violent death”); instead, Strauss pointed out that for Hobbes “expectation of future evil is called fear.”¹⁹¹ The point is that a violent (painful) death is a *premature* death. A violent death is considered the greatest of evils since it ends life prematurely and with that the continuous motion of attaining pleasure. Fear so understood requires a rational calculation. Outside of the person’s actual death, only the fear of a violent death halts the limitless striving for domination over others. In the state of nature *everyone* fears violent death since the “constitution of the human body is so frail, that even the weakest man may kill the strongest, and that easily.”¹⁹² The foundational covenant of Hobbes’s artificial state is prompted by the universal fear that arises when the weakest is able to kill the strongest with ease. Fear of violent death, Strauss argues, “sublates” both vanity and the rational natural right to act in whatever way is necessary to survive, into the first law of natural— to seek peace:

¹⁸⁸ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 88, 92, 94-95, 229-231. Strauss argues that peace provides the conditions of pursuing physical science in the first place.

¹⁸⁹ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 92.

¹⁹⁰ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 92-93.

¹⁹¹ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 93.

¹⁹² Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 93.

In the final instance what is of primary concern is ensuring the continuance of life in the sense of ensuring defense against other men. Concern with self-protection is the fundamental consideration, the one must be fully in accord with the human situation. This is the origin of the distinction made between (moral) good and (moral) evil. The fear of death, the fear of death by violence, is the source of all right, the primary basis of natural right.¹⁹³

The vain striving for excess power over others in the state of nature, Strauss argues, “characterizes the arrogant man,” while the recognition of *equal* vulnerability and hence *fear*, “characterizes the modest man.”¹⁹⁴ Mutual fear of a violent death is the ground for “moderate” reasoning, which Strauss in his 1936 book on Hobbes, defines as the bourgeois consciousness. But this discussion is for the next chapter. For now, let me conclude this first part with the key insight from Strauss’s first text on Hobbes that came to inform his exchange with Schmitt.

Strauss’s Hobbes conceives of the striving for ever more power over others and things in the state of nature as at once an irrational, *vain* striving for excess power, and a rational striving for power as such to secure future sensual goods. When the two strivings are left unchecked, as they are in the state of nature, a war of all against all results, in which every individual runs the risk of a violent death at the hands of others. A third desire, the striving for security, or inversely expressed as the aversion or fear of a violent death, brings all individuals to reason. Instrumental rationality leads individuals to follow the first rational law of nature: to seek peace. Peace is kept by honoring the contract under all circumstances, as postulated by the third law of nature. From the mutual fear of a violent death, individuals thus form a social contract to secure their long-term interest. The social contract is thus formed to guarantee self-preservation. As we shall now see,

¹⁹³ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 93.

¹⁹⁴ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 93. A few years later, in “Notes on Hobbes”, Strauss argues that “arrogant man” is the “aristocratic man”, and the “modest man” is the “bourgeois man.”

turning to Strauss's engagement with Schmitt, it is upon his argument that Hobbes attached an individual right to self-preservation in the state of nature, and through which, that Strauss develops his claim that Hobbes is the founder of a liberal morality and liberal civilization. In so doing, Strauss shifts from identifying the origin of liberalism in Christianity to finding it in Hobbes. We shall see that in his engagement with Schmitt, he is less concerned with the Zionist project, than with the Weimar Republic at the time, and liberalism in general, and the prospect of an authoritarian alternative. Yet, the insights from his search for a foundation of a Jewish nation-state will inform his criticism of Schmitt's conception of the political.

Part II

2. 2. 1. *Schmitt's concept of the political*

Strauss returned to Hobbes in “Notes on Schmitt,” written April-May 1932. Here, Strauss identifies Schmitt as a right-wing authoritarian critic of liberalism. Strauss’s main objective in this review-essay is to devise a conception of the political beyond a liberal horizon, from which all that is liberal has been stripped.¹⁹⁵ At the beginning of his review, Strauss restates Schmitt’s ambiguous proposition in *The Concept of the Political*: “the concept of the state presupposed the concept of the political.”¹⁹⁶ Strauss then asks “Against what *opponent* does the political emerge as the basis of the state?”¹⁹⁷ The answer is liberalism. Liberalism is, for Strauss, the “movement” in which the spirit of our modern age, characterized by “neutralization and depoliticization” has “gained its greatest efficacy.”¹⁹⁸ Liberalism has put the state into question insofar as “liberalism is characterized precisely by the *negation* of the political.”¹⁹⁹ Why?

For Schmitt, in Strauss’s understanding, the *procedural* processes of a liberal, constitutional, representative-democratic state (i.e., the separation of power into a representative legislative branch that make laws after deliberation and vote, an elected executive that implements these laws and governs, and an independent judiciary which adjudicates private and public disputes) such as the Weimar Republic are intended to neutralize *substantive* political differences, so as to assure “agreement and peace at all

¹⁹⁵ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 119.

¹⁹⁶ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 91.

¹⁹⁷ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 92.

¹⁹⁸ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 92.

¹⁹⁹ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 92.

costs.”²⁰⁰ The overall purpose of this formal procedure is to guarantee the shared interest of the constituents: security of life and prosperous living, for which end international cooperation and trade are seen as instruments to increase the wealth of the nation. Opposing the liberal state’s neutralization and de-politicization of the political, Schmitt argues that the political is defined by a “friend and enemy” distinction, which amounts to an *insurmountable difference* between groups — indiscriminately arising from any type of human disagreement — over which the opponents are willing to engage in a life-and-death struggle.²⁰¹ The political antithesis between dissociated political associations expresses an existential enmity between groups that no arbitration, hearing, subcommittee recommendation, parliamentary debate, vote, court room ruling, peace-treaty or alliance can neutralize, but is only potentially resolved in a violent conflict that demands of the individual the *decision* and *readiness* to sacrifice his or her life when the group’s “existence” is threatened.²⁰²

From the outset of the 1930s, in the wake of the Great Depression, political differences were not neutralized and were not prevented from assuming increasingly anti- and extra-parliamentary expressions. The two anti-parliamentarian political parties, the National Socialist Workers Party (NSDAP) and the Communist Political Party (KPD), had won a decisive share of the popular vote in the federal elections of 1930 and 1932. Party politics were hardly confined to the institutions of the state, as the paramilitary group of the Nazis, the SA (*Sturmabteilung*), and that of the Communists, the RFB (*Roter Frontkämpferbund*), violently clashed in the streets. The Weimar constitution allowed the administration of the Chancellor to govern through presidential emergency decrees

²⁰⁰ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 114.

²⁰¹ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 94, 96, 111.

²⁰² Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 93.

without prior approval from the legislative body. Presidential governing became the order of the day, beginning with the appointment of Heinrich Brüning as Chancellor on March 29, 1930. It was against this backdrop that Strauss wrote his review of Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*, in which he, like Schmitt, held that "liberalism" had failed in Germany.

Published in August-September of 1932, "Notes on Schmitt" was Strauss's last publication before he left Germany for Paris, less than a year before the Nazis seized full control of the federal state under the leadership of Hitler, and introduced "legal and extra-legal anti-Semitic actions [that] rendered him [Strauss], for all practical purposes, an exile."²⁰³ Since political liberalism had "failed" in Germany — though to speak of "political" liberalism or a liberal "state" is for Schmitt, as for Strauss, a contradiction in terms — in his "Notes on Schmitt," Strauss argues that the alternative state, the unliberal state, "can be understood only from the position of the *political*."²⁰⁴

But there are problems with Schmitt's concept of the political, Strauss argues. Schmitt fails to free the concept from its liberal trappings, and thus remains within the

²⁰³ Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 54. Strauss left Germany for Paris on a Rockefeller Fellowship in the fall of 1932, "[a]fter Schmitt personally saw to the publication of Strauss's commentary on his own *Concept of the Political*, he wrote a strong letter of recommendation on behalf of Strauss, successfully securing a fellowship for him to conduct research abroad on Hobbes" (Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 56). According to Meier, Schmitt's letter was based on a draft of the never completed 1931-32 *Planned book on Hobbes* (Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, ix). Letters by Cassirer and Guttmann did also accompany the application (Green, *Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, 4). In a letter to Schmitt from Paris on July 10, 1933, Strauss wrote: "I would like to inform you that the Rockefeller Fellowship, which I essentially owe to your evaluation of the first part (submitted to you) of my studies on Hobbes, has now been awarded to me for a second year" (The letter is translated in Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 128). The extension that began October 3, 1933, enabled Strauss to continue his study of Hobbes in London and Cambridge. On April 26, 1934, John. V. Van Sickle (at the European Office, Paris, of the Rockefeller foundation) informed Strauss that the fellowship had not been extended for an additional third year (Leo Strauss Papers [Box 3, Folder 8] Special Collection Research Center, University of Chicago Library). Instead, as R. H. Tawney notes in a letter dated February 20, 1936, "Cambridge gave him [Strauss] a studentship for two years [1934-36], which is now expiring" Leo Strauss Papers [Box 3, Folder 14] Special Collection Research Center, University of Chicago Library).

²⁰⁴ Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 92, emphasis added.

“horizon of liberalism.”²⁰⁵ Schmitt, according to Strauss, devises his concept of the political *polemically*, and as such, in dialectical opposition to liberalism, it is the *relation* between the two — rather than their *difference* — that appears decisive. It is a defect that Strauss set out to correct. I follow Meier in arguing that Strauss demonstrates how the difference between liberalism and Schmitt’s conception of the political dissolves in two ways. As I will unpack below, Strauss suggests that Schmitt’s definition of the political is trapped in a liberal worldview of thinking about all aspects of human life as different provinces of culture. For purpose of clarity, I will refer to this dimension of Strauss understanding of liberalism as the *liberal thought horizon*. When Strauss extricates Schmitt’s political ontology from the liberal thought horizon, by arguing that the deadly enmity between friend and enemy is what makes the political *authoritative* in relation to the other domains of culture, the concept of the political still remains trapped in liberal morality, or what I will call for clarity, the *liberal moral horizon*. The reason for this, Strauss argues, is that Schmitt’s existential conception of the political as defined by the orientation towards the “*readiness to die*” is only the inverse of the liberal moral horizon as defined by an overarching interest in security of *life*, and which Hobbes, according to Strauss in *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, had negatively and affectively expressed as the avoidance of *violent death*.²⁰⁶

To get out of the liberal moral entrapment, Meier has argued that Strauss presents two potential alternative *unliberal* metaphysical grounds for the political: first, a *transcendental* foundation that Strauss argues covertly grounds Schmitt’s political distinction between friend and enemy. It is this hidden metaphysical “center” of

²⁰⁵ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 119.

²⁰⁶ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 100.

Schmitt's thought, Meier suggests, which makes Schmitt a political theologian.²⁰⁷ However, I am not fully convinced by Meier's argument that Strauss detects a transcendental foundation behind Schmitt's conception of the political. For one, as we shall see, by replacing the Hobbesian existential horizon of violent death with religious faith, the notion of a political-theological conception of the political seems to fall back into the liberal thought horizon insofar as the deadly enmity no longer defines the political as authoritative. This brings us to the second unliberal metaphysical ground for the political; namely, *human nature*, which Strauss advances as his own (metaphysical) ground. Strauss attempts to shift from Schmitt's immanent/anti-metaphysical/groundless conception of the political (or according to Meier, hidden providence, or "metaphysical") to the plane of human nature by turning to Hobbes; more precisely, by arguing that Schmitt's political antagonism is in essence *analogous* with the natural antagonism found in Hobbes's state of nature. It is toward human nature in the state of nature that Strauss looks for an unliberal morality as the foundation for the political and a non-liberal state.

2. 2. 2. *The liberal thought horizon*

The problem Schmitt faced in his polemical attack on liberalism, Strauss argues, is that although political liberalism in Germany had been largely defeated, the "systematic of liberal thought" remained persistent and that the liberal worldview remained total and pervasive.²⁰⁸ Meier shows that Strauss, in praising Schmitt as being "wholly alone," not only in his awareness of this difficulty, but also in formulating the task that lay ahead, is also alerting him to his shortcomings. Strauss notes that Schmitt seeks "to replace the 'astonishingly consistent systematics of liberal *thought*' by 'another system', namely, 'a

²⁰⁷ See Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, xiv-xv.

²⁰⁸ Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 119; see also Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 11.

system that does not negate the political but brings it into recognition.”²⁰⁹ Yet, since the “systematics of liberal thought’ has ‘still not been replaced in Europe today by any other system,’ it is to be expected that he [Schmitt], too, will be compelled to make use of elements of liberal thought in the presentation of his views.”²¹⁰ And thus, for Strauss, Schmitt’s conception of the political remains within the liberal thought horizon. How exactly?

Strauss first addresses liberalism in respect to the dominance of “liberal thought” — exemplified by the work of Strauss’s former professor at the University of Marburg, Paul Natorp — which Strauss defines as a “philosophy of culture,” in which the genus of culture encompasses “the totality” of “human thought” and action,” divided into “provinces of culture,” such as the “aesthetic,” the “moral,” and the “economic.”²¹¹ Strauss thus treats liberalism as more than a species of political thought, seeing it instead as a worldview encompassing the whole of social life. Like a Nietzschean horizon, this whole is all pervasive and Schmitt cannot avoid thinking within its parameters. These various provinces of culture are defined as relatively “autonomous” from one another, each having its own criteria of assessment.²¹² The “ultimate” distinction in the moral domain is “good and evil;” in the aesthetic domain it is “beautiful and ugly;” in the economic domain it “useful and harmful.”²¹³ The political, according to Schmitt’s classification, is located as a species alongside the others and given its own criterion: the opposition between “friend” and “enemy.”²¹⁴ So defined, the concept of the political

²⁰⁹ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 93; see also Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 18.

²¹⁰ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 93.

²¹¹ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 94-95.

²¹² Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 97.

²¹³ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 94.

²¹⁴ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 94.

remains within the liberal *thought* horizon, insofar as the political remains a species of culture. Having pointed out this conceptual short-coming, Strauss is ready to offer Schmitt a hand out of the liberal entrapment, as Meier points out, by “pay[ing] more attention to what distinguishes Schmitt from the prevailing view than to the respect in which he merely follows the prevailing view.”²¹⁵

That which distinguished Schmitt’s view from the prevailing view lies not in an exhaustive account of the political, Strauss argues, but in what is specific to the political.²¹⁶ The “*criterion*” for Schmitt’s concept of the political, Strauss argues, is the “distinction between friend and enemy,” and the “*essence*,” or what is “specific” to the concept of the political, is that the enmity between friend and enemy is potentially deadly, by being oriented towards the exceptional state of emergency, “war,” in which there is a “real possibility of *physical killing*.”²¹⁷ It is this essence that locates the political beyond the liberal thought horizon insofar as the political antagonism potentially could *arise* out of any type of conflict within an autonomous domains of culture, when the enmity between two groups is *intensified* to the degree that it calls for the negation of the other group’s existence and is thus “total.”²¹⁸ In this way — when the opponents’ readiness to kill and be killed defines a disagreement within any domain — the political becomes “authoritative”: it overrules any specific criterion, and as such, Strauss argues, is a “fundamental” or “existential” category rather than a “relatively independent domain” alongside others.²¹⁹ The political is *immanently* caused; it is the *existential* threat — the willingness to kill and die — posed by the distinction between enemy and friend that

²¹⁵ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 93; see also Meier, the *Hidden Dialogue*, 11.

²¹⁶ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 94.

²¹⁷ Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 6, 13, 16; Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 94, 97.

²¹⁸ See Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 16, 22-23; Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt*, 68-69.

²¹⁹ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 97.

defines the political.²²⁰

When cast as authoritative in Strauss's understanding, Schmitt's concept of the political transcends the horizon of liberal *thought*, but, in so doing, Strauss argues, remains within the liberal *moral* horizon. In Meier's words, its "orientation" to *death*, which is the inverse of liberalism's "orientation" to *life* in that neither of the two is qualified with respect to the question of the "right life," or what it is that "ultimately matters for man."²²¹ And therefore the affirmation of the political as such is the "affirmation of fighting as such, wholly irrespective of *what* is being fought *for*."²²² From within this view of the political as immanent, "he who affirms the political as such respects and tolerates all '*serious*' convictions, that is, all decisions oriented to the real possibility of *war*."²²³ Schmitt's immanent definition of the political is thus inverted liberalism in that it replaces a liberal preference for life, for "peace" as secured by the procedural "legal order," with an "orientation" towards violent death, towards "the real possibility of *war*."²²⁴ So defined, the concept of the political remains within the liberal *moral* horizon. Since "the affirmation of the political as such proves to be a liberalism with the opposite polarity," Strauss argues that Schmitt "remains trapped in the view that

²²⁰ Schmitt's concept of political adheres to an immanent causation i.e., the cause exists only in its effects; any antagonism becomes political as soon as it is a lethal antagonism. In contrast, Strauss in his writing on Hobbes, assigns a transitive cause — in opposition to Spinoza's anti-Platonic and immanent causality — for the rise of the antagonism in the state of nature qua political.

²²¹ Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 41-43, and Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 113-117.

²²² Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 62; Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 116.

²²³ Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 117. Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 117. Note here the correspondence to Strauss's attempt in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* to read a moral dimension into Hobbes's state of nature: Strauss argues that Hobbes draw a moral distinction between impermissible and permissible strivings, first in accordance with Hobbes's metaphysical materialism, between the ontic natures ("material" and "immaterial") of the object desire and the root of the individual's desire (i.e. "counter-rational" vanity vs. the "rational" or the "scientific" striving for power). In the last instance, the moral horizon of the state of nature, however, appears to be determined by violent death, which, in turn, collapses the moral distinction between "vanity" and the scientific or defensive striving for "power as such", since both, when unchecked, result in "violent death".

²²⁴ Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 117.

he is attacking.”²²⁵ The “affirmation” of the political as such, Meier argues, disregards an *unliberal* morality, while the answer to the question of a “right life” qualitatively identifies *what* is being fought over, and above all, the materiality of life.²²⁶ So what makes a *right* life; or in other words, what makes something worth killing for beside survival?

2.2.3. *Political theology; the transcendental ground*

It is in answer to the question of a moral principle that transcend life and death that Meier suggests Strauss reveals in Schmitt's texts a hidden religious morality. Meier argues that in “Notes on Schmitt”, Strauss restores an *unliberal morality* (against a “neutral” conception of friend and enemy as empty signifiers that can assume any referents) to Schmitt’s concept of the political by revealing that it does indeed matter for Schmitt *who* the enemy is and *what* is “being fought for.”²²⁷ He suggests that it is God who determines the natural enemy (the referent).²²⁸ Religious faith is that which is being fought over.²²⁹

²²⁵ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 117, 116.

²²⁶ Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 42.

²²⁷ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 116; Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 62-63.

²²⁸ Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 29. Meier points to Schmitt’s use of Cromwell’s speech as proof, when Schmitt identifies the most “extreme” enmity, against Papal Spain: “The Spaniards is your enemy, his enmity is put into him by God, he is ‘the natural enemy, the providential enemy’” (Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 67, quoted in Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 29).

²²⁹ Meier argues that Schmitt did not want his enemy to know the “center” of his thought that accorded with his existential position; namely, his “faith in revelation,” at the same time as he sought to fight his enemies on this same undisclosed ground (Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, xiv, xv). Accordingly, Schmitt refuses to meet liberals and Marxists on their “anti-religious,” “economic” ground; and instead framed their unfaith as a faith, their hope in technology and progress as religious (Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 77-79). Schmitt’s political theology — “the political battle of faith” — Meier argues, is therefore also a “weapon,” designed so that by accepting Schmitt’s political distinction the combatant unwillingly accepts its concealed metaphysical ground, and thus finds him or herself, together with others, fighting a covert religious war (76). If Meier is correct in his analysis of Schmitt, it was a type of trick familiar to Strauss. In *Ecclesia Militans* (1925), Strauss argues that there is an opposition within the German Jewish community: the Jewish Church — or the Orthodoxy of Frankfurt — is on the offensive. Despite Strauss’s claim “that it might not even be necessary for us to defend the front line, let alone call for a retreat,” the article takes on “orthodoxy,” which he identifies as “Zionism’s single Jewish enemy” (Strauss, “Ecclesia Militans,” 124). The “war objective” of orthodoxy, Strauss notes, is the “submission of the Jewish people to the Torah” (125). And the “weapon, or the trick, of Orthodoxy is to *try to force the acceptance of this demand, without first having to obtain the acknowledgement of its dogmatic*

The “hidden” ground of the political is thus, *transcendental* (or in Meier’s words, “metaphysical”), not *immanent*: “Schmitt embarks upon his confrontation with liberalism in the name of the political, and he pursues it for the sake of *religion*.”²³⁰ By his own understanding then, Meier suggests, “Schmitt is a political theologian.”²³¹ Schmitt’s “faith in revelation” is the *preposition* or *ground* for the concept of the political.²³² Meier concludes that Strauss in his review identifies the intention and the disguised objective of the author of *The Concept of the Political*.²³³ While Schmitt never *expressly* acknowledges that his conception of the political was grounded in religion and that he sees the friend-enemy binary as an antagonism between rival faiths, Meier argues that in the third and final edition of *The Concept of the Political* (published in the summer of 1933), Schmitt “conducts a hidden dialogue with Leo Strauss,” by silently incorporating Strauss’s comments, and “disclos[ing] more of his identity as a *political theologian* than he had revealed in 1927 or 1932.”²³⁴

Along the lines of his claim that the criterion for the political ontology that Schmitt polemically advanced — the distinction between friend and enemy — is “metaphysical,” Meier explains that the political decision between friend and enemy, in any given historical circumstance of emergence, is a response to the “command” that absolute “obedience” to God requires. Concrete moments in history call for a decision

presupposition,” something that Strauss asserts, could “never be obtained by the majority of contemporary Jewry” (125, emphasis added). The dogmatic presupposition is the belief in revealed religion; as identified and attacked by Breuer, in what Strauss calls a political “weapon,” — a genuine “political publication” (125).

²³⁰ Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 30, emphasis added.

²³¹ Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, xiv.

²³² Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, xiv, xv.

²³³ Meier account as proof that after the publication of his book, *The Hidden Dialogue*, Rudolph Sohm informed him in 1988 that Schmitt in mid-1930 had said the following about Strauss’s “Notes on Schmitt”: “You’ve got to read that. He saw through me and X-rayed me as nobody else has” (Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, xvii).

²³⁴ Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 50; *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy*, 68, emphasis added.

between faiths — between “God” and “Anti-Christ”/”Satan.”²³⁵ And it is as the act of a political theologian, Meier argues, that we should see Schmitt’s public decision to join the NSDAP on May 1, 1933—the same year that the final edition of *The Concept of the Political* appeared.²³⁶ Whatever it was that informed Schmitt’s decision to join the National Socialist party, it was a decision unknown to Strauss, who resided in Paris at the time, oblivious to the fact that he had, as a Jew, been decisively marked as a *public enemy* by Schmitt.²³⁷ Schmitt’s political decision in favor of Hitlerism (according to Meier, over “Satan”) was, according to Jacob Klein, also the private reason why Schmitt never responded to the letter Strauss sent him from Paris.²³⁸

An assessment of the accuracy of Meier’s disclosure of Schmitt’s hidden theology is beyond the scope of this dissertation. It is for others to quarrel over what kind of Grand Inquisitor Schmitt was. The concern here is thus not with Schmitt’s conception of the political or political theology *per se*, but only with Strauss’s understanding and modification of Schmitt’s concept of the political. I agree with Meier that Strauss sought to complete Schmitt’s critique of liberalism, and that Strauss holds that Schmitt’s concept of the political fell back into the liberal moral horizon when extricated from the liberal

²³⁵ Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt*, 71; Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 80.

²³⁶ See Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, xvi, 72-87; and Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt*, 122-173.

²³⁷ Meier has suggested that there exists “no evidence whatsoever” that Strauss was aware that Schmitt had joined the NDSAP on May 1, 1933 (Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, xvii; see also Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 56-57).

²³⁸ Meier quotes from Jacob Klein’s letter to Strauss from October 21, 1933; “Regarding C. S., it can be said that he is joining the crowd in an *inexcusable* way. In the official position he now holds, no doubt he *cannot* very well answer” Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 129). This explanation is disputed in the content of a letter to Strauss from Karl Löwith, in which he reported that Dr. Werner (one of Schmitt’s doctoral students that worked on Hobbes) “regards it as out of the question that Schmitt — despite his anti-Semitism in principle — has not answered you *for that reason*” (Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 130). In his 1938 book on Hobbes, Schmitt would for the first time refer to Strauss in print: Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*, translation by George Schwab and Erna Hilfstein (Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 14n 12). Schmitt’s reference is to chapter four of Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*.

thought horizon. I am not, however, as stated earlier, fully convinced by Meier's argument that Strauss identifies a hidden theology behind Schmitt's conception of the political. I agree with Meier that Strauss calls for a metaphysical and moral ground for the political — as we shall see in a moment — and I follow Meier in arguing that Strauss turns to human nature, by the means of Hobbes, to find that ground. But if it is God who for Schmitt determines the political enmity and assigns the “natural” or “providential” enemy, it is *religion*, not the *political*, that is supposedly authoritative — decisive and divisive.²³⁹ Even if Meier is right that Strauss detected a theological bias behind Schmitt's conception of the political, it is certain — and on this point Meier and I agree — that it is *not* a stance that Strauss as an atheist finds satisfactory. Neither that which Meier defines as Schmitt's hidden (*unliberal*) *moral* political theology, nor his open and *immanent* (liberal-moral) political ontology, satisfies Strauss in answering *why* the *political* antagonism arises in the first instance. He accepts Schmitt's conception of *what* the political is — the mortal antagonism — but not *why* it arises.

²³⁹ Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 29, 47, 56. In Meier's explanation, Schmitt held that individual decides which side to carry out an existential struggle depending on where she identifies God or Satan, and it is thus not death but faith that marks the division as political *qua* existential. The theoretical problem with Meier's suggestion that Strauss identifies a transcendental foundation for the political hidden behind Schmitt's theoretical conception, is that if you accept revelation as the source of the political antagonism, such political-theological conception of the political falls back into the liberal *thought* horizon of culture. The reason for this is that it is no longer the readiness to die and kill that determines whether an antagonism in any one of the cultural domains (including the moral) has reached the intensity of a *political* enmity (i.e., having become political by overruling one of the province's specific criterion). One way to counter this, however, Meier argues, is an alternative political-theological argument to that of the immanent conception of the political as to why religion is authoritative and has the potential to overtake the enmity in all other domains. According to Meier, however, Schmitt's faith in revelation is not something that can be theoretically explicated since belief is an *existential* (not rational) truth, and thus no such theory is accounted for (Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 7).

2. 2. 4. *Political philosophy; on the plane of human nature*

Strauss shares Schmitt's aim to radically critique liberalism. It is to this end that Strauss seeks to make Schmitt's case — his concept of the political — as strong as possible, Meier argues, by tying it to the plane of political philosophy.²⁴⁰ I agree with Meier that Strauss sets about discovering a metaphysical ground for the political, which he finds in human nature. To do so, Strauss shifts the ground of the political from the plane of immanence to *human nature* by turning to Hobbes.

In order to reorient the investigation away from the liberal philosophy of culture in general, Strauss poses and answers the question: What is culture? Against liberal thought, which he argued divides human thought and actions into independent domains (species) and furthermore, understands culture itself (the genus) to be autonomous, Strauss argues that culture is not independent or sovereign from nature: culture “is certainly the culture of nature.”²⁴¹ Culture, he argues, can either build on our natural attributes and dispositions, i.e. “the nurture of nature,” or, as in the case of liberalism, it can “fight” or try to “conquer” what it understands as a disordered nature.²⁴² Independent of the question of whether culture cultivates or fights nature, Strauss argues that nature is a necessary cause for the existence of culture. From this perspective, he infers that when culture is seen as its own “sovereign creation” — as it is in liberal thought — that nature is “*forgotten*.”²⁴³

Strauss argues, however, that Hobbes does not forget nature. Nor does Strauss, who reminds his readers that the “presupposition of culture is primarily human nature;

²⁴⁰ Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 50.

²⁴¹ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 98.

²⁴² Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 98, 97; Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 32; see also Xenos *Cloaked in Virtue*, 54.

²⁴³ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 98.

and because man is by nature an *animal sociale* [social animal], the human nature on which culture is based is the natural *social relations* of men, that is, the way in which man, prior to all culture, behaves toward other men.”²⁴⁴ He is aware that for Hobbes, “man is by nature” precisely *not* a social animal, but an asocial, or anti-social being.²⁴⁵ But for Strauss, who sided with Aristotle (and Heidegger) *against* Hobbes on this point, anti-sociality is still a social relation.²⁴⁶ Put in this light, Schmitt’s conception of the political, defined by the *potentiality* of physical killing — and “not in *actual* fighting; but in the known *disposition* thereto” — is resonant of Hobbes’ state of nature (*status naturalis*) *qua* state of war (*status belli*).²⁴⁷ The criterion of the political — the political *enmity* between friend and enemy — Strauss argues, reflects the natural social antagonism between individuals described in Hobbes’s state of nature.²⁴⁸ Adopting Schmitt’s terminology, Strauss thus asserts that Hobbes’s state of nature “is the genuinely *political status*.”²⁴⁹

While arguing that Hobbes’s state of nature and Schmitt’s concept of the political are in *essence* identical, Strauss accounts for a compositional difference between the two, as well as a formal difference. The first difference is that the war of all against all in Hobbes is between *individuals*, while in Schmitt’s concept of the political enmity occurs between *groups*. By transposing Schmitt’s concept of the political to Hobbes’s state of nature, Strauss *individualizes* the political. The second, and formal, difference between Schmitt’s concept of the political and Hobbes’s state of nature is what puts the first fully

²⁴⁴ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 98, emphasis added; see also Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 32.

²⁴⁵ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 98.

²⁴⁶ Strauss. *Planned Book on Hobbes*. Leo Strauss Papers, [Box 15, Folder 2], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

²⁴⁷ Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 32.

²⁴⁸ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” “Notes on Hobbes,” 98.

²⁴⁹ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 98-99.

at odds with liberalism. Namely, that while Hobbes's purpose is to overcome or "negate" the state of nature, Schmitt's "affirmation of the political is the affirmation of the state of nature."²⁵⁰ As Strauss writes: "It follows that the political that Schmitt brings to bear as fundamental is the 'state of nature' that underlies every culture; Schmitt restores the Hobbesian concept of the state of nature to a place of honor."²⁵¹ Schmitt, however, according to his immanent conception of the "political as such," argues that all political "concepts, ideas and words" are historically specific and "polemical," paralleling Hobbes's rhetorical use of the state of nature, but, Strauss argued, for the opposite reason.²⁵² While Schmitt sets out to restore the political and critique liberalism in a liberal world, Hobbes set out to found liberalism in an unliberal world.²⁵³

To negate the solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short existence in the state of nature, Hobbes proposes in the *Leviathan* that each individual consent, together with all other individuals, to enter into a covenant, under an absolute, inalienable, and indefeasible Sovereign on the basis that each surrenders their natural right to all things. The subjects sanction the Sovereign's power on the condition, Strauss argues, that the "securing of life is the ultimate basis of the state."²⁵⁴ And here Strauss introduces a key insight that is absent from *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*: the citizens' *obedience* to the state is *conditioned* by the state's protection of the life of the citizens. Hobbes's sovereign might demand that its citizens die as soldiers on a battlefield, or exact capital punishment for crimes committed. However, Strauss argues that the citizens are not morally obliged to obey secular commands that negate their own self-preservation: "Therefore, while man

²⁵⁰ Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 115; see also Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 33.

²⁵¹ Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 99.

²⁵² Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 118.

²⁵³ Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 102.

²⁵⁴ Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 100.

is otherwise obliged to unconditional obedience, he is under no obligation to risk his life; for death is the greatest evil.”²⁵⁵ The natural right to life is thus *not* annulled by the introduction of the rational natural laws or precepts in which the unconditional liberty to exercise whatever means needed for survival is forgone by the individuals’ own decision to enter into a covenant:

The right to the securing of life pure and simple — and this right sums up Hobbes’s natural right — has fully the character of an inalienable human right, that is, of an individual’s *claim* that takes precedence over the state and determines its purpose and its limits; Hobbes’s foundation for the natural-right claim to the securing of life pure and simple sets the path to the whole system of human rights in the sense of liberalism, if his foundation does not actually make such a course necessary.²⁵⁶

Each individual’s natural right to self-preservation is the first spring of a liberal doctrine that Strauss argues leads to Schmitt’s characterization of liberalism as “depoliticization” and as the withering away of the state. In liberal civilization — a “pacifist,” “international” society of individuals, a “partnership in consumption and production” — the rational rules of commerce and “the economic technical centralization” replace the political strife over insurmountable differences also between national entities.²⁵⁷ And due to “this very fact,” Strauss asserts that Hobbes “is the founder of liberalism.”²⁵⁸

But even though Hobbes builds his authoritarian state on the negation of the state of nature, Strauss points out that:

Hobbes differs from developed liberalism only, but certainly, by his knowing and seeing *against what* the liberal ideal of civilization has to be persistently fought for: not merely against rotten institutions, against the evil will of a ruling class, but against the natural evil of man [*die natürliche Bosheit des Menschen*]; in an

²⁵⁵ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 100.

²⁵⁶ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 100-01.

²⁵⁷ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 108.

²⁵⁸ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 100.

unliberal world Hobbes forges ahead to lay the foundation of liberalism against the — *sit venia verbo* — unliberal nature of man, whereas later men, ignorant of their premises and goals, trust in the original goodness (based on God’s creation and providence) of human nature or, on the basis of natural-scientific neutrality, nurse hopes for an improvement of nature, hopes unjustified by man’s experience of himself.²⁵⁹

Liberals’ “trust in original goodness (based on God’s creation and providence)” stipulates that humans by nature are good, and their “natural-scientific neutrality” holds that humans by nature are educable. For Schmitt, in his polemic against the “Left,” Strauss argues, the “ultimate [political] quarrel occurs not between bellicosity and pacifism (or nationalism and internationalism) but between the ‘*authoritarian* and *anarchistic* theories.’”²⁶⁰ Strauss further claims that this is an argument over whether man is by nature good or evil: “[t]he quarrel between the *authoritarian* and the *anarchistic* theories concerns *whether man is by nature evil or good.*”²⁶¹ While a theory of the state in accordance with an understanding of human nature as moral evil is authoritarian — the “foundation of the Right” — a theory of the state in accordance with an understanding of human nature as good — the foundation of the “Left” — is liberal or socialist.²⁶² Since Hobbes puts individual liberty, as a natural right, prior to *obedience*, Strauss argues that Hobbes, like Spinoza, denies *sin*.²⁶³ When Hobbes sees the “*natural* evil of man” in the state of nature, it is thus understood as animal evil, “innocent evil,” “dangerous” but “educable.”²⁶⁴

And once one understands man’s evil as the innocent ‘evil’ of the beast, but of a beast that can become astute through injury and thus can be educated, the limit one sets for education finally becomes a matter of mere ‘*supposition*’—whether very

²⁵⁹ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 101; German original, Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 225.

²⁶⁰ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 109.

²⁶¹ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 109, emphasis added.

²⁶² Strauss, “Strauss letter to Schmitt, September 4, 1932”; translated in Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 125. The original letter is in the Nordrhein-Westfälisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Düsseldorf.

²⁶³ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 109-110; and Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 53, 57.

²⁶⁴ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 110.

narrow limits, as set by Hobbes himself, who therefore became an adherent of absolute monarchy; or broader limits such as those of liberalism; or whether one imagines *education* as capable of just about everything, as anarchism does. The opposition between evil and good loses its keen edge, it loses its very meaning, as soon as evil is understood as innocent “evil” and thereby goodness is understood as an aspect of evil itself. The task therefore arises – for purposes of the radical critique of liberalism that Schmitt strives for – of nullifying the view of human evil as animal evil and thus innocent evil, and to return to the view of human evil as moral baseness.²⁶⁵

Thus, contrary to Hobbes and Spinoza, Meier argues, Schmitt must hold — “for purposes of the radical critique of liberalism that he strives for” — that humans are morally evil.²⁶⁶

Meier suggests that Schmitt’s concept of the political thus presupposes the theological, in which humans are evil due to original sin, not as a “goal,” but in order to “provide a foundation for its own [the political’s] necessity.”²⁶⁷ In contrast, Strauss argues that Hobbes “understood man as ‘evil like the beast’” and thus “evil as *innocent* ‘evil.’”²⁶⁸ Innocent evil only confirms the “dangerousness” of humans. However, a Right-wing authoritarian political theory — be it theological (Meier’s Schmitt) or non-theological (Strauss) — must assert human evil as distinctly human *and* moral.

There are thus two interconnected conceptions of the political at play in Strauss’s commentary on Schmitt’s text: (i) the friend-enemy distinction that is oriented toward “dire emergency” and (ii) “the natural evil of man”, which Strauss argues is the principle or the “ultimate foundation of the Right.”²⁶⁹ The dynamic of this double nature of the political is revisited in a letter Strauss wrote to Schmitt from Berlin on September 4, 1932. In the letter, Strauss stresses that Schmitt’s additional distinction between Left and Right — that between “internationalist pacifism and bellicose nationalism” — was

²⁶⁵ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 110.

²⁶⁶ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 110. Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 30.

²⁶⁷ Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 55.

²⁶⁸ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 109.

²⁶⁹ Strauss, “Strauss letter to Schmitt, September 4, 1932,” 125.

“incompatible” with the ultimate foundation of the Left-and-Right distinction, which Strauss identifies as “anarchy versus authority.”²⁷⁰ Strauss asks Schmitt to account for the collapsing of “authoritarian order” with “bellicose nationalism,” as it could “hardly be wholly accidental.”²⁷¹ He then offers an abbreviated version of what could be the linkage between *authoritarianism* and *nationalism*.²⁷² Because “man is moral evil” (the principal for a Right-wing authoritarian theory of the state) he needs *dominion*. However, dominion can be “established” only if there exists a national political community, which requires the friend-enemy distinction insofar as an “association of men is *necessarily* a separation from other men,” and this requires bellicose nationalism.²⁷³ As we saw in the first part of this chapter, this was the case for political Zionism, for which political disassociation was required for political association/identity to form. Strauss initially felt that political Zionism was lacking and turned to religion for a ground for the Jewish nation, before abandoning this quest in the late 1920s.²⁷⁴ Strauss thus holds that Schmitt’s proposition that the “concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political” cannot be meant to suggest that the political provided a “constitutive principle” of the state, but is only “conditional.”²⁷⁵ The task that remains incomplete for Strauss at the end of “Notes on Schmitt,” is that of grounding a morality of good and evil in human nature for the concept of the political to be (i) constitutive of, and (ii) transcend the liberal *moral horizon*.

²⁷⁰ Strauss, “Strauss letter to Schmitt, September 4, 1932,” 124-125. See also Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 56.

²⁷¹ Strauss, “Strauss letter to Schmitt, September 4, 1932,” 125.

²⁷² Strauss, “Strauss letter to Schmitt, September 4, 1932,” 125.

²⁷³ Strauss, “Strauss letter to Schmitt, September 4, 1932,” 125.

²⁷⁴ We shall see in chapter four that Strauss returns to the possibility of using religion as a social glue in his studies of Jewish and Arabic medieval theologians in the mid- and late 1930s.

²⁷⁵ Strauss, “Strauss letter to Schmitt, September 4, 1932,” 125.

Meier argues that for Schmitt, as a political theologian, since human evil is something “known” through faith, then, at their very best, “philosophy” or “anthropology” can only confirm what is already known by faith and thus they are not “decisive.”²⁷⁶ And if human evil is *known* through faith, Schmitt, Meier argues, does not need to entertain the “question of the *natural* qualities of man.”²⁷⁷ Implied by Meier is that Strauss (a “political philosopher”) contrary to Schmitt’s view from within political theology, must precisely “entertain” the “question of the natural qualities of man.”²⁷⁸ Meier argues that shifting attention away from Schmitt’s *transcendental* ground, to the plane of *human nature* — moving, in other words, from *political theology* to *political philosophy* — Strauss is able to uncover a different source behind political enmity and moral evil. In order to replace theology with a study of human nature as the ground for an unliberal morality the answer of what it is in human nature that makes “man evil” must be given. I agree with Meier that Strauss must, and as we shall see in the next chapter, also comes to entertain the “natural qualities of man” in order to prove that the human animal, unlike other animals, is evil by nature.²⁷⁹ Independently of whether or not Meier is correct about Schmitt’s hidden theology, he is thus right in that “[t]he quarrel between the authoritarian and the anarchistic theories [which] concerns whether man is by nature evil or good,” takes an “anthropological” turn in Strauss consecutive studies of Hobbes in the 1930s.

2. 3. 1. *Conclusion*

We have seen in this chapter that Strauss’s concern with the relationship between

²⁷⁶ Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 69.

²⁷⁷ Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 69.

²⁷⁸ Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue*, 69.

²⁷⁹ As I will discuss at length in the next chapter, Xenos also argues along these lines (Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 56).

religion, politics and philosophy informs his early writings. He initially finds political Zionism wanting, and first advocates for religion as the ground for Jewish nationalism. However, in 1928, Strauss seems to have adopted Hobbes's political rationalism when he argued for a purely rationalist Zionist political project. However, Strauss never trusts liberal rights, or the rational liberal contract as capable of repressing the natural evil of man, nor (as we see in his commentary on Schmitt) does he think it is desirable. In his review of *The Concept of the Political*, Strauss reads Hobbes in light of Schmitt, and presents Hobbes as the unacknowledged founder of liberalism whose lessons — that the human animal is antagonistic by nature — have been forgotten and ignored by later liberals. Motivated by some of the same concerns that motivate Schmitt, Strauss delivers a sympathetic critique of Schmitt's concept of the political by reference to Hobbes's political theory. He adopts Schmitt's concept, but attempts to modify it to better serve the purpose of criticizing liberalism. He then sets about discovering what he thinks is an adequate ground for the political and finds that foundation in human nature.

Strauss's interpretation of Hobbes is thus informed by his larger political and philosophical commitments. He uses Hobbes to point the way toward an alternative to liberalism. As we shall see in the next chapter, Strauss's aim is to clear the ground for a right-wing authoritarian political order in accordance with a moral ontological understanding of human nature, something that we have seen Strauss begin, but does not complete, in his essay on Schmitt. If the concept of the political is to transcend the liberal moral horizon, human moral evil has to be differentiated from innocent animal evil. It was the insight that Schmitt's political antagonism is in important respects analogous with the natural antagonism in Hobbes's state of nature that allows Strauss to seek an

answer to the question of why the political antagonism arises in the first place. Once the correspondence between Schmitt's political antagonism and the natural antagonism in Hobbes's state of nature has been established, Strauss, as we shall see in the next chapter, can return to Hobbes and raise the question anew: why is the state of nature a state of war?

In "Notes on Schmitt," Strauss withholds an explanation as to why it is that all individuals incessantly seek to increase their power over others that he accounted for in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*: vanity and the rational pursuit of power. The most theoretically plausible reason for this is because Hobbes's scientific view of human nature does not adequately differentiate, neither psychologically nor morally, between humans and animals. Hobbes's scientific view of the human animal presents human nature as innocent as animals — human beings might be nasty, but they are not morally evil — and hence educable and good. The assertion that humans are by nature evil could thus not be established by appealing to Hobbes in the way Strauss had presented Hobbes's anthropology in "Notes on Schmitt." In the next chapter, we shall see how Strauss solves this problem by differentiating between a scientific and pre-scientific view of human nature in Hobbes's thought.

3

Strauss's Critique of Liberalism; Vanity and Evil in Hobbes

3. 0. 1. *Introduction*

In the previous chapter, we observed how Strauss aligns Schmitt's political enmity with the antagonism in Hobbes's state of nature in the early 1930s, and in so doing, in Strauss's view, grounds the political in human nature. In the final paragraph of "Notes on Schmitt," Strauss states his "principal intention" for having engaged Schmitt in the first place:

The critique introduced by Schmitt against liberalism can therefore be completed only if one succeeds in gaining a horizon beyond liberalism. In such a horizon Hobbes completed the foundation of liberalism. A radical critique of liberalism is thus possible only on the basis of an adequate understanding of Hobbes.²⁸⁰

I will suggest in this chapter that Strauss in his consequent studies of Hobbes in the 1930s sets out to complete his radical critique of liberalism by locating the cause behind why the state of nature is a state of war. The answer to why the state of nature is a state of war (and by extension, why the political antagonism arises in the first place) lies in the answer to why each individual incessantly strives for ever more power over others.

²⁸⁰ Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 119.

I will argue that in “Some Notes on the Political Science of Hobbes” (henceforth, “Notes on Hobbes”), published in 1933, Strauss locates the cause behind the natural political antagonism in *vanity*. To philosophically demonstrate the ground for a right-wing authoritarian state and move beyond the liberal horizon, Strauss has to establish “*the natural evil of man [die natürliche Bosheit des Menschen]*” as distinctly human and moral.²⁸¹ I suggest along the lines of Xenos that the demonstration of why humans are by nature morally evil is presented in Strauss’s 1936 book, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Genesis* (henceforth, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*).²⁸² However, I disagree with Xenos’s supporting argument that in order to show that humans are “naturally evil,” Strauss “reconstitute[s] the pre-liberal moral universe that Hobbes attempted to erase and, ultimately, to resuscitate a pre-liberal notion of natural law.”²⁸³

The consensus in the secondary literature — contrary to Strauss’s own claim — is that Strauss held that an “adequate understanding of Hobbes” was not sufficient to accomplish the move beyond the liberal moral horizon.²⁸⁴ Janssens, sharing Xenos’s position, describes the final paragraph in “Notes on Schmitt” as “somewhat deceptive” in that it “suggest[s] that adequately understanding Hobbes is both the necessary and the sufficient condition for gaining a horizon beyond liberalism,” while in fact Strauss had “*already* begun to recover the horizon beyond liberalism within and against which Hobbes founded liberalism and the modern concept of culture; the horizon of *nomos* or law as a ‘concrete binding order of life,’ common to revealed religion and Socratic-

²⁸¹ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 101; original in Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 225.

²⁸² Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 57.

²⁸³ Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 57.

²⁸⁴ Janssens, *Between Jerusalem and Athens*, 146. See also Peter Minowitz, *Straussophobia: Defending Leo Strauss and Straussians Against Shadia Drury and Other Accusers* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 181-82, 213n 18; Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 19.

Platonic philosophy.”²⁸⁵ Janssens further argues that “only through a recovery of Socratic-Platonic political philosophy” was it possible for Strauss “to develop a *moral-political outlook on human evil* without reverting to a hidden religious framework as in the case of [Carl] Schmitt.”²⁸⁶ Janssens pulls support for his claim from Strauss’s semi-autobiographical preface to the 1965 English edition of *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, in which Strauss identifies a “change in orientation” after his own realization that a return to the ancient thought was possible when writing “Notes on Schmitt.”²⁸⁷

Contrary to Janssens and Xenos, I advance the hypothesis that in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* Strauss transposes a Biblical morality — without its transcendental foundation in God — onto human nature in his conception of human evil. What Strauss writes about Heidegger, in his semi-autobiographical preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, rings true also of the tension on display in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*: Heidegger “wishes to expel from philosophy the last relics of Christian theology,” but instead “he interprets human life in the light of ‘being towards death,’ ‘anguish,’ ‘conscience,’ and ‘guilt’; in this most important respect he is much more Christian than Nietzsche. The efforts of the new thinking to escape from the evidence of the Biblical understanding of man, i.e., from *Biblical morality*, have failed.”²⁸⁸ As we shall see, Strauss in his book on Hobbes, like Heidegger, casts man’s morality, the question of human evil [*böse*] in terms of guilt [*Schuld*]. Like Heidegger, Strauss does not escape Biblical morality in his inter-war writing on Hobbes. Unlike much of the secondary

²⁸⁵ Janssens, *Between Jerusalem and Athens*, 146.

²⁸⁶ Janssens, *Between Jerusalem and Athens*, 144, emphasis added.

²⁸⁷ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 31. The biographical preface was written in 1962. “Notes on Schmitt” was included in the appendix to the first (published in 1965) English edition of *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, and consequently removed from the 1997 paperback edition.

²⁸⁸ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 12-13, emphasis added.

literature, I will not pay much heed to what Strauss has to say retrospectively about his younger self, at least not until we have arrived there chronologically. Instead, I will take the 1932 Strauss at his word, and make it this chapter's hypothesis that he does indeed mean that a radical critique of liberalism that moves beyond its *moral* horizon — having already overcome the horizon of liberal *thought* with his return from *culture* to *nature* — is “possible only on the basis of an adequate understanding of Hobbes.”²⁸⁹

This is the objective and direction repeated in “Notes on Hobbes,” Strauss's first publication after he had moved to Paris in the fall of 1932: “*whoever wishes to engage in either a radical justification or a radical critique of liberalism must return to Hobbes.*”²⁹⁰ In Paris, Strauss began to work on a manuscript with a working title similar to his Spinoza book, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion: A Contribution to Understanding the Enlightenment* (henceforth, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion*).²⁹¹ He stopped working on the manuscript in 1934, a few months after moving to London, and never completed it.²⁹² Later that year, Strauss gained access to the Hobbes papers, held by the Cavendish family in Chatsworth. By this time, Strauss had also abandoned his *Planned book on Hobbes*, that had swelled to two chapters of approximately 100 pages.²⁹³ Strauss had sent parts of the manuscript to Schmitt to use as backdrop for a recommendation letter for the

²⁸⁹ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 119.

²⁹⁰ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 122, emphasis added.

²⁹¹ Published posthumously first in Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*; in English translation, Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion and Related Writings*, translated by Bartlett and Minkov. Chicago - London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011.

²⁹² Meier have suggested two reasons why Strauss never completed his manuscript on Hobbes's critique of religion. The first practical: the difficulty in finding a publisher discouraged him from completing another German manuscript on Hobbes. The other theoretical: in a letter to Krüger in December 1935, Strauss writes that he will postpone his study of Hobbes in order “to gain clarity first of all about the history of Platonism in the Islamic and Jewish Middle Ages” (Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 14).

²⁹³ Leo Strauss, *Planned Book on Hobbes* c) Einleitung, Kapitel I and II, 97 pages 1930-1931. Leo Strauss Papers, [15, Folder 2], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

Rockefeller Foundation that the latter wrote on Strauss' behalf.²⁹⁴ Strauss's study of Hobbes culminated in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, published in 1936. The original German manuscript, *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft in ihrer Genesis* [*Hobbes' Political Science and its Genesis*] had been completed the year before, in 1935, the same year that *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors* [*Philosophie und Gesetz. Beiträge zum Verständnis Maimunis und seiner Vorläufer*] (henceforth, *Philosophy and Law*) was published by a Jewish publisher, Schocken Verlag, in Berlin. Due to the difficult publishing situation in Germany for a Jewish author, Strauss could not secure a German publisher for his book on Hobbes. Eventually, Clarendon press in Oxford accepted the non-English manuscript for publication and Sinclair translated the book under Strauss's close supervision.²⁹⁵

In the previous chapter, I showed that Strauss's discussion of Hobbes in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* identifies three human desires in Hobbes's philosophy, and adopts Schmitt's conception of the political as defined by a concrete antagonism, but not Schmitt's explanation behind the way enmity arises. In this chapter, I will turn to Strauss's subsequent work on Hobbes, "Notes on Hobbes" and *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, to track the way his early engagement with Hobbes, described in the previous chapter, evolves and transforms. In "Notes on Hobbes," I will argue, Strauss:

- (i) Reduces human natural desire [*cupiditas naturalis*] to a singular appetite: vanity [*Eitelkeit*].

²⁹⁴ Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, ix.

²⁹⁵ Some significant alterations to the final English version were made, including an extensive addition on Hobbes's discussion of the importance of foreign policy comparatively to Plato and Aristotle. I discuss this inclusion at the end of this chapter. The German original was published first in 1965, as *Hobbes's Political Science and its Genesis* [*Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft in ihrer Genesis*], with the inclusion of a new German forward that I address in chapter five.

(ii) Argues that vanity is the moving cause behind the incessant striving after ever more power over others, and thus the primary cause behind the natural *qua* political antagonism in the state of nature (i.e., why the state of nature is a state of war).

Since vanity causes strife, Strauss asserts that *vanity* is the “domain” of the “*political*,” whilst its antithesis, the fear of violent death, is the root of the “*economic*.”²⁹⁶ In “Notes on Hobbes,” Strauss proposes that Hobbes’s rational and peaceful commercial commonwealth is grounded in depreciation of the political by the negation of the natural (Hobbes) *qua* political (Schmitt) antagonism, which is caused by vanity—man’s irrational natural desire. He construes out of vanity (first “thesis”) a principle of sovereignty and obedience to a Sovereign grounded in every citizen’s fear of violent death (his “antithesis”). He depicts this dialectic as beginning as an external struggle between two opponents that are blind to all but their own vainglory, which subsequently turns inwards, into an inner struggle between vanity and fear in each individual. Fear of violent death must conquer vanity for Hobbes’s social contract to form. The strife in the state of nature is neutralized by a universal rational agreement dictated by the rational laws of nature [*lex naturalis*] prompted by a common fear of violent death. Hobbes’s *artificial* state is built upon every individual’s repression of his or her own *unliberal* natural desire. It was foremost against the *unliberal* part of human nature, Strauss argues in “Notes on Hobbes,” that liberalism “fought” to “institute” itself.²⁹⁷

In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss revokes his judgment in “Notes on Schmitt” that Hobbes conceives of humans as *innocent* [*unschuldig*] animals by turning

²⁹⁶ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 135.

²⁹⁷ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 122.

to the *unliberal* underbelly of the frightened contractual citizen. He divides Hobbes into the scientific Hobbes, who deduces his physiological premises for political philosophy from modern natural science, and the young pre-scientific Hobbes, who draws political insights from “self-observations.”²⁹⁸ Observation and experience of others and self is the method that Strauss identifies as adequate in observing the natural qualities of man.²⁹⁹ These observations, in turn, Strauss argues, are informed by a new morality.³⁰⁰ What the young Hobbes observes becomes the moral basis for Hobbes’s political philosophy: this basis is an antithesis between the *unliberal* or aristocratic passion — “vanity” — and its liberal or counter passion — “fear of violent death.” It is the self-consciousness of fear of violent death, he argues in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, which forms a “modern” “bourgeois” “moral attitude.”³⁰¹ On this ground, Strauss contests the legal positivist/relativist view of Hobbes — that justice is a matter of an arbitrator deciding over competing interests, and is determined by the disputing parties abiding by an agreed contract as stipulated by the third law of nature — by arguing that only acts, including acts in the state of nature prior to the covenant, that are *motivated* out of a fear of violent death are morally *just*, since only these secure self-preservation. In other words, he reads

²⁹⁸ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 3, 134.

²⁹⁹ Strauss’s suggestion that Hobbes’s portrayal of human behavior in the state of nature reflected an immediate experience of oneself and the world prior to natural science, and that Hobbes’s subsequent scientific view of human nature negated this pre-scientific knowledge of human nature, is influenced by Husserl’s phenomenology. This insight about Hobbes’s method is first described in Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, p. 87; and in the 1931-32 unpublished manuscript, *Planned Book on Hobbes*: “Political science is possible as an independent science because it is based on its own principles and these principles are known through experience.” In the manuscript, Strauss crossed out the definition of experience that followed: [~~“by the experience of one, who observes his own (emotions) movements”~~, ~~“through the experience of one, who examines his own emotion”~~, ~~through self-awareness, self-observation and self-examination (Co VI 7 and I.,J).~~] (Strauss, Leo, *Planned Book on Hobbes*. Leo Strauss Papers, [Box 15, Folder 2], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, translation by Samuel Putinja and Karl Dahlquist.

³⁰⁰ In addition to Husserl, as I will return to in the second part of the chapter, Strauss is here influenced by Heidegger, suggesting that there is an *a priori* moral attitude that informs the phenomenological perception/experience of self and others.

³⁰¹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 102, 108, 114-116, 120.

morality back into Hobbes's state of nature by differentiating between, on one hand, the motivations that underlie Hobbes's conception of right of nature [*jus naturale*] — oriented toward self-preservation and thus in accord with natural reason [*ratio naturalis*] — and, on the other, natural desire [*cupiditas naturalis*], which aims at harming others and is not only pre-rational but contrary to natural reason and thus impermissible. The moral quality of vanity, however, Strauss argues, is only visible in Hobbes's anthropological view of human nature. This “vitalistic” view is different from Hobbes's later scientific view that yields an equally mechanistic explanation of both human and animal appetite.

Strauss claims in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* that when Hobbes initially assigns vanity as the cause behind the war of all against all in the state of nature, it is intended as a *moral* judgment. Hobbes's moral judgment on vanity remains within the liberal moral horizon since vanity is judged against the horizon of self-preservation. In the *Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss asserts that it is due to vanity that man by nature is morally evil.³⁰² Recall that in “Notes on Schmitt,” Strauss argues that since Hobbes places a natural right to life prior to all obligations, humans must be free without sin. In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss thus alters his earlier position that, for Hobbes, humans are innocently evil like animals, not *morally* evil by nature. “Guilt” (“*Schuld*”) is the term Strauss uses to differentiate between “innocent [*unschuldig*]” animal evil and moral “non-innocent/guilty [*schuldig*]” human evil. He asserts that humans are by nature morally evil because they are vain: because they *seek to harm other individuals for the pleasure derived from contemplating one's own supremacy*. This definition of vanity, as with the demonstration of human evil, must be detached from

³⁰² See also Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 60.

Hobbes's bourgeois morality—determined by the liberal horizon of death. To address the objection (as seen for example in the work of Janssens and Xenos) that Strauss adopted his conception of evil from the ancients, I will show that Strauss's assertion that man by nature is evil is made without recourse to ancient natural law and Socratic conceptions of vice.

In the 1936 English translation of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss subsumes both “vanity” and “violent death” under the word “evil.” In the original German manuscript, *Hobbes' Politische Wissenschaft in ihrer Genesis*, he uses three German words that are all translated in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* as “evil”: “*übel*,” “*böse*” and “*schlechten*.” To support my claim that Strauss's case that humans by nature is evil is made without recourse to ancient natural law, I will show in this chapter Strauss applies these first two terms in a precise and philosophically distinct way, and only the first adjective (“*böse*”) to mean moral evil. Strauss uses “*böse*” only when he speaks of vanity, from which he derives that “man is by nature evil [*so ist der Mensch von Natur böse*]” He locates the origin of moral “evil [*böse*]” in vanity. Human evil (“*böse*”) so defined originates in *human nature*, and is independent of the *transcendental* realm, as well as Hobbes's moral horizon of death. Vanity — the peculiar human and infinite striving — provides Strauss with the philosophical ground of moral evil. He uses “*übel*” when he argues that violent death is for Hobbes the “greatest evil [*grösste Übel*]” (in Latin “*summum malum*”), meaning the worst thing that could happen to a human being — something inherently undesirable, or more precisely, the foreclosure of future desiring and any pleasure derived therefrom. However, in this context, “evil [*Übel*]” is not devoid of moral connotation as it is, in Strauss's analysis, moral category for Hobbes,

in that it is contrary to natural reason, which is always directed at *self-preservation*. Finally, Strauss uses “*schlechten/das Schlechte*” when he writes about Aristotle and Plato’s virtue ethics, and not as a moral judgment. “*Schlecht*” is translated as both “evil” and “bad.”

Part I

3. 1. 1. *Human nature and militant liberalism*

“Notes on Hobbes” was Strauss's first publication after he arrived in Paris, in the fall of 1932. The article was translated into French by Alexandre Kojève, whom Strauss had befriended in Germany, in the early 1920s. Like “Notes on Schmitt,” “Notes on Hobbes” engages the work of a contemporary Polish scholar; in this case, Zbigniew Lubieński's book, *The Foundations of Hobbes's Ethical-Political System* [*Die Grundlagen des ethisch-politischen Systems von Hobbes*], which had been published in Germany just before Strauss left for Paris.³⁰³ Strauss remarks from the outset of “Notes on Hobbes” that Lubieński's book was “written with a purely scientific intention,” as if “completely untouched by the spiritual and political movement [*Die Bewegung* as the National Socialists called themselves] that so stirred the country in which the book appeared in the year of its appearance.”³⁰⁴ While Strauss both credits Lubieński and follows him in leaving aside present “prejudice” when taking on Hobbes, Strauss's reason for this was to learn not only about Hobbes's thought, but importantly also about present “political opinions,” which he noted could not be learned by his contemporaries.³⁰⁵ Contrary to Lubieński, Strauss was not “untouched” by the “spiritual and political movement” that attacked the Weimar Republic, an attack, he notes, that was not based on “divine

³⁰³ Zbigniew Lubieński. *Die Grundlagen des ethisch-politischen Systems von Hobbes* (Munich: Reinhardt, 1932).

³⁰⁴ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 123.

³⁰⁵ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 123.

right.”³⁰⁶ In Hobbes, Strauss sought a political alternative to liberalism and the Weimar Republic.

From the outset of the essay, from the right-wing atheistic perspective of “intellectual probity,” Strauss dismisses both “rule based” on “divine right” and “Bolshevism” as political alternatives to liberalism, for being “half-solutions.”³⁰⁷ Bolshevism is a half-solution, in that Bolsheviks, like socialists, sees human nature, like the liberal, as “good,” or “educable,” and thus not only leaves “the first principle of liberalism uncontested,” but adopts it as its own.³⁰⁸ Therefore, Strauss writes, the socialist critiques, “for all the opposition as to final consequence — represents a merely immanent critique of liberalism.”³⁰⁹ It is an immanent critique in that socialists share the liberal moral-ontological principle that humans by nature are good or educable, while disagreeing over ends. Strauss’s had returned to Hobbes to complete a radical critique of liberalism that not only was to transcend the immanent socialist critique, but also the religious critique of liberalism.³¹⁰ In contrast to Meier’s Schmitt, Strauss writes, “Hobbes was ‘*absolutiste sans être théologien*’ [absolutist without being a theologian],” or without being “religious” in “general.”³¹¹ If a critique of liberalism was to transcend — in my classification from the previous chapter — both the liberal *thought* and liberal

³⁰⁶ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 121.

³⁰⁷ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 121. Strauss sides with this atheistic outlook from “intellectual probity” of many of Germany’s radical conservatives. This “new atheism”, Tanguay explains, “represented the position of the Enlightenment with a radicalism hitherto unknown. Nietzsche had turned the critical arms of the Enlightenment against itself. He rejected the moderate Enlightenment’s soft synthesis of religion and philosophy, as well as the ambiguous respect for religious faith shown in the age of Romanticism. [...] According to atheism from probity, the genuine motive of belief or unbelief is not theoretical, but moral.” Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 47). The atheism introduced by Nietzsche is based in moral probity, not consolation, as Strauss argues that religion had become a source of comfort (the security of an eternal order and meaning to life) rather than anxiety since the 18th century.

³⁰⁸ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 121.

³⁰⁹ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 121-122.

³¹⁰ See Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 101-102.

³¹¹ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 121.

moral horizons (discussed in the previous chapter) that Strauss identifies in “Notes on Schmitt,” the following two criteria would need to be met:

- (i) The political antagonism in the state of nature must be proven to have its source in *human nature*, prior to any *cultivation*;
- (ii) For the criticism of liberalism not to be *immanent*, it must be demonstrated that humans are *morally evil by nature*. This is the moral-ontological foundation or condition for a right-wing authoritarian state that Strauss identified in his exchange with Schmitt.

As we shall see, Strauss establishes the former (i) in “Notes on Hobbes” (examined in this first part of the chapter) and the latter (ii) in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (examined in the second part of the chapter).

To his French reading audience, Strauss dubs Hobbes, just as he had to his German-language readers of “Notes on Schmitt,” the “founder of liberalism,” though now with the added qualification that he is not a “proper liberal.”³¹² From the outset of the article, he takes pains to pre-empt the anticipated objection that Hobbes’s political absolutism disqualifies him as the founder of the liberal tradition. Strauss argues that it is possible to learn more from Hobbes about the foundation of liberalism than from any other subsequent liberal thinker precisely because Hobbes is not a “proper liberal.” While the absolutism of Hobbes’s *Leviathan* unmistakably contradicts a liberal constitutionally divided state, Strauss asks his readers to “remember [...] that the *egalitarian* principle underlies all of his arguments.”³¹³ He explains Hobbes’s egalitarianism as follows:

[T]he natural right taught by him [Hobbes] fully possesses the character of an inalienable human right; that the opposition between a military and an industrial

³¹² Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 122.

³¹³ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 122, emphasis added.

state of human society, with the latter unambiguously affirmed, is expressed by him with sufficient clarity; one should recall his denial — on the basis of the egalitarian principle — of paternal, and affirmation of maternal, power over the child and the complete equality of rights of the sexes that is recognized thereby as a given; his teaching about civil marriage and dispensability of oaths; his ideas about university governance and — above all — his critique of religion.³¹⁴

That Hobbes was the first to advance an inalienable human natural right — and, in so doing, paved the road to liberal civilization and universal human rights — Strauss had already argued in “Notes on Schmitt.” What Strauss identifies in the passage directly above as the most representative point of Hobbes’s liberalism, his critique of religion, he had begun to detail in his book on Spinoza and would continue to explore this problematic in his never completed manuscript on *Hobbes’s Critique of Religion*. The main obstacle liberalism has to “fight its way through,” in an “unliberal time,” he now proposes, is not “the old power of the Church and the feudal state;” instead, the greatest resistance against liberalism comes “above all from *human nature* itself.”³¹⁵

In Strauss's assessment of Hobbes’s critique of religion in his book on Spinoza and in his review of *The Concept of the Political*, he points to *human nature* as the ground for both religion and the political. In “Notes on Hobbes,” Strauss proposes that Hobbes is “the first to provide [...] a radical justification for liberalism,” which “does not engage in open or secret borrowings from the religious tradition,” and thus the foundation Hobbes lays for liberalism is *not* shared with the religious tradition.³¹⁶ The *foundation* for liberalism is not shared with the religion insofar as the religious tradition perceives of its own ground as providential, while Hobbes’s founds his social contract on human nature

³¹⁴ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 122.

³¹⁵ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 122, emphasis added.

³¹⁶ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 122.

alone.³¹⁷ Liberalism is constituted against the *unliberal* part of human nature for the purpose of the protection and preservation of the individual's life. As I will detail below, Strauss makes Hobbes the founder of liberalism because humans are not by nature liberals. By nature, *pace* Hobbes, humans are inclined to vanity, which prompts conflict and results in the war of each against all. Vanity must be tamed. A function in human nature must be found that will perform this end. That principle, according to Hobbes, in Strauss's accounts, which we are about to explore, is fear of violent death. It is the *unliberal* part of human nature that liberalism overcomes with Hobbes's construction of a new bourgeois moral consciousness grounded in fear of violent death. From fear of death, individuals will choose to erect an absolute state, which in turn will use its power to "educate" citizens (through law, education, and more generally the creation of a liberal "culture") to reject vanity and live fearful, peaceable, bourgeois lives.

Hobbes's absolutist state is thus required to discipline the *unliberal* part of human nature to avoid civil strife and secure a peaceful and prosperous society. This makes the absolutist Leviathan state a precursor to the liberal state. Whenever threatened, Strauss argues, liberalism must revert to its "absolutist beginnings" as developed by Hobbes: "Hobbes's absolutism is in the end nothing but militant liberalism *in statu nascendi* [in the state of being born], i.e., in its most radical form."³¹⁸ Strauss thus turns the main objection against seeing Hobbes as the "founder of liberalism" (his absolutism) into the leading evidence for the proposal and so concludes that Hobbes's "espousal of absolutism

³¹⁷ Liberalism and religion share foundation, however, according to Hobbes Epicurean critique of religion that Straus details in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, in that religion, like liberalism, had its source in human nature.

³¹⁸ Strauss, "Notes on Hobbes," 122.

does not at all contradict his liberalism.”³¹⁹ It follows from this insight, Strauss notes, that “whoever wishes to engage in either a radical justification or a radical critique of liberalism must return to Hobbes's” political thought.³²⁰

3. 1. 2. *Natural desire and natural reason*

In order to uncover the foundation of Hobbes’s political thought, Strauss argues that a reader of Hobbes must first resolve the symptomatic contradictions therein by way of identifying his “authoritative” or “authentic” doctrine from two mutually exclusive alternatives.³²¹ The contradiction in Hobbes’s thought, Lubieński had argued, results from an inadequate separation in the application of Hobbes’s adaptation of a new “scientific method” from the “traditional rationalism” of Plato and Aristotle.³²² While Strauss agrees with Lubieński that one of the two mutually exclusive doctrines is indeed a new scientific method; contrary to Lubieński, he argues that this scientific aspect of Hobbes’s thought was inauthentic, and that while Hobbes’s thought is somewhat intertwined with ancient rationalism, this tendency is also inauthentic. The authentic tendency in Hobbes’s thought, Strauss claims, is an attempt to break away from platonic rationalism. In this, Strauss follows Tönnies, who holds that Hobbes formulates his “deepest anthropological and political thoughts” prior to the discovery and application of natural science to the study of politics, and thus “Hobbes conceived his view of *man* and of the *state* independently of natural science and only subsequently attempted to ground it in a natural-scientific way.”³²³ Hobbes’s “authentic,” pre-scientific view of “man and the state” expresses itself in a “unified, single, and indivisible fundamental outlook that

³¹⁹ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 122.

³²⁰ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 122.

³²¹ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 125.

³²² Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 124-127.

³²³ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 127, emphasis added.

expresses a *single* fundamental will; and this impression is so strong that the observation of the numerous contradictions in Hobbes's writing cannot stand against it."³²⁴

To identify this new attitude, Strauss turns to Hobbes's theory of political obligation and Lubieński's treatment thereof. He departs from the tripartite typology of natural strivings (the vain striving for power, the rational or scientific striving for power, and the striving for security) enumerated in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* and reduces human desire to a *singular* natural striving: "in Hobbes's view the *natural desire* of man is at bottom a striving for ever greater glory; that is, according to Hobbes's conception of glory, it is *vanity*."³²⁵ Strauss argues that vanity is the cause behind the striving for ever more power over others in the state of nature and thus (*pace* Schmitt) vanity is the root or the "domain" of the political.³²⁶ Strauss opposes Lubieński, who equates "natural desire" with a "vague" conception of "life advancement," while agreeing with Lubieński that Hobbes equates "rational good [*ratio naturalis*]" and "natural right" with "self-preservation."³²⁷ Hobbes attaches natural right to self-preservation, and since Hobbes's natural right is based on a subjective claim prior to and independent of any objective natural law order, Strauss argues that Hobbes's new moral attitude is anti-Platonic.

³²⁴ Strauss, "Notes on Hobbes," 124. Strauss enumerates these contradictions as follows: "the uninterrupted, restless, ever-growing striving for power and honor an ever greater power and honor as general inclination of all men: the impossibility of *beatitudo* [bliss]; the denial of science as a goal in itself: *scientia propter potentiam* [science for the sake of power]; the restriction of science to the investigation of material and efficient causes; the denial of the natural sociality of man; the state of nature as war of all against all; the state as an artificial creation; the primacy of natural right, i.e., of claim, over natural law, i.e., over obligation; the coincidence of the social contract with the contract of subordination; the absolute sovereignty of the supreme power and the rejection of the separation of power; the preference for monarchy; the subordination of the church to the state, and therefore of the eternal to the temporal. To analyse the single and indivisible outlook out of which the enumerated these results—this and nothing else is the task of the interpretation of Hobbes" (Strauss, "Notes on Hobbes," 124).

³²⁵ Strauss, "Notes on Hobbes," 129, emphasis added.

³²⁶ Strauss, "Notes on Hobbes," 135. Vanity, is in effect, described here as a first and determining or transitive cause, and thus Strauss knowingly or unknowingly applies an Aristotelian conception of causality to describe Hobbesian vanity.

³²⁷ Strauss, "Notes on Hobbes," 129.

While Strauss agrees with Lubieński that Hobbes equates self-preservation and the moral good with rationality, he also asserts, contrary to Lubieński, that man's natural desire is "*pre-rational*" or "*irrational*" in its striving for "acquisition of power and honor," which is, drawing from Tönnies, "identical" with the "natural inclination of men to harm each other."³²⁸ The natural desire for acquisition of power and honor runs contrary to self-preservation inasmuch as the consequence of men seeking to harm one another in the course of pursuing ever more power for themselves is a premature and violent death for everyone. Human natural desire is thus not in accord with, but in opposition to the rational good. In Strauss's view of Hobbes's new morality, a striving for ever more power and honor can only be considered morally good if motivated by rational deliberation, directed at self-preservation, and thus in "accord with natural *right*."³²⁹ Only a *few* individuals act rationally in the state of nature, as it is contrary to every person's natural desire. Strauss approves of Lubieński's classification of Hobbes as a "moralist," by ascribing a moral legal right to self-preservation, but he thus also holds, contrary to Lubieński, that "self-advancement" is not man's natural desire. The practical problem of ensuring obligation in Strauss's rendition of Hobbes is thus for Strauss as follows: How to override a natural desire (vanity) to harm others. Or to put it slightly differently, how to get individuals in the state of nature to act in accordance with the rational precepts that secure life, when "man is by nature wolf to man."³³⁰

³²⁸ Strauss, "Notes on Hobbes," 129-130, emphasis added.

³²⁹ Strauss, "Notes on Hobbes," 129, emphasis added.

³³⁰ Strauss, "Notes on Hobbes," 130.

3. 1. 3. *Obligation and the fear of violent death*

Beside his disagreement with Lubieński over the meaning of natural desire in Hobbes, Strauss's other objection levelled at Lubieński concerns Hobbes's theory of political obligation. Lubieński, he argues, puts the question of obligation at the center of his analysis so as to show how Hobbes's "natural-scientific" or empirical framework is compatible with his theory of obligation.³³¹ Lubieński argues that preservation of life is the highest good and the ground for obligation. The inadequacy in positing self-preservation as the greatest good, Strauss counters, is apparent if the inverse expression of self-preservation is considered: that is to say, if Lubieński is right in positing that self-preservation is the greatest good, then death, by being antithetical to life, is the greatest evil.³³² The view of death as the greatest of all evils, Strauss argues, is contradicted by the fact that Hobbes at times states that death is preferred over life, and in such instances, death is "counted among the goods" and thus self-preservation of life cannot be an "absolute and irrefutable demand of reason."³³³ Individuals have a natural right to act with regard to self-preservation, but are not obliged to preserve their lives. The problem in translating Hobbes's natural right to self-preservation into a universally applicable ethics then is that the preservation of life is a *subjective* liberty, not an *objective* and binding *obligation*, and thus Strauss states that self-preservation "cannot quite be the norm of a *universally* valid ethics."³³⁴ He proposes instead: "the content of obligation consists not in the means for the preservation of life generally, but in the means for the

³³¹ Strauss, "Notes on Hobbes," 127.

³³² Strauss, "Notes on Hobbes," 131.

³³³ Strauss, "Notes on Hobbes," 130-131.

³³⁴ Strauss, "Notes on Hobbes," 131.

preservation of life against the attack of other men.”³³⁵ It is fear of ““life-threatening danger”” which makes obligation “compulsory.”³³⁶ Only fear of a *violent* death succeeds as the norm for a universally valid ethics, whereas fear of a *natural* death fails. The reason for this is that natural reason, directed at the rational preservation of life, is an insufficient ground for political obligation since humans are in the last instance motivated by their passions (i.e., not rational calculations). For reason to be operative it must be grounded in the strongest of the passions.

For an obligation to be categorized as moral, however, Lubieński argues it must be in accord with reason. In this and the view that according to Hobbes rationality is defined as being in accord with self-preservation, Strauss agrees with Lubieński. Thus, an obligation grounded in fear is immoral since its foundation is in a passion. In order to solve this problem, Strauss contends that Lubieński distinguished between two conceptions of fear in Hobbes’s political thought: an ““intellectual”” or “logical” fear and a “psychological,” “compulsive” fear.³³⁷ The former (intellectual or logical fear) is “far-sighted” and demarcated by the “horizon of violent death” (i.e. the liberal moral horizon) and thus moral; the latter (affective fear) is “shortsighted” and “without a horizon” and thus immoral.³³⁸ Opposing this distinction in Lubieński’s reading, Strauss argues that “[a]ccording to Hobbes, there is only *one* ground of obligation: fear of violent death as the fear that defines man completely from top to bottom.”³³⁹ Following Tönnies, Strauss argues that the logical and psychological motives for obligation coincide. To fit the

³³⁵ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 132.

³³⁶ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 131. In this context, he repeats his insight from *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* that according to Hobbes there is no greatest good, only primary good (survival), but that there exists a greatest evil. He brings this insight to the fore, not as earlier, to stress the need be alive in order to obtain any good whatsoever, but to secure the applicability of political obligations.

³³⁷ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 131-32.

³³⁸ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 132.

³³⁹ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 133.

criteria for moral theory of obligation (as being in accordance with reason) fear of violent death must be both *affective* and *rational*: “the *rational* consciousness of obligation constitutes itself in *foreseeing* something frightening, or rather the most frightening thing there is, namely, violent death.”³⁴⁰ Strauss provides an account for why the fear of violent death is partly *affective* and partly *rational*, both “*psychological*” and “*logical*.”

3. 1. 4. *The dialectics of Hobbes’s teaching on obligation*

To adjoin *passion* with *reason*, Strauss tells a dialectical story of a generic “blinded” person, a mentally adolescent boy, who is trapped in a man’s body, “moves” out of the “state of nature” and finally becomes an “enlightened citizen of the state.”³⁴¹ The two dialectical poles between which this *educational* story unfolds are vanity and the fear of violent death. The vain “striving of man to please himself through being recognized by other men as their superior,” necessarily leads the boy into a struggle for superiority.³⁴² Blind to the limits of his powers, the vain boy seeks “mastery over all men.”³⁴³ In the encounter with another person’s power, the boy learns not only the *relative* limit of his own powers, but also, and more significantly, the *absolute* limit to his power as he becomes cognizant of a potential deadly resolution to the strife. It is the “experience” of “danger” that instils in us the greatest of all fears, the “fear for a violent death.” The effective “fear of that death” coincides with the “recognition of violent death as the greatest evil.”³⁴⁴ Strauss has two of his conceptions of Hobbesian rationality coinciding

³⁴⁰ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 132, emphasis added.

³⁴¹ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 134.

³⁴² Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 134.

³⁴³ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 135.

³⁴⁴ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 133.

here: the capacity of foresight and the preservation of life. Humans are by nature *educable* in that the vanity of our adolescence is tamed by fear.³⁴⁵

It is for this reason that Strauss later crowns fear of violent death the “majesty” of passions, since it alone has the capacity to conquer man’s singular natural desire.³⁴⁶ It is fear of violent death that brings about the “rational minimal demand,” which restricts vanity’s “maximal demand” for “ever greater triumphs.”³⁴⁷ It is fear of violent death that educates the vain boy to lay down his claim to all things, and by free will become a contractual citizen of an artificial state. It is fear of violent death that effectively compels the individuals to observe a set of rational natural law precepts that ensure security from fatal danger. The aim or purpose of the Hobbesian state is thus to secure the safety of each citizen against the “attack by other men” and it is thus in accord with natural reason.³⁴⁸ A citizenry whose self-consciousness is determined by fear of violent death forms the state. It is fear of violent death that is the affective and inverse expression of the bourgeois preference for life; that is, the liberal moral horizon (as discussed in the previous chapter) as I identified in “Notes on Schmitt.” The basis of the bourgeois pacifist virtues is rooted in fear of violent death, which leads Hobbes, Strauss argues, to dismiss any ancient or aristocratic virtues that are expressions of vanity and antithetical to

³⁴⁵ This dialectical story would cause Strauss problems in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, as the account presupposes an understanding of human nature in which all individuals are propelled by the same natural desire — vanity. Strauss unambiguously argues in “Notes on Hobbes” that vanity is natural to *all* individuals, not only some: “Lubieński’s view that, according to Hobbes, the unrestrained striving for glory ‘come to sight only in *some* men’ is based on a misunderstanding of the passage cited as evidence by him in *Leviathan* 13; and besides, it is completely contradicted by the paragraph immediately following the passage” from which he draws his conclusion, as well as “in numerous other texts.” (Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 129).

³⁴⁶ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 19.

³⁴⁷ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 134-35.

³⁴⁸ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 132.

peacefully living, such as “courage” or “honour.”³⁴⁹

This psychological description complements Strauss’s legalistic argument that Hobbes is the founder of the liberal civilization advanced in “Notes on Schmitt.” The limit of each citizen’s obedience is legally and morally demarcated: the natural right to preserve one’s life is in accord with both natural reason and a liberal moral attitude, which places an unalienable right to life prior to any natural law command. The latter grows from the former: the natural right to life limits the state’s command for obedience when the citizen’s life is at risk. Although Hobbes’s Sovereign is not included in the social contract, and thus is absolute and not subjected to the rule of law, and although citizens’ rights to property are not out of reach of the Sovereign’s power, his command for obedience in matters that risk the life of his subjects is nevertheless not binding on the citizen, whose first right of nature is to preserve his life.³⁵⁰ Before a social contract is formed, each individual is fully free to act as he wishes; but the free individual is a dead man walking, as is every individual in the state of nature. Hobbesian liberty, if unrestricted by law, is a kiss of death. The trade-off is one in which liberty is exchanged for life.

In Strauss’s rendition, Hobbes’s citizens are then psychologically compelled by fear to adhere to a covenant. The covenant is rational in respect to both definitions of reason that Strauss sees in Hobbes: the covenant is (i) grounded in foreseeing a violent death and (ii) guarantees self-preservation and is thus in accord with natural reason. Every individual’s natural right to self-preservation is the first spring in a liberal doctrine that Strauss argues leads to the de-politicization of the political as citizens are not obliged

³⁴⁹ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 132.

³⁵⁰ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 100.

to risk their life as the political relation requires. He adds to this legalistic argument, Hobbes's liberal ontology of human nature, in that humans are *educable* by fear.

It follows from what I outlined above that I agree with Xenos, who argues that Strauss in his interpretation of Hobbes places vanity at the root cause of fear. I am not convinced, however, by Xenos's argument that Strauss adopts Hobbes's use of fear as the principle of rule at this point in time — the principle for rule being identical with obedience — for his own political vision. Xenos writes that for Strauss: “The aim of the state is to impose peace on a recalcitrant human nature. It is, in [Strauss's] formulation, to realize the principles of the political Right.”³⁵¹ Xenos is prone to make this suggestion because the overall aim of his book is to associate the philosophical views articulated by Strauss himself with the neo-conservative ideology promulgated by the self-described “Straussians” who he argues populate Washington-area think tanks and hold government posts and promote fear-mongering.³⁵² If Xenos is correct that Strauss adopts fear as the principle of rule (the principle for Hobbes's authoritarian/militant *liberalism*), Strauss would then in 1932 (i) have adopted the bourgeois consciousness and remained within the liberal moral horizon that he sought to transcend, and (ii) have subscribed to the anarchistic (liberal/socialist) view that humans are educable. The taming of human nature with the fear of violent death marks Hobbes doctrine as bourgeois. It would thus be contradictory if Strauss tried to escape the liberal horizon (as Xenos also claims) by adopting the very principle of rule (obedience for protection against a violent death) that Strauss identifies as the foundation for liberalism. Xenos's argument implies that Strauss thus abandons the moral-ontological foundation for a right-wing authoritarian state he

³⁵¹ Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 69.

³⁵² Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, x-xii.

identifies in his exchange with Schmitt (as discussed in the previous chapter): that humans by nature are evil and hence not good or educable. And this is even before Strauss has provided (which he does first a few years later in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*) the philosophical articulation/proof of the very position Xenos says he has abandoned: that human by nature is evil because they are vain. This is to put the plow before the ox. It would be closer to Strauss's intention at this time to consider the answer to a question he had raised in a 1931 outline (unpublished) to a proposed book, *The Political Science of Hobbes: An Introduction to Natural Right*: "Why not founding of the State on vanity" alone?³⁵³

3. 1. 5. *The political and the economic as the domains of vanity and fear*

Implicitly based on the structural correspondence between Schmitt's conception of the political antagonism and Hobbes's state of nature, Strauss asserts that since vanity being the cause of the war of all against all in the state of nature, vanity is the "domain" of the "political."³⁵⁴ Fear, on the contrary, is the domain of the economic as it wills the rational agreement.³⁵⁵ Vanity and fear in this moral anti-thesis "characterize the two *opposite* ways of human life": the "political" and the "economic" way, the aristocratic and the liberal-socialist way:

It is to the opposition so understood, which is never again developed as purely, as deeply, and as frankly as it is by Hobbes, that one must go back if one wishes to understand the ideal of liberalism, as well as socialism, in its foundation. For each battle against the political in the name of the economic presupposes a preceding *depreciation* of the political. But this depreciation is carried out in such a way that the *political*, as *the domain of vanity*, prestige, the desire for importance, is

³⁵³ Strauss, "The Political Science of Hobbes: An Introduction to Natural Right", in Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion and Related Writings*, 155.

³⁵⁴ Strauss, "Notes on Hobbes," 135.

³⁵⁵ Strauss, "Notes on Hobbes," 135.

opposed, either in a veiled or in an open manner, to the economic as the world of rational, ‘matter-of-fact,’ modest work.³⁵⁶

Economics — rational rules of commerce and modest work — replace political strife; or, as Strauss’s points out that Schmitt puts it: ““liberalism is characterized precisely by the *negation* of the political.””³⁵⁷ Fear of violent death defines the liberal mindset “completely” and “is in accord with the outlook of defense, of a modest life, of working in the rank and file.”³⁵⁸ Strauss adds that the “ideal” of socialism is determined by the fear of violent death as well, and thus complements his view that liberalism and socialism are two sides of the same coin on the basis of their shared “anarchist” view that human by nature is “good” or “educable.”³⁵⁹ The socialist ideal was contrasted by the reality that had played out since the end of the Great War: beside parliamentary opposition to liberal and fascist parties, it had not escaped Strauss that many socialists, beside communists, were also engaged in a life-and-death street struggles against extra-parliamentary, fascist and Right-wing paramilitary groups across Germany. Fear of violent death could hardly be said to determine the consciousness that was informing the actions of these socialists. What Strauss had in mind was that the socialist ideal was tied to economic rationality and thus linked backwards to the fear of violent death. Socialists, like liberals, in Strauss’s view, aimed to create a pacifist and stateless world order without political divisions. The radical left was concerned with physical lethal violence only as a *means*: democratic socialist as a defensive strategy for survival in times of existential threat, or as in the case of the communists, violent revolution as an offensive strategy to transition into a post-capitalist world.

³⁵⁶ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 135, emphasis added.

³⁵⁷ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 100, 112.

³⁵⁸ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 135.

³⁵⁹ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 135; Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 109-110.

The Marxist concern underlying both socialist and communists in this moment — the *end* for which they strived — was the overcoming of indirect structural economic violence — class domination and exploitation — which they rendered political. Marxist political economy identified in capitalist states an economic class division that overdetermined politics and divided the bourgeois nation. While this division had its roots in economics (the private property regime and capitalist mode of production) only political action through the state was widely seen as capable of undoing the capitalist regime. The class division between the owners of the means of production and the wage-laboring class was also recognized as trans-, or inter-national due to the fact that capitalism was an international economic system. Nor was the class struggle — whether violently or peacefully/constitutionally pursued — confined by national borders. Working class political alliances were drawn not (only) along national borders, but along class divisions.

This is important to stress in order to understand the overall political context in which Schmitt polemically designs his conception of the political and Strauss his critique. Schmitt develops his concept of the political in part to counter the Marxist conception of the political. It is thus in reaction, not only to what both Schmitt and Strauss view as liberalism's negation of the political (segmented by rational international trade and peace agreements and liberal state institutions), but also to counter the Marxist (political economic) conception of the political that Schmitt separates political enmity from economic class division by advancing an ontology of the political independent of any underlying economic division.³⁶⁰ Whereas the Marxist conception was internationalist, Schmitt's concept of the political is nationalist. Schmitt's argues that political group association are formed in relation to enemies and the most relevant political actors are

³⁶⁰ This paragraph is informed by an email correspondence with Edward Andrew, April 29, 2014.

nations. In so doing, Schmitt intended to drive a conceptual wedge through the unification of the proletariat on both a national and international basis (the same role World War I had played practically), as well as to counter the neutralization extra-economic inter-state rivalry advanced by liberal institutions such as the League of Nations.³⁶¹

In his conception of the political, Schmitt does not, however, simply replace the Marxist economic substructure of the political — class division and struggle — with an analogous conceptual schema that aligns the friend-enemy distinction along *national* borders. Instead, his concept of the political is immanent or groundless — squarely within the anti-metaphysical tradition. In Strauss’s view, this leads to the shortcoming that he had addressed in his letter to Schmitt (discussed at the end of the preceding chapter) in the late summer of the previous year; namely, that Schmitt’s political right-left distinction relies on “bellicose nationalism” for encircling a sphere of “dominion.”³⁶² Strauss points out that the political, as Schmitt defines it, is not a condition of the nation-state; instead, as Meier clarifies, group *disassociation* is required for *association* and a sphere of *dominion* to form. In other words, an external or internal enemy (such as ‘the Napoleonic French,’ ‘Communists,’ or ‘Jews’) is required for a political friendship unit to form. The folding together of right-wing authoritarianism and bellicose nationalism, oriented at internal and external enemies in Schmitt’s account, is apparent in the historical rise of the Nazis. At a time when the Weimar Republic was “failing conclusively,” anti-Semitism and racial social division came to form core principles of the movement that seizing power out of the Republic’s failure. Needless to say, these

³⁶¹ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt,” 97. Class struggle is posited as one among other spheres of conflicts, out of which the political may arise if the antagonism turns lethal.

³⁶² Strauss, “Strauss letter to Schmitt, September 4, 1932,” 125.

events posed a threat to Strauss as a German Jew. Strauss's re-conceptualization of the domain of the political in "Notes on Schmitt" and "Notes on Hobbes" provides a Hobbesian account of the political in which extra-political *bellicose nationalism* is no longer required to establish the sphere of dominion of a Right-wing authoritarian state. In places of Schmitt's *bellicose nationalism*, it is a conception of human nature as moral evil that grounds the political for Strauss.

In "Notes on Schmitt," Strauss aligns the political antagonism with the Hobbesian state of war. In so doing, Strauss both *individualizes* this political antagonism and assigns it a trans-historical cause in human nature. Strauss thus roots Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction in a natural antagonism between *individuals*, not *groups*. This re-conception of Schmitt's distinction is apparent in "Notes on Hobbes," where Strauss isolates *vanity* as the transitive cause in human nature for why the state of nature is a state of war and thus makes *vanity* the domain of the political. In this account, a *collective* dissociation is *not* required for political association when the political is rooted in *individual* vanity, which in principle transcends national borders and racial difference. Schmitt's "collapse" of an "authoritarian order" with "bellicose nationalism" is thus rendered needless in Strauss's political ontology, since *vanity* substitutes for *bellicose nationalism* as the precondition for *dominion*. As Strauss notes in the margin of his personal copy of Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*: "National world-rule [...] can be expressed *without nationalism proper*: cf. Dante's *Monarchia* endorsing the claim of the Roman nation to world empire."³⁶³ Strauss thus uses Hobbes to argue from a conservative metaphysical/anthropological position that one need not cultivate a bellicose nationalism in order to ground a right-wing authoritarian state as an alternative to liberalism.

³⁶³ Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 242.

In Strauss's Hobbesian modification of Schmitt's conception of the political, the political is "*necessary* because it is given in human nature [vanity]" and it is conditional for the state. However, the political so defined is not yet foundational for a *Right-wing* authoritarian state for the reason that Strauss has not yet proved that the political domain arises because of "the [moral] *natural evil* of man"—the criteria for the "ultimate foundation of the [political] Right."³⁶⁴ The political provides the condition of a right-wing authoritarian state only if Strauss can demonstrate that it is due to vanity that man is by nature evil. Yet, before Strauss was able to present a *constitutive* principle of the state, it became clear that the disassociation of Right-wing *authoritarianism* from Nazism's *bellicose* and *anti-Semitic* nationalism had, with Hitler's seizure of power on January 30, 1933, and extension of his extra-constitutional powers, become an existential question for Strauss.³⁶⁵ The destruction of the liberal democratic Weimar regime and its replacement by an anti-Semitic authoritarian dictator did not find favor with Strauss.

In a letter to Karl Löwith in Italy, May 19, 1933, Strauss wrote from Paris that he "see[s] no acceptable possibility of living under the swastika [*Hakenkreuz*]; that is to say, under a symbol that says to me nothing but: you and your kind, you are all by nature subhuman and therefore true pariahs."³⁶⁶ Later in the same letter, Strauss lists the principles of the ground upon which to "protest" against the "new right-wing Germany" and its *Führer*:

³⁶⁴ Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 101; Strauss, "Strauss letter to Schmitt, September 4, 1932," 125.

³⁶⁵ The Reichstag Fire Decree passed February 28 resulted in entrenchment on civil liberties, and the Enabling Act of March 23, allowed for unconstitutional amendments to pass without parliamentary approval, and "sought to purge 'Non-Aryan' Germans from the German bureaucracy and academic institutions, sending many Jewish scholars to France and England in search of refuge" (Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 57). Additional "anti-Jewish legislation passed on April 1 and the ensuing boycott of Jewish business and professionals" (Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 16).

³⁶⁶ Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, p. 16; original in Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 625.

the fact that the new Right-wing Germany does not tolerate us says nothing against the principles of the right. To the contrary: only from the principles of the right, that is from fascist, authoritarian and *imperial* principles, is it possible with decency, that is, without the laughable and despicable appeal to the *droits imprescriptibles de l'homme* to protest against the shabby abomination [*meskine Unwesen*]. I am reading Caesar's Commentaries with deep understanding, and I think of Virgil's *Tu regere imperio . . . parcere subjectis et debellare superbos* [*To rule the empire... spare the subjected and war down the proud*]. There is no reason to crawl to the cross, neither to the cross of liberalism, as long as somewhere in the world there is a glimmer of the spark of Roman thought. And even then: rather than any cross, I'll take the ghetto [*lieber als jegliches Kreuz das Ghetto*].³⁶⁷

In "Notes on Schmitt" and "Notes on Hobbes" Strauss traces back the origin of the "inalienable human rights of man" to Hobbes's bourgeois conception of natural right. In his Zionist polemics, he had framed liberal political emancipation as secularized universalist Christian values—a position from which he had not wavered. It would thus have been intellectually dishonest for Strauss to crawl to "the crosses [*Kreuze*]" of Christianity and Liberalism to avoid the swastika [*Hakenkreuz*]. Furthermore, Strauss sees no need for it as "long as anywhere in the world there is a glimmer of the spark of Roman thought." If the protest against Hitler is possible "only from the principles of the right, that is from fascist, authoritarian and *imperial* principles"—then the question of how these principles are different from those of the Nazis must be answered.³⁶⁸

Xenos's answer is that all "three principles" of "fascist, authoritarian and *imperial*

³⁶⁷ Shell, "Strauss on 'German Nihilism,'" 185; original in Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 625. For different interpretations of this letter see Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 60-63; Xenos *Cloaked in Virtue*, xv-xvi, 15-17; Shell, "'Leo Strauss's Lecture on 'German Nihilism,'" 185-188; Altman, *The German Stranger: Leo Strauss and National Socialism*, 229-231. Most significantly for the argument at hand is my disagreement with Altman's claim that "*das meskine Unwesen*" is a reference to "Jews". Altman notes that Smith, Werner Dannhauser, Richard Wolin and Sheppard argues that "*das meskine Unwesen*" is a reference to Hitler, and Minovitz and Benjamin Lazier to the "Nazis or Nazism generally" (Altman, *The German Stranger: Leo Strauss and National Socialism*, 229).

³⁶⁸ Shell has pointed out that Löwith in his reply disagrees with Strauss's inclusion of fascism in the right on the basis of fascists' democratic principle. The authoritarian leader embodies the homogenous/democratic will of the people.

rule” are grounded in Strauss’s notion of “dominion.”³⁶⁹ The principle of dominion, the “common denominator” of these principles, he states, drawing from John McCormick, is “rule through *fear*.”³⁷⁰ As I explained above, I disagree. Strauss’s argument in “Notes on Hobbes” is that the foundational principle of *liberalism* is fear of violent death. Furthermore, if it is correct that Strauss thought, as Xenos argues, that the National Socialists ruled “through fear, and it, too, was based on a grouping of friends and enemies,” then fear *cannot* be the principle that differentiates Strauss’s proposed right-wing alternative to Nazism.³⁷¹ Xenos concedes as much in his next sentence, in which he claims that the “foundational principle” of the Nazis “was not the *inherent evil of the human being* [which in Xenos’s argument necessitates fear] but rather *race* and it thus excluded Strauss and Löwith.”³⁷² While Strauss had not yet at this time accounted for why human beings are by nature inherently evil — this he does first in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, to which I turn to shortly — Xenos is right in identifying *race*, figured in the concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* as the community of a ruler race, as the principle underlining Nazi rule. The Nazis collapsed Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction with bellicose nationalism built around the understanding of *Volksgemeinschaft* and the concept of *Lebensraum* — the *racist* justification of the aggressive conquest of *territory* for the use of the superior German *Volk* — which came to influence both domestic and foreign policy of the Third Reich. The principle of the right that Strauss envisions as an alternative to Nazism is lacking in bellicose nationalism and it is one not based on fear or

³⁶⁹ Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 59.

³⁷⁰ Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 59; John P. McCormick, “Fear, Technology, and the State: Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, and the Revival of Hobbes in Weimar and National Socialist Germany.” *Political Theory* 22, no.4 (November 1994): 619-952.

³⁷¹ Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 59.

³⁷² Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 59.

racism, and thus more like the principles of the Roman Empire before its Christianization, or Mussolini's Italy at this time.³⁷³

In Virgil's verse that Strauss refers to in the passage above — "May you remember, Roman, to rule the peoples with an empire. These will be your arts: to impose the custom of peace, to spare the subjected and war down the *proud*" — Xenos detects a right-wing "formula for reconstituting Jewish communities in subordinate but protected pre-Enlightenment, imperial form [in Germany] (i.e., "to spare the conquered")."³⁷⁴ If this is the formula that Strauss had in mind, then his "deeper" understanding of Caesar's *Commentaries* had Virgil's advice surpass the Roman's policy towards Judaism that Strauss describes in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*: "the powerful Romans tolerated every type of religion within their city with the *exception* of Judaism, in which the obedience to a mortal king was forbidden."³⁷⁵ It was precisely vanity or pride (to be war down by the Romans) that Hobbes, Strauss argues in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, pins down as the main root of revealed religion and the Jewish refusal to recognize a mortal king. However, the secularization of the Jewish principle of obedience to include a

³⁷³ Xenos suggests that Strauss holds that "a properly Fascist movement such as the Italian one was to be distinguished from National Socialism by the absence of a racial component (as opposed to a national one) and its promotion of a premodern corporatist social program" (Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 17). Xenos also provides additional circumstantial evidence of Strauss's support for Italian fascism: "In his memoir, the philosopher Hans Jonas, who knew Strauss since their student days, says of him that he was an early supporter of Mussolini, albeit when Mussolini was free of anti-Semitism" (Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 149n 55. Xenos reference is to Jonas, Hans, *Erinnerungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 2003, 262). And Zank writes that "In Paris Strauss connected with Charles Maurras of the fascist *Action Française*, and even after the Nazis took power in Germany he lamented in a letter to Karl Löwith that he was fed up with the Jewish expatriate intelligentsia and wished he could return to Germany, even if it meant living in a ghetto. Strauss's embrace of 'pagan-fascist' political principles are attested for the early 1920s, when he was a political Zionist fighting first cultural Zionism from the stand-point of orthodoxy and then religious Zionism from the standpoint of atheism, and there is no evidence that Strauss ever turned from the tough Jabotinskyite political 'realism' to which he had 'converted' at the age of seventeen to any sort of 'idealism'" (Zank, *The Early Writings*, xi).

³⁷⁴ The full quotation from Virgil's *Aeneid* is translated by Altman, *The German Stranger: Leo Strauss and National Socialism*, 227n 11; Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 17.

³⁷⁵ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 96, emphasis added.

secular Sovereign (as to spare the subjected), as we saw in the previous chapter, had done little to convince anti-Semites (like de Lagarde) that assimilated Jews should be spared; quite the opposite: anti-Semites argued that the German Jewry had to be purged, and with them, in de Lagarde's words, the "'Jewification' of the German spirit."³⁷⁶ And while Strauss's earlier engagement with Zionism had alerted him to the existential danger of Schmitt's relativist conception of the political as embodied by the Nazis (for whom identity relied on political dissociation from an enemy), he could not have imagined the horrors and scale of the final solution. It is thus possible that Strauss's appealed to Virgil's verse for a policy on the Jews in Germany after the rise of Hitler. In contrast to Xenos, Susan Shell has suggested that it was first in England that Strauss discovered an understanding of Roman thought that could actually serve as bulwark for the Jews against the Nazis. I will examine Shell's claim in the next chapter; for now, I will turn to Strauss's research on Hobbes in England.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁶ Strauss, "Paul de Lagarde," 94.

³⁷⁷ Shell, "Strauss on 'German Nihilism,'" 185-188.

Part II

3. 2. 1. *England and the quest for moral evil*

Strauss left Paris for London in January of 1934, along with his wife and her son. He soon favored England over France.³⁷⁸ In March, three months after arriving in England, he moved north to Derbyshire after the Duke of Devonshire made arrangements for Strauss to access some manuscripts by Hobbes there.³⁷⁹ He arrived in Cambridge as a research student at Sidney Sussex College in January 1935.³⁸⁰ In a letter written to Kojève on May 9, 1935, Straus described the foreword to *Philosophy and Law*, which had recently been published as part of the celebration of the eight hundredth anniversary of Maimonides's birth, as "very daring" and the "best thing" he had "written" to date.³⁸¹ The book had been prepared with a view to apply for a professorship at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.³⁸² He added:

In the meantime my study of 'Hobbes's Political Science in its Genesis' is finished. I believe that it is good. Other than the study [*Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origins of Algebra*] by Klein [...], it is the first attempt at a radical liberation from the modern prejudice. On several occasions I refer to Hegel, and do not fail to mention your [Kojève's] name. The study will appear in

³⁷⁸ Steven Smith, "Leo Strauss; The Outline of a Life," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, 22.

³⁷⁹ "The duke of Devonshire had granted Strauss access to unpublished documents from Hobbes's period with the Cavendish family at a castle in Derbyshire." (Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 6). In a letter to Kojève in April 9, 1934, Strauss writes: "I may perhaps(!) have found Hobbes's hitherto entirely unknown writing—a collection of 10 essays, the first five which deal with *vanity* and related phenomena" (the letter is transcribed, translated and annotated by Victor Gourevitch *On Tyranny, Revised and Expanded Edition, including the Strauss-Kojève correspondance*, ed. by Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 225). These unknown writing of Hobbes was written under pseudonym. Two months later, after having "read and studied" the manuscript, Strauss writes Kojève in June 3, 1934, it is "absolutely certain" that Hobbes is its author (227). The archivist at Derbyshire contested the authorship and thus to avoid controversy Strauss did not make the manuscripts integral to his argument.

³⁸⁰ Steven Smith, "Leo Strauss; The Outline of a Life," 23.

³⁸¹ In Gourevitch and Roth, *On Tyranny, Revised and Expanded Edition, including the Strauss-Kojève correspondance*, 230. Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, first published as *Philosophie und Gesetz. Beiträge zum Verständnis Maimunis und seiner Vorläufer* (Berlin: Schocken, 1935).

³⁸² Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2*, 363.

the first volume of my posthumous works, since no German publisher or English translator can be found.³⁸³

Three days later, on May 12, 1935, Strauss asked Gadamer and Krüger for help to “get the writing placed somewhere in a German speaking country.”³⁸⁴ Nothing came of it and it was not until 1965 that the first German edition of the book appeared. Instead, Clarendon Press, Oxford, saw to the translation and final publication of the manuscript in 1936, with the English title, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Genesis*.

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The Political Philosophy of Hobbes, builds on “Notes on Schmitt” and presents Hobbes as the first modern philosopher. Repeating his view in “Notes on Hobbes,” Strauss argues that Hobbes’s political philosophy is “the most important testimony to the struggle which has been fought against the aristocracy in the name of bourgeois virtue.”³⁸⁶ He advances the criticism of liberalism and socialism that he had first developed in “Notes on Schmitt,” by arriving at moral and ontological insights through Hobbes’s view on human nature.³⁸⁷ He lays bare in his account of Hobbes’s prescientific description of vanity the moral-ontological piece needed to supersede the liberal moral horizon and constitutional state: humans are morally evil due to human nature alone, i.e., independently of both a transcendental guarantor and the horizon of death

³⁸³ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 230.

³⁸⁴ Leo Strauss, “Letter to Gadamer and Krüger on May 12, 1935,” translated by Bartlett and Minkov in Strauss, *Hobbes’s Critique of Religion and Related Writings*, 159; original copy in Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 3, 443-447.

³⁸⁵ *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* was instrumental in securing Strauss a teaching position at the New School of Social Research in New York in 1938. R. H. Tawney, Christian socialist, economic historian and political theorist, wrote a glowing recommendation letter for Strauss in 1938.

³⁸⁶ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 126.

³⁸⁷ Repeating an argument from “Notes on Schmitt,” the justification Strauss gives is that Hobbes’s doctrine of “man and state” is the “ideal of civilization in its modern form, the ideal both of the bourgeois-capitalist development and of the socialist movement, was founded and expounded by Hobbes with a depth, clarity, and sincerity never rivaled before or since” (Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 1).

(Hobbes/Liberalism). Or, as Xenos has put it, “Strauss’s argument favors a return to a view of the human being as naturally evil, and not innocently so.”³⁸⁸ In making such return possible, Strauss modifies his earlier claim in “Notes on Schmitt” that Hobbes viewed human evil as innocent animal evil.³⁸⁹ He makes this alteration by differentiating human evil from animal evil by making the case that in Hobbes’s prescientific view of the passions there exists an absolute ontological distinction between human and animal desire. Exploring this further development of the distinction between human and animal desire over in this section, I will first show how Strauss sees in vanity (i) the psychological cause to why the state of nature is a state of war and (ii) the origin of human evil. Thereafter, I address Janssens’s (and by extension, Xenos’s) conjectural hypothesis that the vantage point from which Strauss asserts that man by nature is evil is informed by Socratic-Platonic natural law. In the concluding section, I return to assess Xenos’s hypothesis that Strauss adopts fear as the principle of obedience in light of his comparison of Hobbes’s political science with the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*. For reason of clarity, I begin with a brief sketch of Strauss’s approach and his case for Hobbes as the first philosopher of the bourgeoisie in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*.

3. 2. 2. *Strauss’s approach*

In the draft version of a lecture on Heidegger, delivered nearly twenty years later in Chicago (in the early 1950s), Strauss writes of the development of philosophical thought in Germany in the early 20th century. This recapitulation helps introduce Strauss’s

³⁸⁸ Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 57.

³⁸⁹ Strauss, “Notes on Schmitt”, 110.

approach in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, already underway in “Notes on Schmitt”:

It was Heidegger’s critique of Husserl’s phenomenology which became decisive: it became so precisely because that criticism consisted in a radicalization of Husserl’s own question and questioning. Briefly, Husserl once said to me, who had been trained in the Marburg neo-Kantian School, that the neo-Kantians were superior to all other German philosophical schools, but they made the mistake of beginning with the roof. He meant the following. The primary theme of Marburg neo-Kantianism was the analysis of *science*. But science, Husserl taught, is derivative from our primary knowledge of the world of things: science is not the perfection of man’s understanding of the world, but a specific modification of that *prescientific understanding*. The meaningful genesis of science out of prescientific understanding is a *problem*: the primary theme is the *philosophical understanding of the pre-scientific world*, and therefore in the first places the analysis of the sensibly perceived thing. According to Heidegger, Husserl himself began with the roof: *the merely sensibly perceived thing is itself derivative*; there are not first sensibly perceived things and thereafter the same things in a state of being valued or in a state of affecting us. Our primary understanding of the world is not an understanding of things as objects but of what the Greeks indicated by *pragmata*. The horizon within which Husserl had analyzed the world of prescientific understanding was the pure consciousness as the absolute being. Heidegger questioned that orientation by referring to the fact that the inner time belonging to the pure consciousness cannot be understood if one abstracts from the fact that this time is necessarily finite, and even constituted by man’s *mortality*.³⁹⁰

In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss first argues — like Husserl against the neo-Kantians — that Hobbes’s “fundamental view of human life” is independent, and comes prior to his discovery and application of a modern science. Hobbes’s view of human life derives from a primary knowledge of the world: from a “*pre-scientific*” observation of self and others and the “actual *experience* of how men behave in daily life and in ‘public conversation.’”³⁹¹ Strauss adds that “[t]he experience, underlying Hobbes’s

³⁹⁰ Strauss, “Introduction to Existentialism,” 28-29, emphasis added.

³⁹¹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, p. x, emphasis added. The German manuscript reads: “Political philosophy is independent of natural science because its *principles* are not borrowed from natural science, are not, indeed, borrowed from any science, but are provided by experience [*die Erfahrung*], by the experience [*die Erfahrung*] which every one has of himself, or, to put it more accurately, are discovered by the efforts of self-knowledge [*die Selbsterkenntnis*] and the self-

view of human life, must, in its turn, be traced back to a specific *moral attitude*.”³⁹² He thus follows Heidegger’s radicalization of Husserl’s questioning, suggesting that it is not Hobbes’s “pure consciousness” that observes the world. It is a repetition with a difference, however, as Hobbes’s understanding of the world, Strauss argues, is not framed merely “by man’s mortality” *per se*; but a *moral* bourgeois consciousness determined by the horizon of fear of violent death.

It is in Hobbes’s observations of human life prior to his adoption of modern science, with its amoral or neutral conception of the striving for power, that Strauss excavates a *moral* foundation of Hobbes’s political philosophy.³⁹³ At the core of this moral attitude, Strauss locates the antithesis vanity-fear that he had identified in “Notes on Hobbes.” In a letter Strauss wrote to Gadamer and Krüger in May 12, 1935, he explains:

The leading outlook in Hobbes is characterized by the fundamental antithesis of vanity and fear of violent death, and the inner connection between the two sides of this antithesis brings out, ever more emphatically, that this antithesis is intended *morally*, and that, as well as why, Hobbes shies away from its moral understanding.³⁹⁴

As the subtitle of the book (*The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Genesis*) indicates, it is the “*genesis*” or development of this moral “*basis*” that Strauss traces throughout Hobbes’s written corpus. The adoption of science obscures the way in which “Hobbes’s political philosophy rests not on the illusion of an *amoral* morality, but on a *new* morality, or, to speak according to Hobbes’s intention, on a new grounding of the

examination [*die Selbstprüfung*] of every one” (Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 7; Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 20).

³⁹² Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, x.

³⁹³ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, ix, 5.

³⁹⁴ Strauss, “Letter to Gadamer and Krüger on May 12, 1935,” 160, emphasis added.

one eternal morality.”³⁹⁵ This new and trans-historical morality, Strauss argues, is Hobbes’s bourgeois answer to the classical question of man’s “right way of life”; that is, a life lived in peace and material prosperity.³⁹⁶ The aim of Hobbes’s bourgeois state is to secure the life of its citizens; a ground for existence stipulated by the natural right of each individual to preserve his or her life.

For Hobbes obviously starts, not, as the great tradition did, from natural ‘law,’ i.e. from an objective order, but from natural ‘right,’ i.e. from an absolutely justified subjective claim which, far from being dependent on any previous law, order, or obligation, is itself the origin of all law, order, or obligation. [...] For, by starting from ‘right’ and thus denying the primacy of ‘law’ (or, what amounts fundamentally to the same, of ‘virtue’), Hobbes makes a stand against the idealistic tradition.”³⁹⁷

Every important contradiction in Hobbes’s work, Strauss suggests, arises because the “traditional conceptions [of Natural Law] are not appropriate to [Hobbes’s] fundamentally untraditional view, and the conceptions provided by the modern science are not congenial to a view of human life originating in a *moral attitude*.”³⁹⁸ It is by means of one of these contradictions that Strauss re-evaluates the question of man’s moral status in Hobbes’s corpus and in general.

3. 2. 3. *The first bourgeois philosopher*

The moral antithesis vanity-fear serves to explain three different levels of human affairs in Strauss’s account of Hobbes as the founder of the artificial bourgeois state: (i) *psychological*: from vanity to a fear of violent death; (ii) *political*: from the pre-political state of nature to civil society; (ii) *historical*: moving from aristocratic feudalism and religious authority to bourgeois and secular modernity. The three levels correspond to the

³⁹⁵ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 15, emphasis added.

³⁹⁶ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 1.

³⁹⁷ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, viii.

³⁹⁸ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, xi, emphasis added.

resistance that Strauss had previously argued, in “Notes on Hobbes,” liberalism had to “fight its way through”: first and foremost, “*human nature*”, as well as “the old power of the *Church* and the *feudal state*.”³⁹⁹ The weapon used on all fronts is the fear of violent death. Let us now examine these three levels of human affairs one by one:

Against human nature

In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss aligns Hobbes’s two postulates of human nature — “natural appetite” and “natural reason” — with the moral antithesis vanity-fear.⁴⁰⁰ Natural appetite is “reduced” to vanity and natural reason “to the principle of self-preservation.”⁴⁰¹ Natural reason is insufficient to restrain vanity since “natural appetite” is dominant. To make reason potent (i.e., capable of enforcing norms that ensure a peaceful commonwealth), Hobbes grounds reason in fear of violent death — the only passion that “conquers” and “convinces” vanity.⁴⁰² In other words, Hobbes plays one passion against the other, fear against vanity, in order “to draw up a political philosophy which will from the outset be in harmony with the passions.”⁴⁰³

As a vain individual enters into a struggle with another person, the imaginary perception of his or her own power may or may not correspond to reality — determined as this matter is by the outcome of the contest. The struggle is initially for the other’s recognition in which the combatant who recognizes the

³⁹⁹ Strauss, “Notes on Hobbes,” 122, emphasis added.

⁴⁰⁰ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 10-17, 113, 154.

⁴⁰¹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 15.

⁴⁰² Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 103, emphasis added.

⁴⁰³ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 103.

other's superior power feels "slighted."⁴⁰⁴ Insult is turned into "hatred" when physical harm is inflicted. This is the step missing in the description of the dialectical story from "Notes on Hobbes": *hatred* turns the striving for the opponent's recognition into a *desire* to kill him. A life-and-death struggle unfolds and awakens the subject to a potential violent death in the hands of the other. The "struggle-over-life-and-death" corresponds to what Strauss identifies as the *essential* relation of enmity in Schmitt's conception of the political.

Strauss casts fear of violent death as a pre-rational passion that is "symmetrically" opposed to vanity, but that causes reason and prudence:

Not the rational and therefore always uncertain *knowledge* that death is the greatest and supreme evil, but the *fear* of death, i.e., the emotional and inevitable, and therefore necessary and certain, aversion from death is the origin of law and the State. This fear is a mutual fear, i.e. it is the fear each man has of every other man as his potential murderer. This fear of a violent death, *pre-rational* in its *origin*, but *rational in effect*, and not the rational principle of self-preservation, is, according to Hobbes, the root of all right and therewith of all morality.⁴⁰⁵

With this, Strauss explicitly adds a theory of causality to the relation between fear of violent death and natural reason: the pre-rational fear of violent death is the affective *cause* of natural reason that is in accord with the rational laws of nature. Silently dropped from the dialectical story, however, is the reliance on reason and the associated capacity to foresee a violent death.⁴⁰⁶ In rearticulating the natural right for self-preservation into its own affective cause, Strauss relies on Hegel's "authority" for a definition of the bourgeois self-consciousness as being defined

⁴⁰⁴ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 20.

⁴⁰⁵ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 17-18, emphasis added.

⁴⁰⁶ We become aware of the prospect of dying violently in the hands of others first after we enter into the struggle for ever more power over others. In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss provides for two definitions of reason that are operative in Hobbes: (i) the capability to foresee the future, and (ii) that which is in accord with self-preservation. The ability to foresee the future is required for fear to attach itself to a prospective violent death.

by the fear of violent death.⁴⁰⁷ In Strauss's own words, he "attempted to show" that "Hegel's analysis of the bourgeois corroborates the identity of Hobbes's morality and bourgeois morality."⁴⁰⁸

The reason why every individual fears violent death is that they are each equally at risk of dying at the hands of another, according to Hobbes's emphasis on a natural equality that stipulates that the weakest can kill the strongest. When fear of violent death is shared by everyone, it is "exalted to a principle"; and it is only at this point that Hobbes's "new [bourgeois] philosophy become possible."⁴⁰⁹ Fear of violent death makes man reasonable: "bourgeois virtue, the right life of man is understood exclusively as an emanation of his right self-consciousness."⁴¹⁰ Former enemies decide to secure their own self-preservation (which is in accord with natural reason) by adhering to the rational precepts enumerated in the laws of nature (i.e., a set of obligations in accord with natural reason).⁴¹¹

It is the potentially deadly antagonism that defines the essential relation in both Hobbes and Schmitt's state theory in Strauss's account. It is the readiness to kill and die, he argues, that sets the political apart from all other domains of culture in Schmitt's conception. Similarly, in Strauss's reading of Hobbes, violent death becomes the ground for the political covenant when attached to fear. There

⁴⁰⁷ Strauss, "Letter to Gadamer and Krüger on May 12, 1935," 162.

⁴⁰⁸ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 122.

⁴⁰⁹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 102.

⁴¹⁰ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 128.

⁴¹¹ The first two natural law precepts stipulate that each individual should seek peace by surrendering their natural right to all things. The subsidiary clause of the second law of nature specifies that the natural right to self-preservation is *unalienable*. Each individual surrenders their rights only to the extent that their life is preserved. Therefore, Strauss suggested that Hobbes's natural laws are not proper obligations.

are two state resolutions to the state of war accounted for by Strauss: (i) despotism, the *natural* state in which one of the combatants surrenders and recognizes the other's superiority (a ruler-ruled relation that Strauss calls "natural dominion"); and (ii) the Hobbesian *artificial* state, in which all men surrender their rights to an absolute Sovereign (the ruler—ruled relation that he calls "artificial dominion").

The *artificial* state, which is as such more perfect, arises when the two opponents are both seized with fear for their lives, overcome their vanity and shame of confessing their fear, and recognize as their real enemy not the rival, but 'that terribly enemy of nature, death', who, as their common enemy, forces them to mutual understanding, trust, and union, and thus procures them the possibility of completing the founding of the State for the purpose of providing safeguards for the longest possible term, against the common enemy.⁴¹²

As a result of the transposition of "enemy" from the opponent onto the "common" and objective and potential consequence of enmity (violent death) the struggle-unto-death is aborted, and Schmitt's political antagonism neutralized by the creation of an artificial, bourgeois state against human nature.⁴¹³

Against feudal aristocracy

As Hobbes came of age, Strauss argues, he turns from an appreciation, to a critique of aristocratic virtues: "the *genesis* of Hobbes's political philosophy is nothing other than the progressive supplanting of aristocratic virtue by bourgeois virtue."⁴¹⁴ In his mature political work, Hobbes links all aristocratic virtues to vanity and all bourgeois virtues to fear of violent death. In respect to vanity, Strauss explains, "a man's honour is the recognition by others of his superiority

⁴¹² Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 22, emphasis added.

⁴¹³ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 21-22.

⁴¹⁴ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 126, emphasis added.

over those others [...] All emotions or actions which arise from consciousness of superiority are ‘honourable.’”⁴¹⁵ Pride and glory are the “consciousness of superiority,” and when it is “well founded” (i.e. not imaginary, but reflecting reality), this consciousness of superiority becomes “magnanimity.”⁴¹⁶ Hobbes rejects all aristocratic virtues since they are grounded in vanity.⁴¹⁷ “Because Hobbes finally recognizes fear of violent death as the basis of all virtues, he must finally question every obligation which causes man to risk his life.”⁴¹⁸ Thus any virtue inconsistent with peacefully living is no longer perceived as a virtue: “courage” and “generosity” are thus dismissed, and by the time Hobbes published *De Cive* in 1642, the conclusion that fear is the “sufficient motive for *all* right behavior” includes times of war.⁴¹⁹ Alongside the ideals of “justice and charity,” Hobbes “recognizes only industry and thrift.”⁴²⁰ It is “in the movement from the principle of *honour* to the principle of *fear*, [that] Hobbes’s political philosophy comes into being.”⁴²¹

Hobbes’s moral teaching is the moral of the “middle class.”⁴²² Whereas Hobbes blames the Presbyterian clergy and the middle class for the outbreak of the civil war in the *Behemoth*, Strauss argues that his attacks are directed “by no means the middle class itself, its being and its ideal”; his attack is directed at their

⁴¹⁵ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 50.

⁴¹⁶ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 50-51.

⁴¹⁷ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 113-114.

⁴¹⁸ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 114, 127-28.

⁴¹⁹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 113, emphasis added.

⁴²⁰ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 120. Recognition of any other virtue is due to Hobbes’s “entanglement in the tradition” (Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 132).

⁴²¹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 128, emphasis added.

⁴²² Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 117.

“policy” only.⁴²³ In disobeying Charles I, and supporting the revolution, the middle class acted contrary to their own “private gain.”⁴²⁴ The bourgeois rely on the Sovereign to secure the “condition of its existence,” of “body and soul, which the bourgeois cannot itself guarantee.”⁴²⁵ Domestic peace is the precondition for “private property and private profit.”⁴²⁶

In contrast to industry and thrift, war is no certain means of securing well-being [...] war should be waged only for defence, and to this end it is best to maintain a mercenary army. Thus the relationship between ‘Leviathan’ and subject is changed to its opposite; the sovereign power is the hiring of individuals, who apply themselves to just and modest self-enrichment, *who buy and sell labour like any other commodity*, and who also can pay for the work of their defence...⁴²⁷

Hobbes is a bourgeois philosopher in a society governed by capitalist market relations: Hobbes “takes it for granted that ‘a man’s Labour also is a commodity exchangeable for benefit, as well as any other thing.’”⁴²⁸ Strauss argues that Hobbes’s political philosophy is a philosophical defense of the rise of the bourgeois civilization: “Not only does Hobbes not attack the middle class which is sensibly aware of its own interests, he even provides it with a philosophical justification, as the ideals set up in his political philosophy are precisely the ideals of the bourgeoisie.”⁴²⁹

Against religion

As we have seen, Strauss argues that Hobbes puts forth a universal and applicable rationality grounded in an aversion potentially shared by everyone: fear

⁴²³ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 118.

⁴²⁴ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 118.

⁴²⁵ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 121.

⁴²⁶ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 118.

⁴²⁷ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 120, emphasis added.

⁴²⁸ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 118.

⁴²⁹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 118.

of violent death. Hobbes's political theory is impotent without a predominant fear of violent death, the affective cause that ensures self-preservation.⁴³⁰ In maintaining this position, the challenge Hobbes faced in his time is that fear of violent death was that for many not the only — and often not the determinant — passion that swayed them to action in a given moment. Fear of afterlife (of the eternal damnation of the soul) moved many individuals to take up sword more than violent death restrained them at the time — a fact which England's religious and civil wars are a testament to. In the unpublished, largely complete monograph, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion*, Strauss states unequivocally that the critique of Scripture, or revealed religion "in general," is the "*conditio sine qua non* for the ultimate safeguard, if not for the original possibility, of Hobbesian politics."⁴³¹ Strauss explains:

Hobbes's politics is [...] indissolubly connected with his critique of religion: religion is *the* enemy of this politics. For this politics is based on the axiom that violent death is the greatest evil [*gewaltsame Tod das grösste Übel ist*]; religion, by contrast, teaches that there is a greater evil even than violent death, namely, eternal punishment after death in hell; *religion therefore denies the foundation of Hobbesian politics*. Hence, this politics remains questionable as long as the teaching of religion is not refuted: it is dependent on the critique of religion.⁴³²

Hobbes struggles with revealed religion over what object fear is attached to. Hobbes's disavowed motivations centered on the afterlife in favor of (bourgeois) motivations centered on fear of death in this world. He must transfer the fear of eternal damnation to violent death for his "politics" to work. Hobbes's political

⁴³⁰ "Among the passions he [Hobbes] pays particular attention to vanity and fear. The view which guides this selection is the relationship of the passion to reason, or more accurately, the fitness and unfitness of the various passions, to function as a substitute for impotent reason" (Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 130).

⁴³¹ Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion*, 73.

⁴³² Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion*, 26, emphasis added; German original in Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 271.

doctrine depends on public enlightenment and his writing thus works against the kind of esotericism — the divide between the few wise and the many vulgar — that Strauss identified in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. If Hobbes's scientific materialism fails to convince his readers that immaterial spirits do not exist, Strauss argues, in all his three presentations of his political philosophy (*Elements of Law*, *De Cive*, and the *Leviathan*), “with a double intention [Hobbes] becomes an interpreter of the Bible, in the first place in order to make use of the authority of the Scripture for his own theory, and next and particularly in order to shake the authority of the Scriptures themselves.”⁴³³ Hobbes first attacks scholastic theology in order to make use of the Scripture's authority to secure obedience to an undivided corporeal civil Sovereign among believers of various denomination and independent sects. He then questioned the authority of the Scripture itself.⁴³⁴

3. 2. 4. *Vanity: the cause for the state of war and proof of human evil*

At the outset of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss returns to the problem of human evil by staging a contradiction in Hobbes's corpus with help from Rousseau:

As Rousseau's polemic against Hobbes sufficiently proves, there remains [in Hobbes] the antithesis between the assertions that man is by nature good (more

⁴³³ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 71.

⁴³⁴ This order of division follows the order of presentation in *Hobbes's Critique of Religion*: In the first part, Strauss argues that Hobbes attacks the “theologian's *opinion* about revelation” on the “basis of the scripture,” as if he had been a believer in revelation (Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion*, 33). In all his three “political theological” treaties, “Hobbes declares that unconditional obedience to the secular power is the bounded duty of every Christian, in so far as that power does not forbid belief in Jesus as Christ” (Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 72). Until the return of Christ, all that is “needed for salvation is the belief in Jesus as Christ” and that the temporal Sovereign is obeyed and rule supreme in a Christian commonwealth (72). In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes's final political work, Strauss argues that Hobbes refutes the immortality of the soul for the resurrection of the body after the second coming of Christ (72). The soul, as Strauss puts it in *Hobbes's Critique of Religion*, is inseparable from the body and thus not an “incorporeal substance” (Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion*, 45). In the second part, Strauss shows that Hobbes turns from the Church and theology to what the two former “acknowledge... as unconditional binding Scripture” to critique it by attacking the source of the scripture in revelation, prophets, and miracles” (33-34).

accurately, innocent) and that man is by nature evil (rapacious) [*daß der Mensch von Natur gut (genauer: harmlos), und daß er von Natur böse (raubsüchtig) sei*].⁴³⁵

Strauss immediately confirms — altering his views from “Notes on Schmitt” — that it is the latter antithesis (i.e., man is by nature evil) that is at the heart of Hobbes's political philosophy, “without” which it “would lose all its character.”⁴³⁶ He locates the answer to why man by nature is morally evil in the answer to the question why all individuals in the state of nature incessantly seek ever more power over others. Strauss answers this question anew by splitting Hobbes into a young prescientific and a mature scientific Hobbes.⁴³⁷

In Hobbes's mature “scientific” or “mechanistic conception” humans and animals are both viewed as self-moving, directed by sense impressions. The only thing that differentiates humans from animals is that the former have reason at their “service.”⁴³⁸ Reason is here defined — the first of two definitions given in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* — as the capacity to “envisage the future” and “for this very reason he [the human being] is not like animals, hungry only with the hunger of the moment; but also with future hunger, and thus he is the most predatory, the most cunning, the strongest, and most dangerous animal.”⁴³⁹

It is in the young Hobbes’s “anthropological” view of human desire that Strauss finds a definite distinction between human and animal desire. This “vitalistic conception is based not on a general scientific theory, but on *insight into human nature*, deepened

⁴³⁵ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 3; German in Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 15.

⁴³⁶ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 3.

⁴³⁷ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 7-10.

⁴³⁸ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 9.

⁴³⁹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 9.

and substantiated by *self-knowledge and self-examination*.”⁴⁴⁰ The quality that differentiates human desire from animal desire in the young Hobbes’s “anthropological” view, lies *not* in man’s unique capacity for *rationality*, but in man’s “*irrational*” desire. Human desire is different from animal appetite in that it is “*innate*” and “*infinite*” and thus not determined by external objects, while animal appetite, on the contrary, he argues, is *externally* motivated by sensory perceptions, and subsequently *finite* because the *finitude* of external objects.⁴⁴¹ Contrary then to *finite* animal desire (determined and limited by external objects), human desire in Hobbes’s anthropology is *self-originating* and “has its basis in the pleasure which man takes in the consideration of his own power, i.e. in vanity. The origin of man’s natural appetite is, therefore, not perception but vanity.”⁴⁴² More specifically, the vain desire is for the other’s recognition of one’s “superiority of intelligence.”⁴⁴³ The vain individual does not strive to attain external objects or ends besides the pleasure derived from the contemplation of others’ recognition of one’s own superiority: “*man’s natural appetite is nothing other than a striving after precedence over others and recognition of this precedence by others....*”⁴⁴⁴

It is through this psychological description of vanity that Strauss accounts for why the incessant struggle for power is always *over others* and thus why the state of nature is a war of all against all: “Every man is for that very reason the enemy of every other man,

⁴⁴⁰ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 9, emphasis added.

⁴⁴¹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 11, emphasis added. The distinction drawn in *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* between human desires for material and immaterial objects is here sketched onto an animal-human dichotomy. The pleasures of the “senses and the flesh” is “limited and confined” in the present, and shared with animals, while the striving for “power” and “reputation,” and “honor,” which is “limitless” and future oriented, “take on independence over against the seeking after the sensual pleasure” (Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 88-89).

⁴⁴² Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 11.

⁴⁴³ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 26, emphasis added. Illusory self-perception of one’s own capabilities, in particular, “mental,” intellectual prowess.

⁴⁴⁴ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 11, emphasis added.

because each desires to surpass every other and thereby offends every other.”⁴⁴⁵ The pleasure attained by contemplating one’s own superiority is only obtained by engaging another person and thus vanity is the first and primary cause behind the antagonism in the state of nature. Strauss therefore concluded “the war of everyone against everyone arises of necessity from man’s very nature.”⁴⁴⁶ The consequence of all men seeking ever more power over others is a “warre of every one against every one.”⁴⁴⁷ The famous sentence from the *Leviathan* does not end at “every one” however, but concludes: “this is also consequent: *that nothing can be unjust* [in the state of nature].”⁴⁴⁸ Contrary to Hobbes’s explicit and nominal assertion that it is the contractual agreement between two parties to the social contract that differentiates *just* from the *unjust*, as enumerated in the third law of nature, Strauss argued that the pre-scientific Hobbes had conceived of a moral distinction in the state of nature so that “the unequivocal distinction between *just* and *unjust* intentions holds even for the state of nature, and is, therefore, absolute.”⁴⁴⁹ Whereas all *actions* in the state of nature are *just* subjectively on the ground that any action can be said necessary for self-preservation and thus in agreement with the natural right of each individual, Strauss argued that *not* all *motivations* are just.

There are two motivations behind the striving for ever more power over others in the state of nature according to Strauss in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*.⁴⁵⁰ Besides the vain striving, there exists in the state of nature a rational will for power. There are

⁴⁴⁵ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 12. If vanity was not a natural desire shared by *all* (as he waivers on this point), but the majority, the outcome of the many vain individuals striving for ever more power over others resulted in a state of nature qua state of war in which *everyone*, not only was forced to strive for ever more power, but feared for their life due to their mutual vulnerability.

⁴⁴⁶ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 12.

⁴⁴⁷ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 22.

⁴⁴⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 12, emphasis added.

⁴⁴⁹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 24.

⁴⁵⁰ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 15.

individuals who rationally engage in the struggle-onto-death due to fear of violent death when there is no other way out. Rational offence is the only defense in a situation in which the desire of vain individuals (who are not yet disciplined by fear of violent death) require the other's submission.⁴⁵¹ Strauss assigns a moral division between good and evil to these two motives: "The striving after power [*das Machtstreben*], as human striving after power, is always either good [*gut*] and permissible [*erlaubt*] or evil [*böse*] and unpermissible [*unerlaubt*]."⁴⁵² It is "good" and "permissible" to rationally strive for power to secure one's life. It is "evil" and "unpermissible" to strive for power due to vanity.⁴⁵³ In accordance with this binary, Strauss claims that Hobbes gradually came to the conclusion that there exists only one just intention: "Not pride, and still less obedience, but fear of violent death, is according to him [Hobbes] the origin of the just intention."⁴⁵⁴ The "confession" of one's "weakness," when "unconcerned about his *honour* [rooted in vanity], this alone is fundamentally just."⁴⁵⁵ Moreover, attaching a moral distinction to these two different motivations permits Strauss to argue that there is individual moral *conscience*: "Hobbes's last word is the identification of *conscience* [bourgeois] with the *fear of death*."⁴⁵⁶ The rational striving for self-preservation is a coerced decision in good conscience, as it is rooted in the fear of violent death and thus determined by the liberal or bourgeois moral horizon. Whereas the striving after power over others is both rational and irrational, only the *irrational* striving is a "natural human appetite":

⁴⁵¹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 15.

⁴⁵² Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 15; Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 27-28.

⁴⁵³ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 23-25.

⁴⁵⁴ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 25.

⁴⁵⁵ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 25.

⁴⁵⁶ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 25, emphasis added.

Only the *irrational* striving after power, which is found more frequently than the rational striving after power, is to be taken as a *natural* human appetite. For the rational striving after power rests on already rational reflection and is for that very reason not natural, i.e. not innate, not in existence prior to all external motivations, to *all experience and education*.⁴⁵⁷

It is in this irrational and natural/innate motivation that Strauss unearths the proof that man is by nature evil: “According to Hobbes’s view, the motive of this striving is man’s wish to take pleasure in himself by considering his own superiority, his own recognized superiority, i.e. vanity.”⁴⁵⁸ It is because “man by nature finds his pleasure in triumphing over all others [*der Mensch also von Natur durch Triumph über alle anderen sich selbst gefallen will*],” Strauss asserts: that “man is by nature evil [*so ist der Mensch von Natur böse*].”⁴⁵⁹

His earlier conclusion in “Notes on Schmitt” — that Hobbes conceives of humans as innocent (i.e. not guilty/innocent) animals (i.e., none-morally evil by nature) — is thus revoked.⁴⁶⁰ While the young Hobbes, in Strauss’s portrayal, judged the morality of an action was determined retroactively i.e., whether the motivation is fear of death (ensuring self-preservation) or vanity (leading to war), Strauss judiciously stops short of asserting that vanity should be judged as morally evil because it results in violent death. With *this* decisive adjustment of Hobbes’s moral-ontology, Strauss’s own moral-ontological demonstration of human evil, in the domain of the state of nature (qua Schmitt’s

⁴⁵⁷ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 10, emphasis added.

⁴⁵⁸ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 12.

⁴⁵⁹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 13; Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 26. It is innate vanity, and not “perception” that is the “basis” for man’s “irrational striving for power,” that is, “man’s natural appetite” (Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, p. 11). While the source is innate, asocial, the partial fulfillment of the appetite — the recognition of one’s superiority — on the other hand requires the social.

⁴⁶⁰ In “Notes on Schmitt,” Strauss argues that Hobbes does not attribute guilt to man, because he “had to deny *sin* because he did not recognize any primary obligation of man that takes precedence over every claim qua justified claim, because he understood man by nature free, that is, without obligation” (109-110).

political), transcends Hobbes's liberal moral horizon — defined by an overarching interest in security of life/fear of violent death — and provides the foundation for a Right-wing authoritarian state.⁴⁶¹ Strauss's conception of vanity exceeds the technical/scientific or neutral definition of the striving for power as merely a means to attain an end. In this, he agrees with the younger Hobbes. Vanity is then Strauss's *moral-ontological qua metaphysical* answer — an answer that is formulated as a *transitive* cause — to what *wills* the will to power.⁴⁶²

Strauss points out that in the *Leviathan*, Hobbes's "final presentation" of his political philosophy, "vanity"/glory is enumerated as the last on the list of three causes — after "competition" and "diffidence" — of violence in the state of nature.⁴⁶³ The reason for the diminished importance of vanity, Strauss argues, is Hobbes's adoption of modern science as a method to investigate things political. In Strauss's account of Hobbes's response to the charge by his contemporaries that he had asserted that man is by nature morally evil, we find Strauss's own earlier view of Hobbes in "Notes on Schmitt" repeated: "Because man is by nature animal, therefore he is not by nature evil [*von Natur*

⁴⁶¹ Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt", 100.

⁴⁶² Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 134n 4. Strauss's description of the vain quest for power corresponds closely with Nietzsche's conception of the will to power [*Wille zur Macht*] to which Strauss made reference. The will to power is defined as a constant striving to overcome others and oneself. For Nietzsche, the will to power is a will stronger than the will to survive. Strauss notes that Nietzsche's conception of the will to power developed out of Hobbes's attachment of pleasure to displeasure/aversion; wherein aversion is the displeasure of being unable to fend against the other, of not becoming master. Strauss refers to Aphorism 693 in Nietzsche's *Will to Power* (Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 134n 4) "If the innermost essence of existence is the will to power; if happiness is every increase of power, and 'unhappiness the feeling of not being able to resist, of not being able to become master: may we not then postulate happiness and pain as cardinal facts? Is will possible without these two oscillations of yea and nay? But who feels happiness? . . . Who will have power? . . . Nonsensical question. If the essence of all things is itself will to power, and consequently the ability to feel pleasure and pain! Albeit: contrasts and obstacles are necessary, therefore also, relatively, units which trespass on one another" (Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Will to Power: Selections from the Notebooks of the 1880s*, ed. Michael A. Scarpitti and R. Kevin Hill (UK: Penguin Books, 2017).

⁴⁶³ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 13.

böse], therefore he is an innocent [*unschuldig*] as the animals; thus vanity [*Eitelkeit*] cannot characterize his natural appetite [*Also: weil der Mensch von Nature ein Tier ist, darum ist er nicht von Natur böse, darum ist er so unschuldig wie die Tiere; daher kann nicht die Eitelkeit seine natürliche Begierde charakterisieren*]⁴⁶⁴ To the Strauss of a few years later, writing *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* from England, this is the scientific Hobbes speaking, having shied away from his moral view on human nature.⁴⁶⁵ The mature Hobbes scientifically portrays vanity as an appetite common to both humans and animals, and as a consequence, humans appear by nature morally innocent [*unschuldig*], without guilt.

In laying the foundations of his political philosophy, Hobbes puts vanity more and more into the background in favor of innocent competition, innocent striving after power, innocent animal appetite, because the definition of man's natural appetite in terms of *vanity* is intended as a moral judgment.⁴⁶⁶

What Hobbes represses due to his adoption of a scientific view of human nature is both the significance and moral status of vanity, the human nature cause behind the natural antagonism in the state of nature: “with the progressive elaboration of his natural science, vanity, which must of necessity be treated from the *moral* standpoint, is more and more replaced by the *striving for power*, which is *neutral* and therefore more amenable to *scientific interpretation*.”⁴⁶⁷ As a consequence, “the *moral basis* of his political philosophy becomes more and more disguised, the farther the evolution of his natural science progresses.”⁴⁶⁸ Strauss concludes that Hobbes does not “dare to uphold the consequence or assumption of his theory”, of “the reduction of man's natural appetite to

⁴⁶⁴ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 14; Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 27. Sinclair has translated *Begierde* as “appetite” rather than “desire”.

⁴⁶⁵ Strauss gives the same verdict in *Planned Book on Hobbes*, 57.

⁴⁶⁶ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 14, emphasis added.

⁴⁶⁷ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 169, emphasis added.

⁴⁶⁸ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 168.

vanity;” that is, the moral judgment that “*man is by nature evil [so ist der Mensch von Natur böse]*”⁴⁶⁹

Contrary to the scientific Hobbes, Strauss, however, does dare to reassert Hobbes’s *moral* judgment, not only as a commentator on the pre-scientific Hobbes’s emphasis on vanity, but also in regards to human nature *per se*: “But he [Hobbes] is no better able than any other to make us [*wie*] forget that man does *not* happen to be an *innocent animal [daß der Mensch eben kein unschuldiges Tier ist]*.”⁴⁷⁰ Strauss speaks here in his own voice when he asserts that humans are not an innocent animal [*unschuldiges Tier*], but guilty [*schuldige*]. He casted man’s evil [*böse/das Böse Menschen*] in terms of biblical category: guilty [*schuldige*]. He differentiates his own views from the later, scientific Hobbes, by putting forth his own *moral* judgment on the nature of man, which was sufficient to remind “us” (fellow right-wing *authoritarians*) *not* to forget that the human animal, unlike all other animals, is morally evil (i.e., non-innocent) by nature.⁴⁷¹ In “Notes on Schmitt” and “Notes on Hobbes,” however, Strauss argues that those who subscribe to the anarchistic view of human nature — i.e. liberals and socialists, who focus on humans’ natural competitiveness, instead of vanity as the cause for why the state of nature is a state of war — either forget or deny that humans are by nature evil.

⁴⁶⁹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 12, 13, emphasis added.

⁴⁷⁰ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 14, emphasis added; Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften* 3, 27. Sinclair’s translation literally corresponds with the original German manuscript: “*Aber er kann so wenig wie ein anderer die Tatsache in Vergessenheit bringen, dass der Mensch eben kein unschuldigen Tier ist*” (Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 27).

⁴⁷¹ It is tempting to suggest that Strauss in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, as he wrote a few years later about Farabi, “avails himself then of the specific immunity of the commentator of the historian in order to speak his mind concerning grave matters in his “historical” works, rather than in the works in which he speaks in own name” (Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 14).

3. 2. 5. Strauss's moral attitude

I have argued that Strauss attaches Biblical morality to human nature by asserting that humans are, due to their vanity, morally *guilty*, not *innocently* evil like animals.⁴⁷² A contrasting hypothesis is suggested by Xenos and Janssens, who argues that at the time of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* Strauss had adopted a Socratic-Platonic moral-political point of view of evil. Only through a recovery of Socratic-Platonic political philosophy was it possible for Strauss, in Janssens's words: "to develop a moral-political outlook on human evil without reverting to a *hidden religious* framework as in the case of Schmitt. According to Socrates' well-known dictum, 'virtue is knowledge' and thus vice is based on ignorance."⁴⁷³ Janssens is thus here suggesting that Strauss came to equate vice (ignorance) with evil.⁴⁷⁴

To address Janssens and Xenos's claim, it is of additional help that Strauss in fact discusses a Socratic-Platonic conception of good and evil in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes's* final chapter. In this final chapter, "evil" is mentioned three times and in all cases translated from the German word "*schlecht*," which is also translated as "bad" (but never "evil") elsewhere in the book. Strauss does not use "*böse*" in this chapter — the German word he uses consistently when he speaks of vanity to assert that "man is by nature evil"⁴⁷⁵ In one of these three cases, Strauss in fact gives a definition of vice/evil as

⁴⁷² Strauss thinks (in agreement with Hobbes) that human beings are vain and contentious by nature and take pleasure in the abasement of others. This, according to Strauss, marks them as naturally morally evil and guilty.

⁴⁷³ Janssens, *Between Jerusalem and Athens*, 144, emphasis added.

⁴⁷⁴ Rather than expanding on the exact meaning of this moral-viewpoint, Janssens ties this observation to one of his earlier arguments: according to Strauss's pre-liberal or classical conception of the political, there will always be disagreement over what is good and just (i.e., an argument over the right life) and this disagreement transcends the liberal moral horizon.

⁴⁷⁵ He speaks of *Schlecht* when: (i) valuing the consequences of "good fortune" (Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 140-41. In Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 160-161); (ii) In regard to Hobbes's preference for exact science over moral arguments over good and evil since they are the

ignorance, which concurs with Janssens's definition of the Socratic-Platonic moral-political outlook: "good," Strauss writes, "is in every respect contrary of evil that which is completely free from evil [*was dem Schlechten in jeder Hinsicht entgegengesetzt, vom Schlechten gänzlich frei ist*]. The result of this reflection is confirmed by what men also say: that the *good is virtue and wisdom*."⁴⁷⁶ If Strauss had adopted a Socratic-Platonic view that evil is only understood as ignorance (i.e., we do evil because we do not know what we are doing), and thus as a privation of the "good [wisdom]," then: (i) as he writes in "Notes on Schmitt," "the opposition between evil and good loses its keen edge"; (ii) Strauss's "moral-political outlook" on evil falls under the *anarchistic* view that man is by nature *educable* and thus good by nature (this assessment, of course, supposes that individuals are susceptible to education in the first place); and (iii) what are we to do with the fact that Strauss's only definition of human moral evil by nature is in relation to human vanity in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*?⁴⁷⁷ Strauss references to "*schlecht*" as vice/bad in Socratic-Platonic tradition in the final chapter provides inconclusive ground for asserting, like Janssens and Xenos, that Strauss had adopted a Socratic-Platonic "moral-political outlook on human evil."⁴⁷⁸ The moral outlook through which Strauss asserts that "man is by nature evil [*so ist der Mensch von Natur böse*]" due to their vanity (and thus "guilty [*schuldige*]") is more akin to Biblical religion than Socratic-Platonic philosophy. Strauss's assessment that Heidegger had not freed himself from

"origin of all strife and contradiction" (Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 144; Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 164); and (iii) in regard to the ancient definition of good as "completely free from evil [*vom Schlechtesten gänzlich frei ist*]" (Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 145; Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 164). The other places in the final chapter, "The New Political Science," in which he uses "*Schlecht*" in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, are: 131, 140-141, 160-161.

⁴⁷⁶ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 144, emphasis added; Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 164.

⁴⁷⁷ Strauss, "Notes on Schmitt," 110.

⁴⁷⁸ Janssens, *Between Jerusalem and Athens*, 144, emphasis added.

theology thus applies in some measure also to the author of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*.

What then remains of Janssens's claim that Strauss "already begun to recover the horizon beyond liberalism within and against which Hobbes founded liberalism and the modern concept of culture; the horizon of *nomos* or law as a 'concrete binding order of life,' common to revealed religion and Socratic-Platonic philosophy"?⁴⁷⁹ A great deal. I have argued that Strauss begins to recover a horizon prior to the rise of liberalism from which he compares Hobbes's modern conception of an individual natural right with the ancient natural law (the "right of the state") that demands obedience in accordance to "natural or divine law."⁴⁸⁰ It is from this pre-liberal horizon that Strauss, in the final chapter of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, compares Hobbes's bourgeois morality and the accompanying natural right/claim with Aristotle's. He notes for example: "Hobbes in his enumeration of good things mentions life as the first good in the first place, whereas Aristotle mentions happiness in the first place and life only in the penultimate place."⁴⁸¹ The higher ranking of goods other than basic survival (with which Strauss agrees), however, does not play a role in Strauss's attempt to identify in Hobbes an unliberal human nature and morality, and his claim that humans are by nature morally evil due to their vanity. Strauss completes his critique of liberalism, or moves beyond the liberal moral horizon, through (in his terms) an adequate understanding of Hobbes's pre-scientific ontology or anthropology. More precisely, Strauss derives the moral-ontological insight that humans are evil by nature from Hobbes's phenomenological observations of our unliberal nature. Between the book's covers there are two moral

⁴⁷⁹ Janssens, *Between Jerusalem and Athens*, 146.

⁴⁸⁰ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 156

⁴⁸¹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 132.

frameworks at play: one Biblical, the other that of a kind of ancient virtue ethics. On the question of moral evil (as the ground for an authoritarian and unliberal state), Strauss applies the former in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, but he was in the process of adopting the latter, as we shall see in the next chapter.

3. 3. 1. *Conclusion: constitutive principle and domestic policy*

In this chapter, I have argued that in his main study of Hobbes, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss seeks to complete a radical critique of liberalism by moving beyond the liberal horizon according to the criteria he had previously identified in “Notes on Schmitt” and clarified in a letter to Schmitt on Sept. 4, 1932, repeating it again in “Notes on Hobbes”: The moral ground for the right-wing authoritarian state *ontologically* lies in the *unliberal* quality of human nature which marks us as evil by nature. He solves this problem by arguing that Hobbes’s pre-scientific or anthropological definition of vanity proves that humans are by nature morally evil, hence not educable. His suggestion that Hobbes’s portrayal of human behavior in the state of nature reflects an immediate experience of oneself and the world prior to natural science, and that Hobbes’s subsequent scientific view of human nature negates this pre-scientific knowledge of human nature, was influenced by Husserl’s phenomenology. We have seen that Strauss supplements this argument by drawing on Heidegger’s addition to Husserl; that there is an *a priori* moral attitude that informs the phenomenological perception/experience of self and others.

Whereas Strauss agrees with Hobbes’s anthropological observation of *vanity*, and argues that due to vanity man is evil, he disapproves of the bourgeois moral horizon informing the pre-scientific Hobbes’s moral judgment on vanity, and the remedy (the

principle of rule) in fear of violent death. The question why people would obey the Sovereign in a right-wing authoritarian state remains unanswered at this stage in Strauss's writing. Xenos argues that Strauss favors a return to human moral evil because he has adopted, from Hobbes's bourgeois contract, fear as the principle of rule. This claim is contradictory to Strauss's right-wing authoritarian moral-ontology (i.e., if the foundation is fear as the principle for obedience then you have accepted that humans are educable) and it is not textually verifiable.

Thus, the two main problems that remain unresolved at the end of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* are the question of obedience or legitimacy and the internal policy of the state. Whereas a conception of the political as grounded in vanity necessitates authority and a sphere of dominion without national enmity, it is not constitutive of the internal policy of the state, and lacks a principle for obedience that transcends the liberal view of human nature as educable. To assess Strauss's pursuit of a conception of the political that is ranked above the state and provides its constitutive principle, it is useful to consider a comparison Strauss draws between Aristotle and Plato's political thought and Hobbes's in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes's* final chapter. Strauss mentions this comparison in a 1935 letter to Kojève, in which he describes *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* as "a first attempt at a radical liberation from the modern prejudice."⁴⁸² In lieu of such return to the ancient, Strauss raises the question: "Who or what shall rule?" He answers that prior to modernity it was the "Law."⁴⁸³ For priests, he explains, this meant revealed Law; for the ancient philosophers, it was the rational

⁴⁸² The letter is transcribed, translated and annotated by Gourevitch, Victor, *On Tyranny, Revised and Expanded Edition, including the Strauss-Kojève correspondence*, 230.

⁴⁸³ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 158.

law/order in nature, which entailed that the rational should rule: “reason *justifies* dominion.”⁴⁸⁴

Since justification is far from automatically ensuring implementation, Strauss raises the question of whether inferior men would obey on the ground of an intellectual order of rank alone. It is a question that requires that the inferior “recognize” the “superiority” of the intellect of those fit to “rule” in the first place.⁴⁸⁵ Hobbes had made this problem all the worse, Strauss adds, since he denies “considerable difference in reasonableness.”⁴⁸⁶ It is worse after Hobbes because the problem of “sovereignty” only first arises with Hobbes’s anthropology that asserts equality of reasonableness. Who should rule when there exists no “natural superiority”?⁴⁸⁷ Strauss assigns the problem of obedience — not withstanding all its historical specificity in Hobbes’s time — a theoretical cause in Hobbes’s denial of “the existence of a natural law, that is, of a natural standard” of rule.⁴⁸⁸ Hobbes grounds sovereignty in the will of each and every citizen to expressively sanction the authority of an absolute Sovereign out of fear of violent death.

It is thus not without some difficulty that Strauss brings the question of the durability of ancient rationality for practical politics back as a practical solution: he argues that Hobbes disqualifies classical rationality as impotent when it came to ensuring norms that guaranteed peace. Hobbes, he argues, holds that while classical rationalism is competent in arriving at moral precepts, it is incompetent in ensuring that these norms are obeyed.⁴⁸⁹ Hobbes turns to history for tested solutions to “man’s disobedience.”⁴⁹⁰ He

⁴⁸⁴ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 161, emphasis added.

⁴⁸⁵ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 158.

⁴⁸⁶ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 159.

⁴⁸⁷ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 159.

⁴⁸⁸ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 165.

⁴⁸⁹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 101.

⁴⁹⁰ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 93.

abandons his historical studies only when he discovers a new philosophy that solves the problem of applicability by augmenting reason in passion.⁴⁹¹ It is due to this founding in passion that Strauss argues that Hobbes's rationality breaks with classical "rationalism": whereas Hobbes's right of nature is in "accordance" to reason (i.e., it secures survival), it is "dictated" by passion (i.e., the fear of violent death).⁴⁹² What is the basis for Strauss's case — contra Hobbes — for a return to classical rationality for matters concerning political philosophy? Such a return would need to function not simply as an ideal but also as a theory that works in practice, not only in the ideal *Kallipolis*, but also, say, in Europe in the 17th century, or the 1930s.

In his search for an answer, Strauss notes that for Plato there are two kinds of reasons: one "good" and one "necessary" — the former dialectically pursues the question of the good, the latter is instrumental — while for Hobbes there exists only instrumental reason. Hobbes, he argues, never questions the *end* of the state; that is, securing *peace*. Hobbes never questions the good of that aim, or the necessity of political science in the pursuit of that end. Hobbes's right way of life, or ideal, is a life lived in security and relative prosperity for all. It is with the aim of guaranteeing peace, Strauss argues, in a three-page paragraph that was added to the English translation of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* that Hobbes gives primacy to "*foreign policy*" in a critical turn against "classical political philosophy":

While for Plato and Aristotle, in accordance with the primary interest they attach to home policy, the question of the number of inhabitants of the perfect State, that is, the limits set to the State by its inner necessity, is of decisive importance, Hobbes brushes this question aside in the following words: 'The Multitude

⁴⁹¹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 97-99.

⁴⁹² Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 159.

sufficient to confide in for our Security, is not determined by any certain number, but by comparison with the enemy we Feare....’⁴⁹³

The required size of the state is for Hobbes defined relationally to the strength of one’s enemy. Contrary to Hobbes, the state in Plato’s and Aristotle’s conception is not relationally defined by the strength of one’s enemy, but by an optimal natural number determined in regard to the nonrelational essence of the *polis*.

For both Plato and Aristotle “*internal policy*” is thus independent of, and prior to, *foreign policy*:

The view of classical rationalism, that only reason *justifies* dominion, found its most radical expression in Plato’s saying that the only necessary and adequate condition for the weal of a State is that the philosophers should be kings and kings philosophers. That amounts to stating that the setting up of a perfect commonwealth depends on exclusively on ‘*internal policy*’ and not at all on any conditions of *foreign policy*.⁴⁹⁴

The standard for Plato and Aristotle’s regime and right life is the order in nature. Hobbes’s substitution of ancient natural law (or virtue) for natural right to life breaks with Plato and Aristotle’s view that the order state should reflect the order in nature that exceeds both the individual’s nature and his individual preferences.

At the end of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss is thus beginning to look with Plato and Aristotle for a conception of the political that also provides a constitutive principle for the state’s internal order. Whereas moral evil is the prerequisite for a right-wing authoritarian state, it is not constitutive of the internal “order” of the state. Strauss had yet to outline and investigate the principle for the constitutive aim and order of his unliberal theory of the state. The question of whether less rational individuals

⁴⁹³ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 162-163; The reason for this inclusion, Meier argues, was due to a discovery reported in the 1935 essay “Maimonides and Alfarabi,” 86n 77; and Meier, *How Strauss became Strauss*, 369; Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2*, 162.

⁴⁹⁴ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 161, emphasis added.

would agree to obey the few wise also remained unanswered. In the next chapter, I will turn to Strauss's return to classical political philosophy and ancient natural law in his search for a conception of the political and theory of the state and obligation. Strauss's return to classical political philosophy will also lead me to his thoughts on the aim and order of the state, which his neo-Hobbesian modification of Schmitt's concept of the political could not provide. This solution Strauss finds in medieval and ancient political philosophy: civic morality or religion for the many, rational atheism for the few philosophers that seek wisdom. However, clues to this answer are already discernible in his work on Maimonides from this time, in which he also had revisited the question of Zionism.

In 1935, the year Strauss completed the German manuscript of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, he writes about his own outlook in *Philosophy and Law* that brings to mind for him the contention between reason and revelation at the centre of the previous chapter: "A Jew who cannot be orthodox and who must consider purely political Zionism, the only 'solution to the Jewish question' possible on the basis of atheism, as a resolution that is indeed highly honorable, but not in earnest and in the long run, adequate."⁴⁹⁵ Zank's comment on this passage serves well as the bridge into the next chapter:

But surely one could not be an atheist and an Orthodox believer at the same time! Could there be a synthesis of revealed religion and modern historical consciousness? Strauss's answer is: No. But there should be such a synthesis! Strauss's answer is: such a synthesis can only exist at the expense of the truth of religious belief. It would be atheism in disguise. Can one not be a Jew in the full sense, just by virtue of seeking the well-being of the Jewish nation? Strauss: but is not nationalism a modern European rather than a truly Jewish value? So what is a Jew to do? In the statement cited above, Strauss formally ends his association with the Zionist movement, and he does so at the very moment when the Jewish

⁴⁹⁵ Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 38.

state had become a matter of greater urgency than ever before. But he also formally acknowledges that he can no longer be Orthodox. What is left for him to choose? This is the point at which Strauss turns to Maimonides, to his Muslim predecessors, and to Platonic political philosophy.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁶ Zank, *The Early Writings*, 15. Or as Arendt wrote in a letter to Karl Jasper in 1954, Strauss “is a convinced orthodox atheist” (*Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926–1969*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 244; quoted in Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 147n 29).

4

Strauss's Post-War Hobbes: Modern Natural Right

4. 0. 1. *Introduction*

In early 1937, Strauss left Britain and sailed for America, the country where he would live until his death. His first home was in New York City, where he had been offered a position as a Research Fellow in the Department of History at Columbia University. The following year, Strauss became a visiting researcher at the New School for Social Research, where he was promoted to professor and remained for a decade.⁴⁹⁷ In 1948, Strauss left New York to accept an endowed Professorship at the University of Chicago. In his first year in Chicago, he delivered the annual Walgreen Lectures, which introduced Strauss to a larger audience, and included a lecture on Hobbes. This was his first work on Hobbes since the publication of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*. The lecture was published as an article in 1950, "On the Spirit of Hobbes's Political Philosophy [henceforth, "On the Spirit of Hobbes"] and then slightly revised as part one of chapter five, "Modern Natural Right," in *Natural Right and History* (1953), the book version of

⁴⁹⁷ Strauss also taught courses at other institutions of higher learning across the East coast. Strauss wife, and her son, arrived on New York a few months before the war began. Strauss's father died of a heart attack in 1943. His sister passed away of illness in Egypt in 1942. Strauss adopted her daughter Jenny, after that her father passed away in 1944 in illness or suicide. No one beside Jenny, in Strauss's immediate family, survived the holocaust.

the lecture series.⁴⁹⁸ In this chapter will ultimately assess the Walgreen lecture and its published form in order to answer two questions: how does Strauss's interpretation of Hobbes change in the decade after World War II, and how does his criticism of liberalism evolve in relation to his altered understanding of Hobbes. In order to give an account of the former, it is necessary to take a larger view of Strauss's intellectual development during and after the war.

Almost fifteen years had passed between the 1936 publication of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* and his return to Hobbes in the late 1940s. In the intervening years, Strauss published a series of essays on esotericism and ancient and medieval political and religious (primarily, Judaic and Islamic) thought. In the previous chapter, I argued that *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* exposes a tension between two strands in Strauss's thinking, between the younger Strauss who looks to moral evil as that which necessitated and legitimated dominion, and the later Strauss who sides with the ancient emphasis on reason, as that which justifies political authority. In this chapter, I will show how, following World War II, Strauss moves away from the former to assume the latter perspective. Strauss no longer speaks of a biblical moral conception of human evil in terms of guilt; instead, Strauss adopts an ancient virtue ethics, in which the pursuit of theoretical knowledge is seen as the greatest good or the only just activity of the political community.

In chapters two and three, in conversation with Meier, Sheppard and Xenos, I argued that Strauss's interpretation of Hobbes is forged in connection with his effort to critique liberalism and to ground a right-wing authoritarian alternative to liberalism,

⁴⁹⁸ Leo Strauss, "On the Spirit of Hobbes's Political Philosophy," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 4, no. 14 (October 1950): 405–431.

socialism and Nazism. For the criticism of liberalism not to be immanent, and to establish the ground for a right-wing authoritarian state, Strauss needed to demonstrate that humans are morally evil by nature. Strauss's reading of Hobbes prior to World War II is thus informed by his need to find that the humans are by nature morally evil, a teaching he finds in the young, pre-scientific Hobbes's conception of vanity. When he returns to Hobbes after the war, Strauss is no longer seeking a moral ground for an authoritarian right-wing regime in Hobbes's anthropological observations of the passions. He now detaches *morality* from *human nature* and, with that, *evil* from *vanity*, delegating the description of a moral or normative order from the field of philosophy to that of *political* philosophy. Philosophers, according to his acquired understanding of medieval Jewish and Islamic thought and ancient philosophy, put into question the moral or normative foundations of the city (the society in which they live) in private, and advocate in public for an exoteric moral order for the many in the city to live in accordance with.

Nevertheless, Strauss argues in *Natural Right and History* that philosophy remains concerned with discovering supra-human or eternal principles of right. Tanguay, who has argued that Strauss becomes a Socratic sceptic over time, has pointed that Strauss in *Natural Right and History* holds that philosophy is possible if there are permanent *questions*, natural right is, however, only possible if there are permanent *answers* to the permanent questions, which requires knowledge of all the parts or the "whole" or the universe.⁴⁹⁹ Strauss never provides a philosophy of the whole. Tanguay argues that, as a "zetetic," Strauss doubted that such philosophy of the whole could ever exist:

What this means is that genuine Platonism reveals itself more by a particular cast

⁴⁹⁹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 35.

of mind than by adherence to some metaphysical doctrine or complete system of knowledge. The cast of mind of the genuine Platonist is zetetic in the sense that in the quest for wisdom ‘the evidence for all solutions is necessarily smaller than the evidence of the problems.’ Philosophy is not to be confused with the science of all beings since it is not itself this science or even completed wisdom, but rather the attempt to attain that science. Certainly, the essence of philosophy is theoretical. But the movement that carries the philosopher toward contemplation is not itself integrated into the science of all the beings: it is eros.⁵⁰⁰

Despite this, the promise of a natural right nevertheless remains in so far as while philosophers do not agree over the whole there is still the possibility that there is a metaphysical structure, which “existence,” Plato’s “Athenian Stranger,” Strauss writes in the early 1960s, “tries to demonstrate”.⁵⁰¹

The greatest challenge to this view in Strauss’s mind is the anti-metaphysical tradition, starting with Nietzsche and culminating in Heidegger, for whom nothing is “eternal,” and which radically questions the foundation of classical philosophy from the standpoint of historicity.⁵⁰² Against Heidegger, Strauss suggests that the evidence of an unchanging standard of right is that people in all times and places have argued over what is right and wrong. Strauss, after the World War II, advocates for a Socratic phenomenology that begins with everyday opinions over conflicting conceptions of justice and other notions (as in the Plato’s dialogues) and are, in the process, replaced with knowledge. The claim in regard to Strauss’s phenomenology and ethical foundation that I will substantiate in this chapter, however, is that Strauss operates with the notion of, and attaches a right to, the natural human, rational capacity for theoretical wisdom that only a few possess, independently of any metaphysical proof for this position at this time.

⁵⁰⁰ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 88; quotation from *On Tyranny*, 196.

⁵⁰¹ Strauss, “Preface,” in *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (henceforth, “Preface” only), 11.

⁵⁰² Strauss, “Preface,” 11.

Philosophy, as Strauss applies it after World War II, both takes its bearing from and is oriented toward the study of human nature. One of the things that remains the same from before the war is thus Strauss's continuous appeal to *human nature*. What has changed, however, is the aspect of human nature that Strauss emphasizes: his focus shifts from *vanity* (passion) to *reason*. Strauss returns to human nature, or what is "natural in man," no longer through Hobbes's observation, but rather through the philosophy of the ancients. It is now by appeal to *reason*, not *vanity*, that Strauss distinguishes humans from animals, and furthermore, humans from humans: the *few* wise from the *many* vulgar. He recuperates what he had framed in early work as a Platonic-Socratic understanding of human nature, rationality, and natural right. It is against this return to classical philosophy that Strauss assesses, criticizes, and utilizes Hobbes's political philosophy as a counterpoint.

In his first essay on Hobbes after the war, Strauss is little concerned with understanding the political and polemical contexts in which Hobbes wrote as he had been in the 1930s. In place of these earlier concerns, the backdrop for his study of Hobbes after World War II becomes his overarching account of the historical trajectory of political philosophy and its departure from classical antiquity, and Hobbes's role therein. The development of his analysis of Hobbes after World War II reads at once as a product of the influence of pre-modern thought on Strauss, on one hand, and a consequence to his reaction to historicism, nihilism and relativism, on the other. We shall see that as the politics of his day become less of an immediate concern for Strauss following the war, his study of Hobbes's egalitarian natural right, and what he identifies as its ancient roots, is increasingly undertaken from the perspective of Socratic-Platonic philosophy. The fact

that Strauss assesses Hobbes's philosophy in light of the tradition of Socratic-Platonic philosophy is, however, not an automatic proof that this is a view he shares. Strauss could account for a view without subscribing to it, just as Plato did not necessarily agree with all — or any — of his characters. In part one of this chapter, I will therefore establish that Strauss adopts with a Platonic-Socratic explication of reason, human nature and natural law and right, before I examine his essay on Hobbes.⁵⁰³

Due to the reorientation in his thought, Strauss quietly retracts some of his key arguments from “Notes on Hobbes” and *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* and advanced a few new ones in “On the Spirit of Hobbes.” Most significantly, Strauss writes little about vanity during this period, and no longer asserts that it is due to vanity that humans are morally evil by nature; also absent from Strauss's post-war work is the thought of the young pre-scientific Hobbes, which Strauss had excavates in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* to build his case that the basis of Hobbes's political thought was his pre-scientific view of human nature, and not the new scientific method that the mature Hobbes applies to the study of politics. Instead, Strauss makes a full reversal, now introducing Hobbes's political philosophy as reflective of modern natural science, which opposes monotheistic and Aristotelian teleological worldviews. It was this non-teleological worldview, Strauss comes to argue, that informs Hobbes's natural doctrine and his conception of an inalienable natural right to life. Strauss argues that Hobbes is the

⁵⁰³ This is easier said than done, as Robert Pippin has pointed out: “[A]lthough Strauss is clearly out to defend the classical notion of natural right, he never does so in his own voice, preferring to write historical studies. These studies sometimes seem to propose logical connections among ideas or necessary deteriorations of positions, which commit Strauss to a complicated historiography only rarely discussed as such and which leave the details of his own views, or his strategy for defending natural right, hidden in asides, allusions, remarks, marginal comments, and so forth” (“The Modern World of Leo Strauss,” *Political Theory* 20, no. 3 (1992): 448-472, 454).

first to subordinate natural law to a natural individual right.⁵⁰⁴ The shift of primacy from obligations or duties to rights is what prompts Strauss to declare that Hobbes is the founder of liberalism, in his words, “the power of the state finds its absolute limit in [individual] natural right and in no other moral fact.”⁵⁰⁵

There is a great deal written about Strauss’s relation to liberalism. While few scholars question Strauss’s anti-liberal ire of the inter-war years — from his criticism of assimilation to his commentary on Schmitt — some, like Howse, seek to tone down what they find extreme in Strauss’s exchange with Schmitt (see chapter two and six), and the letter to Löwith (see chapter three).⁵⁰⁶ Zuckert and Shell have pointed out, however, that what troubles Strauss’s liberal critics most is not his anti-liberal stand in the interwar years, but rather his rediscovery of esotericism. In Shell’s words:

What especially arouses them [Strauss’s liberal critics] is his later claim to have rediscovered a tradition of “exoteric” writing, formerly common among philosophers forced by the threat of persecution to hide their deepest thoughts. According to Strauss, that tradition reflected the natural and ineradicable tension that obtains between philosophy as an unimpeded search for knowledge and the needs of the political community. A concomitant distinction between the “many” and the “few,” and a related allowance for “noble myths,” has further fuelled the suspicion in some quarters that Strauss’s thought — despite his many statements to the contrary — is deeply hostile to liberal democratic principles. In the view of some, his overt expression of patriotic loyalty to the principles of his adopted

⁵⁰⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 181-182.

⁵⁰⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 197.

⁵⁰⁶ Shell writes: “There is no denying that Strauss began his scholarly career as a staunch critic of Weimar liberalism. A student of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger and associate of Karl Löwith, Gershom Scholem, and others, Strauss came of age at a time of radical challenge to liberal political and intellectual positions generally. Strauss later observed that in that German postwar atmosphere, Oswald Spengler and Karl Junger were widely admired and Nietzsche’s influence deeply felt. (As Strauss later told Löwith, Nietzsche so “bewitched” him between his twenty second and his thirtieth year that he literally believed everything that he could understand.) Strauss’s youthful aversion to the assimilationist path that had been followed by an earlier generation of liberal German Jews (an aversion he shared with figures such as Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem), combined with his early exchanges with Carl Schmitt, whom he accused of remaining too beholden to liberal thinking, have cemented Strauss’s reputation among some as a lifelong opponent of liberal ideas (Shell “Strauss on “German Nihilism,”” 171-72).

country was merely the mask under which he hid a powerful antipathy to all things democratically liberal.⁵⁰⁷

In the years before and during the war Strauss deepened his understanding of esotericism. Philosophical esotericism is the use of a double rhetoric through which two groups of readers, the few and the many, are communicated two different teachings in one and the same book: “a popular teaching of an edifying character, which is in the foreground and a philosophic teaching concerning the most important subject, which is indicated only between the lines.”⁵⁰⁸ I will suggest that the precondition for Strauss’ discovery of the esoteric/exoteric art of writing is grounded in an elitist view of human rationality. This same view informs Strauss’ adoption of the classical or Platonic-Socratic natural law tradition. Hobbes emerges in the trajectory of Strauss’ discovery of esotericism as the counterpoint to pre-modern esotericism. Hobbes’ perspective is based on a view of human equal rational capacity, and with that, the eradication of the need for esoteric communication. To Strauss, Hobbes is the representative par excellence of the radical modern European enlightenment, who wrote esoterically only to avoid religious and political persecution, and whose ultimate goal was popular enlightenment.

There is controversy around whether or not Strauss wrote esoterically himself, and if so, how. This conundrum presents an interpretative hurdle for anyone concerned with Strauss’ oeuvre. It is necessary to address Strauss’ understanding and possible use of a multilayered art of writing in order to digest his writings on Hobbes after World War II. A full exposition of Strauss’ understanding and use of esotericism is not offered in this chapter, however. My focus instead is on Strauss’ gradual discovery of an esoteric tradition in the history of philosophical and religious texts that alters both Strauss’

⁵⁰⁷ Shell, “Strauss on “German Nihilism,”” 171-72.

⁵⁰⁸ Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 36.

interpretation and *presentation* of Hobbes. I unpack this aspect of Strauss's thought with a focus on Hobbes's role within it, as well as his criticism of liberalism and modern natural right.

To counter the assessment that Strauss remained hostile to liberalism after he left Europe, Shell has suggested that the time spent in England changed Strauss "from a harsh critic of liberal democracy to an unhesitating supporter."⁵⁰⁹ The evidence for this she draws mainly from a talk on "German Nihilism" that Strauss gave in the General Seminar of the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science of the New School for Social Research in 1941. This lecture grounds Shell's case that, during his time in England, Strauss gained an appreciation for Churchill and a liberal rule of law tradition.⁵¹⁰ While I would not go as far to call Strauss an "unhesitating supporter of liberal democracy," I will suggest that Strauss does come to see merits with, and give his support to, a liberal democratic constitutional regime, but not without notable reservations that led him (as I will return to in the concluding chapter of the dissertation) to try to limit the *democratic* influence as much as possible and advocate for the restraint of some civil rights and freedoms. Given this shift in Strauss's thinking on liberalism, one might imagine that Hobbes, who remains in Strauss's view the founder of "liberalism," would also have been granted some grace. I will argue that the opposite is true.

The criticism of liberalism continues in Strauss's post-war writing on Hobbes from the perspective of a recuperation of a Socratic-Platonic conception of human nature and natural law. In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss builds on the criticism that he had first formulated in "Notes on Schmitt," which portrayed Hobbes as the founder of liberal

⁵⁰⁹ Shell, "Strauss on 'German Nihilism,'" 191.

⁵¹⁰ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 372.

rights, and what, after World War II, Strauss refers to as the doctrine of modern natural right. The case for Strauss's *qualified* support of liberalism rests on his discovery of a liberal tradition that antedates and is distinct from Hobbes's modern liberal natural rights doctrine. This is the Aristotelian tradition that Strauss refers to in "German Nihilism" as the "rule of law," and in *Natural Right and History* as "rule, under law, of gentlemen, or the mixed regime."⁵¹¹ Strauss thus makes a distinction between liberal theory, which he argues originates in Hobbes's natural right doctrine, and a liberal constitutional regime, defined by the rule of law. Following the 1940s, Strauss expands his definition of ancient liberalism to include the Socratic-Platonic philosophical tradition's pursuit of excellence through the cultivation of the human virtues, highest of them being wisdom. It is in this light that Strauss speaks of ancient liberalism in regard to liberal education, and in particular the study of the great books — a curriculum that Strauss promotes until the end of his life as a way to cultivate human nature towards excellence.⁵¹²

⁵¹¹ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 363; Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 143.

⁵¹² First published, Leo Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?," in *Education for Social Responsibility*, ed. Scott C. Fletcher (New York: Norton, 1961), 43-51; Leo Strauss, "Liberal Education and Responsibility," *Education: The Challenge Ahead*, ed. Scott C. Fletcher (New York: Norton, 1962: 49-70); Leo Strauss. *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).

Part. I

4. 1. 1. *Criticism of liberalism and the Nazi revolution*

In the previous chapter, I argued that Strauss discovers in Hobbes's doctrine of the state of nature a ground for Schmitt's concept of the political in the war of each against all. This natural inclination to fight one's fellow humans is linked to a principle of human nature, vanity, which Strauss placed at the heart of Hobbes's political theory. Vanity, understood as a moral evil, proved the need for a right-wing authoritarian dominion. This, I argued, was in part intended by Strauss to advance a critique liberalism, but also to counter the relativism he identifies at the heart of Schmitt's immanent definition of the political, which requires bellicose nationalism (political disassociation) against internal and external enemies for political association to form. In Schmitt's concept of the political, political association, like political Zionism, lacks a positive identity/ground, and is formed negatively in relation to an enemy, i.e., by political dissociation.

Two decades later, Strauss would name anti-Semitism as the National Socialists' only coherent principle.⁵¹³ During the war, however, Strauss had identified a contradictory twin movement behind the support of National Socialist among his philosophical right-wing peers: the destruction of reason and the belief that a socialist society was the only rational and historical conclusion to liberalism or liberal civilization. In order to make sense of Strauss's criticism of Hobbes and liberalism after the war, it is necessary to identify where Strauss sees Hobbes's thought overlapping with, and departing from, Schmitt, Nietzsche and Heidegger. Strauss ties the source of Schmitt's relativism to historicism and its destruction of reason as an authoritative standard for

⁵¹³ Strauss, "Preface," 2-3.

science/philosophy and morality. To counter historicism's destruction of reason (and by extension, Schmitt's relativistic conception of politics), Strauss, as he had before the war, looks to human nature for a remedy. He looks at human nature, not in Hobbes's anthropological observation of the passions, but in the Socratic-Platonic tradition's conception of the human animal as a rational animal.

In February 1941, less than a year before America would enter the war, Strauss analysed the philosophical roots of Nazism in a paper presented at a faculty seminar on the "Experiences of the Second World War," at the New School.⁵¹⁴ The paper is programmatic of Strauss's post-war philosophy, that is, his return to and recuperation of ancient philosophy, or what Seyla Benhabib has called his "mature position."⁵¹⁵ In this presentation, Strauss investigates the philosophical origin of the National Socialist movement by engaging Hermann Rauschning's *The Revolution of Nihilism*, and advances the hypothesis that "National Socialism is only the most *famous* form of German nihilism—its lowest, most provincial, most unenlightened and most dishonorable form."⁵¹⁶ German nihilism is another name that Strauss uses for the conservative revolutionary philosophical movement that had emerged in Germany at the turn of the 19th century, and which had returned with added force after the Great War.

Strauss suggests in this paper that the German nihilist does not seek the destruction of "everything," but aims specifically to destroy the "Anglo-Saxon," "modern civilization."⁵¹⁷ Put differently, Strauss's attack is directed at the "intellectual

⁵¹⁴ Unlike many of Strauss's other essays, this paper was never subsequently published. Sheppard suggests that the reason for this is due to the straightforwardness in which Strauss expresses himself in the essay.

⁵¹⁵ Benhabib, Seyla, *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 117.

⁵¹⁶ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 357; Hermann Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism: Warning to the West*, translation E. W. Dickes, (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1939).

⁵¹⁷ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 357-58.

development” that he argued starts with Hobbes and “exploded in the French Revolution.”⁵¹⁸ The “motive” behind the attack on liberal civilization, Strauss argues, is “not itself nihilistic.”⁵¹⁹ The radical conservative attack, like Strauss’s writing on Hobbes in the interwar era, is directed specifically at the liberal civilization’s “*moral* meaning.”⁵²⁰ Contrary to the taste of the radical conservatives, the liberal civilization had “lower[ed] the moral standards,” as reflected in ideas such as “the identification of morality with an attitude of claiming one’s rights, or with enlightened self-interest, or the reduction of honesty to the best policy, or the solution of the conflict between common interest and private interest by means of industry and trade.”⁵²¹ The *non*-nihilistic motivation that animates German nihilism, Strauss suggests, is also found in Plato, Rousseau and Nietzsche—namely, the protest against the lowering of the standards of morality. A non-liberal moral life, for the German nihilist, “means *serious* life.”⁵²² “Serious life” is the closed life of the nation—“oriented” at what Schmitt called the “*Ernstfall* [the state of emergence].”⁵²³ Against the general trend of the Hobbesian “debasement of morality,” and the ideal of civilization, German philosophy from its beginning opposed the equation of “the morally good” with “the object enlightened self-interest,” honesty with utility, and insisted in its place, “self-sacrifice,” and foremost, “courage.”⁵²⁴ It was a radical critique of modern liberal civilization that Strauss had pursued in his studies in the 1920s and 1930s. He had sought to complete Schmitt’s criticism of liberalism by attaching the political to an unliberal moral aspect of human nature, but contra Schmitt, whose

⁵¹⁸ Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 370-71.

⁵¹⁹ Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 357.

⁵²⁰ Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 358, emphasis added.

⁵²¹ Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 371.

⁵²² Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 358, emphasis added.

⁵²³ Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 358.

⁵²⁴ Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 371.

immanent conception of the political the Nazis embodied, Strauss had used Hobbes to propose a political and moral ontology as ground for a right-wing authoritarian alternative to Nazism.

Of “all philosophers,” Strauss proposes, “none exercised a greater influence on post-war Germany, none was more responsible for the emergence of German nihilism, than was Nietzsche. The relation of Nietzsche to the German Nazi revolution is comparable to the relation of Rousseau to the French revolution.”⁵²⁵ One main reason for this, Tanguay explains, is that Nietzsche, unlike the romanticists and early 18th century philosophy, radicalizes the *atheism* of the early enlightenment thinkers, into a “*moral*,” and not “theoretical,” aversion to Christianity and religion in general: “Nietzsche asserted that the *atheist* assumption is not only reconcilable with, but indispensable for, a radical anti-democratic, anti-socialist, and anti-pacifist policy: according to him, even the communist creed is only a secularized form of theism, of the belief in providence.”⁵²⁶ I argued in the previous chapter that Strauss, in his studies of Hobbes in the early to mid-1930s, agrees with Nietzsche that a secularized religious belief in providence underpins the liberal and communist-anarchist view that human nature is good or educable, and that heaven on earth is possible. In response, Strauss constructed an authoritarian atheistic moral criticism of liberalism and socialism by arguing that human nature is evil. As I pointed out then, however, Strauss’s counter-position also presupposes Biblical morality.⁵²⁷ Nietzsche’s atheism opposes Hobbes’s atheistic materialist philosophy, and

⁵²⁵ Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 372.

⁵²⁶ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 47, emphasis added; Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 361-62, emphasis added.

⁵²⁷ Or as Strauss put it two decades later: Nietzsche “made clear that the denial of the Biblical God demands the denial of biblical morality, however secularized, which, so far from being self-evident or rational, has no other support than the biblical God: mercy, compassion, egalitarianism, brotherly love or altruism must give way to cruelty and its kin” (Strauss, “Preface,” 236).

with it the bourgeois (and socialist) theistic morality premised on the right to preservation and material pleasure.

Strauss establishes beyond doubt that there was nothing the German nihilist disliked more than the egalitarian, materialist and hedonist strand found in Hobbes's philosophy. In one of the paper's most rhetorically fervent passages, Strauss suggests that it was the fear of an egalitarian socialist society that partly led to nihilism:

[T]he conflicts inherent in the present situation would necessarily lead to a revolution, accompanying or following another World War—a raising of the proletariat and of the proletarianized strata of society which would usher in the withering away of the state, the classless society, the abolition of all exploitation and injustices, the era of final peace. It was this prospect at least as much as the desperate present, which lead to nihilism. The prospect of a pacified planet, without rulers and ruled, of a planet society devoted to production and consumption only, to the production and consumption of spiritual as well as material merchandise, was positively horrifying to quite a few very intelligent and very decent, if very young, Germans. They did not object to that prospect because they worried about their own economic and social position; for certainly in that respect they had no longer anything to lose. Nor did they object to it for religious reasons; for, as one of their spokesmen (E[rnst]Jünger) said, they knew that they were the sons and grandsons and great-grandson of godless men. What they hated, was the very prospect of a world in which everyone would be happy and satisfied, in which everyone would have little pleasure by day and his little pleasure by night, a world in which no great heart could beat and no great soul could breathe, a world without real, unmetaphoric, sacrifice, i.e. world without blood, sweat, and tears. What to the communists appeared to be the fulfilment of *the* dream of mankind, appeared to those young Germans as the greatest debasement of humanity, as the coming of the end of humanity, as the arrival of the latest man.⁵²⁸

To the “intelligent,” “decent,” “atheists” and “very young, Germans,” the communists were Nietzsche's last men.

These young right-wingers, however, Strauss argues, committed a fatal mistake. They accepted the communist's thesis “that the proletarian revolution and proletarian dictatorship is necessary, if civilization is not to perish.”⁵²⁹ They had wrongly agreed

⁵²⁸ Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 360.

⁵²⁹ Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 360.

with the Hegelian-Marxist view that the world society is the only *rational* conclusion to the liberal civilization.⁵³⁰ This led the young men to opt for what “they called ‘irrational decision’”:

They did not really know, and thus they were unable to express in a tolerably clear language, what they desired to put in the place of the present world and its allegedly necessary future or sequel: the only thing of which they were absolutely certain was that the present world and all the potentialities of the present world as such, must be destroyed in order to prevent the otherwise necessary coming of the communist final order: the only thing of which they were absolutely certain was that the present world and all the potentialities of the present world as such, must be destroyed in order to prevent the otherwise necessary coming of the communist final order literally anything, the nothing, the chaos, the jungle, the Wild West, the Hobbesian state of nature, seemed to them infinitely better than the communist anarchist-pacifist future. Their Yes was inarticulate—they were unable to say more than: No! This No proved however sufficient as *the* preface to action, the action of destruction. This is the phenomenon which occurs to me first whenever I hear the expression German nihilism.⁵³¹

The fear of communism leads them to say “No” to civilization, and “Yes” to Hitler and the Nazi. What to put in place of the liberal-communist civilization they did not know.⁵³²

It was the “reaction of a certain type of young atheist to the communist ideal,” which resulted in German nihilism.⁵³³ For this reason, these “young men,” Strauss suggests,

were in need of teachers who could explain to them in articulate language the positive, and not merely destructive, meaning of their aspirations. They believed

⁵³⁰ To understand how followers of Nietzsche and Heidegger in Strauss’s description believed that communism was the rational conclusion to liberal civilization, Pippin’s explanation is helpful: “Nietzsche and Heidegger obviously do not share Hegel’s view that the institutions of bourgeois society are in themselves rational (that is, can be viewed as rational outcomes in a putative civilizational struggle for self-knowledge) [...] But Nietzsche does argue that “last man” civilization is a rational or rationally inevitable outcome of the original ideals of Christian morality and Socraticism and that we learn something essential about moral ideals by understanding such a development. And Heidegger attributes an enormous range of later ideas and phenomena to Plato and the development of Platonic metaphysics, everything from Cartesian philosophy to the *Gestell* of the technological worldview. All these are for them in some sense rational outcomes, and they play a central role in how both philosophers want us to understand ‘the spiritual situation of the age’” (Pippin, Robert, “The Unavailability of the Ordinary: Strauss on the Philosophical Fate of Modernity”, *Political Theory* 31 no. 3, (2003): 335-358, 339)

⁵³¹ Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 360.

⁵³² Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 360.

⁵³³ Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 356.

to have found such teachers in that group of professors and writers who knowingly or ignorantly paved the way for Hitler ([Oswald] Spengler, Moeller van den Bruck, Carl Schmitt, Ernst Jünger, [Martin] Heidegger).⁵³⁴

These teachers paved way for Hitler through their destruction of reason, and their faith in the authority of the new national socialist spirit. They welcomed Hitler:

The less is said about him, the better. He will soon be forgotten. He is merely the rather contemptible *tool* of “History”: the midwife who assists at the birth of the new epoch, of a new spirit: and a midwife usually understands nothing of the genius at whose birth she assists; she is not even supposed to be a competent gynaecologist. A new reality is in the making; it is transforming the whole world; in the meantime there is: nothing, but—a fertile nothing. The Nazis are as unsubstantiated as clouds; the sky is hidden at present by those clouds which announces a devastating storm, but at the same time the long-needed rain which will bring new life to the dried up soil...⁵³⁵

Strauss suggests that the nihilist had adopted the modern belief in “progressivism” in that they aimed at something, even though it was *unknown*.⁵³⁶ The communists, on the other hand, aimed to establish a *known* egalitarian order and world peace (providence). What partly turned the young atheists into nihilists, in Strauss’s analysis, was that they allowed the *enemy* — the *communist* — to define the terms of the battle. The young right-wing atheists accepted the Marxist thesis that the communist classless world is the *rational* conclusion to the liberal civilization. In reaction, they said “No!” to civilization — defined “as the conscious culture of human reason, i.e., science and morals” — and opted for Hitler and the Nazis, without their end being defined. This was a mistake in Strauss’s eyes. It was a mistake he sets out to correct.

Strauss not only counted himself as one among the young German right-wingers who criticized liberalism in the inter-war era, he still shared the motive — a *moral* criticism of liberal civilization — of the teachers who he identifies as having

⁵³⁴ Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 362.

⁵³⁵ Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 363–64.

⁵³⁶ Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 356.

philosophically paved the way to Nazism. In chapters two and three, I argued that Strauss in the early and mid-1930s philosophically dismisses both liberalism and communism on the grounds that they both conceive of human nature as *good*, and proposes a right-wing authoritarian regime grounded on a conception of human nature as morally evil. Furthermore, it is clear that, during the inter-war period, Strauss agreed with other right-wingers that the liberal and communist notions of an ideal world were inherently undesirable.⁵³⁷ Strauss thus shared the nihilist underlying *motive*, and their *aversion* to communism. He did not, however, accept the Marxist thesis that communism is the only *rational* conclusion to liberalism. He therefore set as his task to devise a *rational* alternative to communism *and* Nazism. Just as in his study of Hobbes before the war, Strauss's post-war writing turns to human nature to do so. This time around, however, Strauss reads *nature* together with *reason*, rather than vanity. He argues that "the lack of resistance to nihilism seems ultimately to be due to the depreciation and the *contempt of reason*, which is one and unchangeable or it is not, and of science."⁵³⁸ To counter the perception of reason as changeable, that is, a product of historical and particular and national projects — as Spengler had influentially argued in *The Decline of the West* — Strauss seeks to tie reason to human nature as a "known and stable standard."⁵³⁹

Strauss's first step in this strategy in the early 1940s — as seen in "German Nihilism" — is to divide reason into an ancient and a modern variety, in order to counter the destruction of the entire history of western metaphysics. Strauss agrees with Heidegger's criticism of reason as applied to *modern* rationality *only*. Modern rationality,

⁵³⁷ They recalled the ideals of aristocracy found in the Christian middle ages, ancient Rome, and ancient Greece.

⁵³⁸ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 364, emphasis added.

⁵³⁹ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 364. See also Strauss, "The Living Issues of German Post-War Philosophy," 118.

as we saw in Strauss's account of Hobbes in the previous chapter, rests on passion, on the fear of violent death, and is aligned with calculated self-preservation. Heidegger's rejection of reason at large (including pre-modern rationality), as determined by history, is part of a greater problem that Strauss identifies as having accompanied German philosophy since its birth. German idealism, he argues in "German Nihilism", was formed in reaction to the British and French enlightenment and, as a consequence, the romanticists return to "pre-modern ideal was not a real pre-modern ideal," but was mediated by this criticism.⁵⁴⁰ According to this account, pre-modern philosophy had not gotten a fair hearing and should be granted an appeal. Paradoxically, it is Heidegger — whom Strauss recognized as the most radical of the historicists — who had led Strauss to reconsider ancient rationality.

In a paper, "The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy," delivered at Syracuse University one year earlier, in the spring of 1940, Strauss wrote of modern philosophy in general:

Modern philosophy has come into being as a *refutation* of traditional philosophy, i.e., of the Aristotelian philosophy. Have the founders of modern philosophy *really* refuted Aristotle? Have they ever *understood* him? They certainly understood the Aristotelians of their time, but they certainly did not understand Aristotle himself. [...] He cannot have been *refuted*, if he has not been *understood*; And this was perhaps the most profound impression which the younger generation experienced in Germany during the period in question: under the guidance of Heidegger, people came to see that Aristotle and Plato had *not* been understood. Heidegger's interpretation of Aristotle was an achievement with which I cannot compare any other intellectual phenomenon which has emerged in Germany after the war. Heidegger made it clear, not but by assertions, but by concrete analyses — the work of an enormous concentration and diligence — that Plato and Aristotle have *not* been understood by the modern philosophers; for they read their own opinions into the works of Plato and Aristotle...⁵⁴¹

⁵⁴⁰ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 356.

⁵⁴¹ Leo Strauss "The Living Issues of German Post-War Philosophy," in Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 115-139, 134-35; original, Leo Strauss Papers [Box 8, Folder 14] Department of Special Collections, University of

Heidegger's philosophy had both opened a return to ancient philosophy and posed the greatest challenge to the possibility of an eternal human nature. Strauss describes the return to the ancients as having been primed by Heidegger:

The turning to the texts themselves implies a profound distrust of the initial categories of interpretation, of the categories we use before having *submitted* ourselves to the test of the past. That distrust is directed especially against the term 'culture' which is the product of the Faustic soul. More elementary, less sophisticated terms are required if we want to give an accurate and adequate account of the thoughts and interests guiding the life of earlier people. We must get rid of the whole conceptual apparatus created by modern philosophy or science, and indeed by the older traditions of philosophy or science; we must return to a pre-philosophic or a pre-scientific language if we want to arrive at an adequate understanding of pre-philosophic 'culture.'⁵⁴²

It is a route Strauss follows up to a point. Unlike Heidegger, he does not at this time return to the pre-Socratic, and disagrees with Heidegger's historicist conclusion:

Whoever tried seriously to understand the past along these lines discovered certain *basic* facts and interests which have *not* changed and which are *not subject to change*. Therewith the historical interest turned into a philosophic interest, into the interest in the *eternal nature of man*. And that turn was backed by historical studies as distinguished from a general philosophy of history. Finally, it became clear that members of all 'cultures', being men may understand each other, whereas the 'Faustic' historicist understands none, because he does not see the eternal nature of man, 'because he does not see the wood for the trees.'⁵⁴³

Strauss speaks of the transformational effect of this return for philosophy, as it liberates itself from historicism: "We become again, what we cannot be before, *natural* philosophers, i.e., *philosophers who approach the natural*, the basic and original question of philosophy in a natural, an adequate way."⁵⁴⁴

Chicago Library.

⁵⁴² Strauss, "The Living Issues of German Post-War Philosophy," 120, emphasis added.

⁵⁴³ Strauss, "The Living Issues of German Post-War Philosophy," 120-21, emphasis added.

⁵⁴⁴ Strauss, "The Living Issues of German Post-War Philosophy," 133, emphasis added. Shell has pointed to their words that they "casts instructive light on the overall purpose of his [Strauss] counter-historicist history of modern thought" (Shell, "Strauss on "German Nihilism,""180n 22).

His experience of Heidegger's re-interpretation of Aristotle and Plato convinced Strauss that a return to ancient thought was possible. He thus insists that "La querelle des anciens et des modernes [the quarrel between the ancient and modern] must be renewed."⁵⁴⁵ Against Heidegger, however, Strauss makes it his project to prove the existence of reason as an unchanging and authoritative standard through a return to the Socratic-Platonic tradition of political philosophy. It is in light of this return to the study of the "eternal natural man" that we must read the programmatic statement in "German Nihilism" that follows from Strauss's judgment on Heidegger as a teacher (beside Spengler, van den Bruck, Schmitt, Jünger) — Strauss told his colleagues that what these young men need is a "traditional teacher." It was the role of a traditional teacher Strauss filled after the war. It would not be redundant (i.e., too late), since Strauss soberly predicts: "the defeat of National Socialism will not necessarily mean the end of German nihilism. For that nihilism has deeper roots than the preaching of Hitler, Germany's defeat in the World War and all that."⁵⁴⁶

It is important to note that with the description, "traditional teacher" Strauss does not mean a return to traditional conservatism as he explains in his essay on "German Nihilism": "I believe it is dangerous, if the opponents of National Socialism withdraw to a mere conservatism which defines its ultimate goal by a specific *tradition*."⁵⁴⁷ Instead, Strauss turns to "Aristotle" to describe the task at hand: to "seek what is *good*, and not what we inherited."⁵⁴⁸ The tool for seeking the good in all places and times is Socratic-Platonic rationalism. It is the pursuit for the *good*, independent of *tradition* (as formed by

⁵⁴⁵ Strauss, "The Living Issues of German Post-War Philosophy," 137, emphasis added.

⁵⁴⁶ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 357.

⁵⁴⁷ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 367, emphasis added.

⁵⁴⁸ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 367.

history) that marks Strauss as a *radical* conservative in what followed after his work on Hobbes in the 1930s. Over two decades later, in his book, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern* (1968), Strauss would write that the Socratic-Platonic quest for philosophical truth “cannot be simply conservative since it is guided by the awareness that all men seek by nature, not the ancestral or traditional, but the good.”⁵⁴⁹ And a decade earlier, in 1958, he had aligned the Socratic-Platonic tradition in an essay on liberal education with what he called “ancient liberalism,” or, “liberal in the original sense of the term” as “liberality.”⁵⁵⁰ In the early 1940s, however, Strauss’s mentioning of an ancient liberal tradition was primarily restricted to the *political* realm. During his stay in England (1934-37), Strauss had, as Shell has pointed out, discovered a liberal *political* or practical tradition with ancient roots, which would alter his earlier quest to replace the liberal state with a non-liberal authoritarian regime.

4. 1. 2. *Ancient political liberalism*

At the end of “German Nihilism,” Strauss states his agreement with Nietzsche’s account and criticism of the ideals of the modern civilization as having an “English origin,” but adds that his experience living in England had led him to discover a liberal tradition that Nietzsche fails to account for:

[T]he English almost always had the very un-German prudence and moderation not to throw out the baby with the bath, i.e. the prudence to conceive of the modern ideals as a reasonable adaptation of the old and eternal *ideal of decency*, of *rule of law*, and of that *liberty which is not license*, to changed circumstances. [...] Whatever may be wrong with the peculiar modern ideal: the very Englishmen who originated it, were at the same time versed in the classical tradition, and the English always kept in store a substantial amount of the necessary counter-poison. While the English originated the modern ideal — the

⁵⁴⁹ Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*, x.

⁵⁵⁰ Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*, x.

pre-modern ideal, the classical ideal of humanity, was no where better preserved than in Oxford and Cambridge.⁵⁵¹

Here we see Strauss pitting a classical understanding of liberalism against Hobbes's definition of freedom as license, that is, of liberty defined as the absence of external impediments, as displayed in the state of nature. In Hobbes's view, law is always an infringement on liberty, and what is not forbidden by law is permitted, as opposed to what Strauss two decades later describes as the "sternness and austerity which classical political philosophy shares with ancient law — a sternness which Aristotle expressed classically by saying that what the law does not command it forbids."⁵⁵² And however much the rule of law was suspended under Churchill's war ministry — the conservative all-party coalition government that had been formed on May 10, 1940 to take Britain through the war — Churchill appeared to Strauss as a beacon of classical light. If they had not been blinded by their fervent nationalism in this period of national emergence, Strauss argues that the young German nihilists would have seen in Churchill the only vital alternative to Nazism, and a statesman who shared the young nihilists' anti-communist stand:

Only one answer was given which has adequate and which would have impressed the young nihilists if they had heard it. It was not however given by a German and it was given in the year 1940 only. Those young men who refused to believe that the period following the jump into liberty, following the communist world revolution, could be the finest hour of mankind in general and Germany in particular, could have been impressed as much as we were, by what Winston Churchill said after the defeat in Flanders about Britain's finest hour.⁵⁵³

⁵⁵¹ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 372, emphasis added.

⁵⁵² Strauss, "Preface," 16.

⁵⁵³ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 363.

These young men would have been impressed by Churchill's speech, Strauss adds, because Spengler had taught them to see "that glory which was ancient Rome."⁵⁵⁴ To disqualify the Nazis's imperial ambitions, Strauss turns again to Virgil's advice to Rome, just as he had in his letter to Löwith seven years earlier (that I discussed in chapter three), this time to account for why the English deserved to be victorious:

The present Anglo-German war is then of symbolic significance. In defending modern civilization against German nihilism, the English are defending the eternal principle of civilization. No one can tell what will be the outcome of this war. But this much is clear beyond any doubt: by choosing Hitler for their leader in the crucial moment, in which the question of who is to exercise military rule became the order of the day, the Germans ceased to have any *rightful* claim to be more than a provincial nation; it is the English, and not the Germans, who *deserve* to be, and to *remain*, an *imperial* nation: for only the English, and not the Germans, have understood that in order to *deserve* to exercise imperial rule, *regere imperio pupulos*, one must have learned for a very long time to spare the vanquished and to crush the arrogant: *parcere subjectis et debellare superbos*.⁵⁵⁵

The German imperial ambition under Hitler was, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, organized around the doctrine of Germans as a superior ruler race (*Volksgemeinschaft*), whose natural right it is to colonize and enslave the land and people of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union—the *Lebensraum* doctrine. Strauss expresses the difference between the British Empire and the Third Reich in a bullet-point in one of the essay's two outlines: "The English gentlemen as an imperial nation vs. the German *Herren* as a nation of provincial, resentful fanatics."⁵⁵⁶ Unlike the Nazis, the British Empire was not primed on *bellicose* nationalism, but adhered to the belief that Strauss had noted in the

⁵⁵⁴ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 363.

⁵⁵⁵ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 373; see editors not for their transcription of this paragraph from the typescript and handwritten note.

⁵⁵⁶ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 356.

margin of his copy of Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*: "National world-rule [...] can be expressed *without nationalism proper*."⁵⁵⁷

In "German Post-War Philosophy," Strauss returns to Schmitt's conception of the political to account for how German *bellicose* nationalism was a result of the *historicist* destruction of reason and any common moral standard due to the relativism it caused:

Now, every human community needs some degree of agreement at least as regards the basic moral questions. [...] If mutual understanding as regards the practical basis of common life cannot be reached by reason and argument, people had no choice but to turn away from reason to *authority*. // The most visible kind of authority — most visible at least in Germany — is the State. In [*On the Concept of the Political*], Carl Schmitt indicated the following chain of thought: there is not one ideal, but a variety of conflicting ideals; therefore, ideals cannot have an obligatory character; more precisely, any value judgment is a free decision, which concerns exclusively the freely deciding individual himself; it is essentially a private affair; therefore, no one can expect of any other man that that other man sacrifice anything for the first man's ideal; but no political community can exist without asserting that there are *obligations* which can overrule any *private decision*; whatever may be the ultimate source of these obligations, they cannot be derived from free decisions of the individual, or else they could be no more than *conditional obligations*, not *absolute* obligations, the obligation to sacrifice life itself. For, Schmitt asserts, if we analyse political obligation, and above all the meaning of 'political,' we find that we mean by 'political' any fact which is related to the distinction of friend and enemy of the group to which we belong, that distinction originating in the possibility of *war*. The basic fact of the possibility of war sets an absolute limit to all freedom of decision: it creates *authority* and therewith it gives all members of the community a generally valid guidance.⁵⁵⁸

As we saw in the last chapter, Strauss shares with Schmitt the anti-liberal view that state authority should win over individual rights. I argued that Strauss's neo-Hobbesian political ontology that places vanity at the root of political antagonism, as the precondition for dominion, provides an alternative to Schmitt's collapse of political authority with bellicose nationalism. To counter what he here sees as the historicist roots of Schmitt's immanent and relativistic conception of the political that sees war as that

⁵⁵⁷ Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 242.

⁵⁵⁸ Strauss, "The Living Issues of German Post-War Philosophy," 127-28, emphasis added.

which creates a common standard for the community, Strauss turns again to human nature to look for a non-relativistic foundation for political dominion, for an authoritative standard for common life/normative order.

This time around, however, it is no longer in Hobbes's pre-scientific observation of human passion in which Strauss finds an alternative, but the Socratic-Platonic essentialist view of the human animal as the rational animal. Drury and Laurence Lampert have argued that Strauss follows Nietzsche in that he thinks that human nature is not fixed and the natural order is created anew through the will to power.⁵⁵⁹ Robert Pippin (following Stanley Rosen, and in his turn, Kojève), on the other hand, opposes Lampert's and Drury's thesis by pointing out that Strauss's appeals to human nature as something permanent.⁵⁶⁰ Pippin's reading of Strauss appears the correct one in respect to those of Strauss's texts that I have examined up-close. As in the inter-war era, Strauss continues to make an appeal to the idea of an unchanging human nature after the war. I uncover the specific features of this appeal in this chapter.

In the same paper on "The Living Issues of German Post-War Philosophy," Strauss also points out that some reacted to historicism, "which had led to the turning *from* reason to authority," by returning to the Hobbesian tradition of natural law:

The urgency of a convincing, generally valid moral teaching, of a moral teaching of evident political relevance, was clearly felt. Such a moral teaching seemed to be discernible in the natural law doctrines of the 17th and 18th centuries rather than in later teaching[s]. (Troeltsch had asserted time and again that the political superiority of the Anglosaxons was due to the fact that that natural law tradition had not been superseded, to the same extent as in Germany, by historicism.) For

⁵⁵⁹ See Shadia Drury, *The Political Thought of Leo Strauss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁵⁶⁰ See Robert Pippin, "Being, Time, and Politics: The Strauss-Kojève Debate," *History and Theory* 32, no. 2 (1993): 138-161; Pippin, "The Unavailability of the Ordinary: Strauss on the Philosophical Fate of Modernity".

the natural law teachers of the 17th and 18th centuries had spoken of laws and obligations, and not merely of ideals and values.⁵⁶¹

In Strauss's eyes, the natural law doctrines of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are precisely the wrong places to turn to in order to counter historicism and moral relativism. The first modern natural law teacher among the Anglo-Saxons was Hobbes and it is he, in Strauss's account (as examined in chapter two and three), who causes the crisis of obligation/authority in the first place. Both during and after the war, Strauss advances the view that Hobbesian natural law (rational and moral precepts) is predicated on safeguarding each individual's *unconditional* natural right to self-preservation.⁵⁶² He also holds that the obligations derived from this unconditional right are *conditional*, and thus lead to the unintended consequences of undoing unconditional obligation to the state. Strauss also comes to blame Hobbes for the rise of historicism in *Natural Right and History*, as we shall see in the second part of this chapter. So, while Schmitt turns to war as that which re-establishes authority to the state, and other compatriots to 17th and 18th century natural law tradition, Strauss returns to the Socratic-Platonic conception of human nature and reason to try to tease out a non-relativist theory of obligation.

To make such move possible, Strauss recognizes that the attack on the liberal civilization in general, and the Weimar Republic specifically, while necessary for philosophical investigations, resulted in a political disaster:

German philosophy *implies* a more or less radical criticism of the very idea of civilisation and especially of modern civilisation — a criticism disastrous in the political field, but necessary in the philosophical, in the theoretical field. For if civilisation is distinguished from, and even opposed to, what was formerly called the state of nature, the process of civilisation means an increasing going away from the *natural* condition of man, an increasing *forgetting* of that situation. And

⁵⁶¹ Strauss, "The Living Issues of German Post-War Philosophy," 131, emphasis added.

⁵⁶² As pointed out in the previous chapter, Strauss had argued that Schmitt preference for death was the inverse of Hobbes and liberalism's preference for life.

perhaps one must have a living knowledge, an acute recollection' of that situation if one wants to know, i.e. to understand in its full meaning, the *natural*, the basic problems of philosophy.⁵⁶³

The philosophical criticism of liberal civilization, morals and rights had catastrophic effects in the field of politics. In order to avoid the “disastrous” political consequences of the necessary philosophical criticism of liberal civilization, Strauss recovers a way to insulate philosophical criticism from the political field from medieval and ancient thinkers. In a 1954 paper, “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing,” Strauss explains:

Philosophers or scientists who hold this view about the relation 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 truth to 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 concentrated study.⁵⁶⁴

4. 1. 3. *Philosophical esotericism*

Strauss’s discovery of an art of writing that shielded politics from philosophy was a gradual process that begins in the 1920s. The research culminated in the publication of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (henceforth, *Persecution*) in 1952, which collects one essay on the general theme of esotericism, and four case studies in the practice of esotericism—all papers which Strauss had published throughout the 1940s.⁵⁶⁵ In the

⁵⁶³ Strauss, “The Living Issues of German Post-War Philosophy,” 115. In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss had noted that unlike developed liberalism, Hobbes never forgot the state of war/nature. What Strauss’s Hobbes repressed due the adoption of natural science was that human are evil. The scientific Hobbes still remembered the state of nature unlike developed liberalism.

⁵⁶⁴ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, 221-22.

⁵⁶⁵ Leo Strauss, “Farabi’s Plato,” in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume, American Academy for Jewish Research* (1945): 357–393, was revised and abbreviated for *Persecution’s* Introduction; “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” *Social Research* 8, no. 4 (1941): 488–504, was revised for chapter two by the same name, “Persecution and the Art of Writing”; “The Literary Character of the Guide for the Perplexed,” in *Essays on Maimonides*, ed. by S. W. Baron (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941): 37–91, was revised for chapter three by the same name, “The Literary Character of the Guide for

second chapter, from which the book takes its name, Strauss writes that “persecution” “gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing, and therewith to a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines.”⁵⁶⁶ This is only part of the story, as philosophers also wrote esoterically in order not to endanger the normative order on which society rests:

After about the middle of the [17th] century an ever-increasing number of heterodox philosophers who had suffered from persecution published their books not only to communicate their thoughts but also because they desired to contribute to the abolition of persecution as such. They believed that suppression of free inquiry, and of publication of the result of free inquiry, was accidental, an outcome of faulty construction of the body politics, and that the kingdom of general darkness could be replaced by the republic of universal light. They looked forward to a time when, as a result of the progress of popular education, practically complete freedom of speech would be possible, or — to exaggerate for purpose of clarification — to a time when no one would suffer any harm from hearing any truth. They concealed their views only far enough to protect themselves as well as possible from persecution; had they been more subtle than that, they would have defeated their purpose, which was to enlighten an ever-increasing number of people who were not potential philosophers. It is therefore comparatively easy to read between the lines of their books.⁵⁶⁷

Strauss identifies persecution and the danger of truths for the social fabric as the reason behind esotericism. For these heterodox or enlightenment philosophers, the conflict between philosopher and society can be resolved by popular education, which in turn nullifies the need of esoteric writing.

It is not these enlightenment philosophers, however, that *Persecution* is about. The book’s introduction makes use of an article on the Muslim philosopher Farabi, and the other chapters are case studies on the esoteric art of three Jewish thinkers,

the Perplexed”; “The Law of Reason in Kuzari,” proceedings of the *American Academy for Jewish Research* 13 (1943): 47–96, was published as chapter four by the same name, “The Law of Reason in Kuzari”; “How to Study Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise”, proceedings of the *American Academy for Jewish Research* 17 (1948): 69–131, was published as chapter five by the same name, “How to Study Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise”.

⁵⁶⁶ Strauss, *Persecution*, 25.

⁵⁶⁷ Strauss, *Persecution*, 34.

Maimonides, Halevi, and Spinoza — while Spinoza counts among the enlightenment philosophers, Strauss argued that this designation thus not apply to his view on esotericism and human reason. In the book’s “Preface,” Strauss notes that he discovered esotericism when “studying the Jewish and Islamic philosophy of the Middle Ages.”⁵⁶⁸ These thinkers were part of a group of pre-modern esoteric writers.⁵⁶⁹ Strauss differentiates between what Frazer has referred to as “modern” and “ancient” esotericism.⁵⁷⁰ This is a useful heuristic distinction if the terms ancient and modern are not understood strictly with respect to the time period in which these thinkers lived and wrote, but rather with respect to the underlying rationale behind their esotericism.

These ancients, contrary to the moderns, Strauss writes in his 1948 book *On Tyranny* “believed that the gulf separating ‘the wise’ and ‘the vulgar’ was a *basic fact of human nature* which could *not* be influenced by popular education; philosophy, or science, was essentially a privilege of ‘the few.’”⁵⁷¹ The difference between the few philosophers and the many vulgar is thus predicated on a natural difference in their intellectual ability, and because of this natural and permanent condition, it cannot be transcended. According to ancient esotericism, the *difference* between the few philosophers and the many vulgar is irreconcilable, while the *conflict* between the two is manageable. In the case of the modern, the difference between the few philosophers and the many vulgar is due to societal circumstances only, and can therefore be

⁵⁶⁸ Strauss, *Persecution*, 36.

⁵⁶⁹ Strauss, *Persecution*, 36.

⁵⁷⁰ Michael L. Frazer, “Esotericism Ancient and Modern: Strauss Contra Straussianism on the Art of Political-Philosophical Writing,” *Political Theory* 34, no 1 (2006), 33 – 61. See also Catherine H. Zuckert, and Michael P. Zuckert. *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 137, 288-9n 57.

⁵⁷¹ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 27, emphasis added. See also Zuckert, Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*, 136.

transcended.⁵⁷² The preconditions and social aims of ancient and modern esotericism are thus mutually exclusive. One must choose one. Strauss sides with the ancients against the moderns. To substantiate this claim, I will now unpack Strauss's discovery of esotericism chronologically, with emphasis on Hobbes role as the representative of modern esotericism.

4. 1. 4. *The discovery of ancient esotericism*

Already in the mid- to late-1920s, in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, Strauss identifies a *qualitative* difference between the *numerically* "few wise" and the "ignorant many" at play in Aristotle's work. He writes: "contemplation or theory, and theory is accessible only to the few who are wise, special precautions are needed for the guidance of the ignorant many, for the sake of social law and order."⁵⁷³ Strauss's understanding of esotericism at this point in time amounts to a conception of an exoteric-esoteric division between the *numeric* few and many, based on a *qualitative* difference between the wise (capable of contemplation) and ignorant. He is not yet aware of an art of writing — a double rhetoric — that simultaneously communicates an esoteric teaching to the few and an exoteric doctrine to the many. The use of esotericism is to maintain law and order: wisdom is separated from the moral doctrine required to maintain order in the city/state.

In 1935, the same year that Strauss finished his Hobbes manuscript, Strauss writes in *Philosophy and Law* that Maimonides, like his "predecessors and successors" (medieval Jewish and Islamic rationalists), "had in mind a *certain* enlightenment of all men," since they

⁵⁷² Strauss, *Persecution*, 37.

⁵⁷³ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 47.

were precisely Enlighteners in the proper sense; for them it was *not* a question of *spreading* light, of educating the *multitude* to rational knowledge, of *enlightening*; again and again they enjoin upon the philosophers the duty of *keeping secret* from the unqualified multitude the rationally known truth: for them — in contrast to the Enlightenment proper, that is, the modern Enlightenment — the *esoteric* character of philosophy was unconditionally established.⁵⁷⁴

Strauss finds in Maimonides, just as he had in Aristotle, a tradition that shielded an esoteric teaching from the *political* or *moral* realm.

Tanguay and Lampert have each respectively argued that, in *Philosophy and Law*, Strauss had not yet figured the full extent of the esoteric nature of Maimonides's prophetology. Lampert shows, in an exposition of a series of letters that Strauss sent to Klein (January 1938 to November 1939), that it is during these years that Strauss for the first time fully dissects Maimonides's esotericism and arrives at the "explosive" insight that the most "important prophet" in Judaism was an atheist.⁵⁷⁵ Out of this insight, Lampert argues, Strauss arrives at the realization that Maimonides' Jewish predecessor, Halevi, and his Islamic precursors, Averroes and Farabi, and ultimately, Aristotle and Plato, had also concealed their atheism. Lampert argues that their separation of wisdom from morality moved them beyond good and evil, and thus describes them as "immoralists."⁵⁷⁶ Tanguay, on the other hand, argues that it is in Farabi that Strauss discovers the strongest case for the esoteric practice of "prophetology" and it signalled his "shift" to "genuine Platonism."⁵⁷⁷ He dates this "Farabian turn" to 1935.⁵⁷⁸

In *Persecution*, Strauss argues that prophets were the medium through which God had communicated the divine law. Whatever difference in their teaching on the relation

⁵⁷⁴ Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 102.

⁵⁷⁵ Lampert, "Strauss's Recovery of Esotericism," in the *Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven B. Smith (New York: Cambridge University Press), 63-92, 64-65.

⁵⁷⁶ Lampert, "Strauss's Recovery of Esotericism," 70.

⁵⁷⁷ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 53, 68, 74, 92.

⁵⁷⁸ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 53, 79-97.

between philosophy and religion, Averroes, Avicenna, Farabi, Halevi, and Maimonides's esoteric commentaries on revealed law show that they are political philosophers in disguise. Their interpretations of the law of the Torah and the Koran are Platonic lies that approximate philosophical truths about the natural order. The law, as in the Platonic tradition, is separated from philosophy. The principle of rule that most closely approximates the order in nature is identified by the philosopher and handed down to the many as the right interpretation of revealed law. These moral commands, Strauss argues are, according to Averroes, Farabi, Halevi, and Maimonides, not *rational* laws of nature (*nomoi*). The religious laws are not believed to reflect the rational laws of the universe (a divine or metaphysical order), but are exoteric moral laws. Christian theologians in the Thomistic tradition (influenced by Aristotle), on the other hand, believed that the rational commandments corresponded with the Christian notions of "the natural law," "the law of reason," and "the moral law" of the universe.⁵⁷⁹ Unlike the private role of philosophy in Judaism and Islam (as practiced by Maimonides, Halevi, Farabi and Averroes), Strauss argues that the medieval Christian tradition popularized philosophy as a handmaid for religion.⁵⁸⁰

4. 1. 5. *Esotericism and Hobbes*

In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss makes the case that Hobbes turns to philosophy, as popularized by Christianity, against religion. Strauss points out that no pre-modern philosopher would have questioned the social utility of religion to secure social order: "No pre-modern atheist doubted that social life requires belief in, and worship of, God or

⁵⁷⁹ Strauss, *Persecution*, 11.

⁵⁸⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 74-75.

gods.”⁵⁸¹ Philosophy was not sufficient to secure a moral order. Prior to Hobbes, Strauss notes that atheists were a non-enterprising faction that kept their unbelief to themselves. Hobbes breaks with the Epicurean tradition and popularizes philosophy as a “weapon” against theology: “[s]ince the [17th] century, philosophy has become a weapon, and hence an [ideological] instrument.”⁵⁸² Hobbes uses philosophy against religion, and not, like the mediaeval scholastics, religion as an exoteric rhetoric to secure social order.⁵⁸³

In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Hobbes’s proposed political contract is impotent without the affective provision of the fear of violent death, and Strauss repeats this insight in *Natural Right and History*:

There was only one fundamental objection to Hobbes's basic assumption which he felt very keenly and which he made every effort to overcome. In many cases the fear of violent death proved to be a weaker force than the fear of hell fire or the fear of God. The difficulty is well illustrated by two widely separated passages of the *Leviathan*. In the first passage Hobbes says that the fear of the power of men (i. e., the fear of violent death) is ‘commonly’ greater than the fear of the power of ‘spirits invisible,’ i.e., than religion. In the second passage he says that ‘the fear of darkness and ghosts is greater than other fears’ Hobbes saw his way to solve this contradiction: the fear of invisible powers is stronger than the fear of violent death as long as people believe in invisible powers, i.e., as long as they are under the spell of delusions about the true character of reality; the fear of violent death comes fully into its own as soon as people have become enlightened. This implies that the whole scheme suggested by Hobbes requires for its operation the weakening or, rather, the elimination of the fear of invisible powers. It requires such a radical change of orientation as can be brought about only by the disenchantment of the world, by the diffusion of scientific knowledge, or by popular enlightenment. Hobbes's is the first doctrine that necessarily and unmistakably points to a thoroughly ‘enlightened,’ i.e., a-religious or atheistic society as the solution of the social or political problem.⁵⁸⁴

For the actualization of his political proposal, Hobbes must replace the object which his contemporaries fear is attached from afterlife to violent death. Through public education,

⁵⁸¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 169.

⁵⁸² Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 34.

⁵⁸³ The reason for this I have outlined in chapter three.

⁵⁸⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 198.

Hobbes attempts to wrestle the fear individuals have for invisible powers to the fear of death in the hands of others. Hobbes's social contract does not presuppose a transcendental creator as absolute authority/Sovereign. In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss places Hobbes in the Epicurean tradition, but unlike *any* (including the Epicureans) pre-modern thinkers, he argues that Hobbes does not think "social life required belief in, and worship of, God or gods" and is therefore the founder of "political *atheism*."⁵⁸⁵

4. 1. 6. *Rational capacity as the ground for ancient esotericism*

Hobbes stands out in Strauss's account as the anti-esoteric thinker par excellence. The reason for this is that Hobbes, in Strauss's view, subscribes to *rational equality*, which is contrary to the natural ground on which Strauss argues ancient esotericism rests, namely, the natural difference between the rational capacity of the few wise and the vulgar many. It is the view that humans are by nature *unequal* that establishes the permanent need for an esoteric hermeneutics.

In *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, Strauss observes that Hobbes's understanding of every human's capacity for reason makes redundant the need for a religious exoteric doctrine:

According to Spinoza, the command 'thou shalt love thy neighbor' takes its force as commandment for the multitude only from the belief that the commandment is the directly 'revealed' word of God, but from Hobbes' position this commandment is sufficiently binding upon man by virtue of the fact that God has created men as reasonable beings. The distinction between the wise men and the vulgar does not enter into the matter at all. *Because* that distinction does not come into consideration, there is no necessity for recourse to religion.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 169, emphasis added.

⁵⁸⁶ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 101. See also Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 45.

With respect to his view of rational ability, the use and role of religion (as discussed in chapter two and three) belong to the pre-moderns, for whom religion is seen as an exoteric mean to assure obedience of the many. For Hobbes, subjects do not need to be steered into the commonwealth by divine command because the individuals' reason alone, developed out of fear, is sufficient to persuade them of the benefits of belonging to a state. While Strauss has Hobbes dismissing the necessity of a revealed commandment due to his egalitarian view of human rational capacity, he still does not assert that Hobbes is an atheist. So much is clear from Strauss's point at the end of the above passage that for Hobbes, it is "God" who "created men as reasonable beings."⁵⁸⁷ Strauss concludes that Hobbes is agnostic:

An atheist in the theoretical sense of the term Hobbes is not. However, his 'true religion' is no more than a fringe phenomenon, which exercised no great influence on his way of thinking and feeling. The positive mind, for which reason itself is modesty, is content with those matters which are truly accessible to the finite mind. Only *this* world yields some answers. His mind and imagination do not go roaming into the infinite and eternal. *From an agnosticism such as that of Hobbes, it is only a step into atheism, a step which this philosopher himself however never took.*⁵⁸⁸

Strauss explains in his unfinished manuscript on *Hobbes's Critique of Religion* (which he abandoned in 1934), why he had overlooked Hobbes's atheism in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*:

Even though the English *Leviathan* contains the frankest presentation of the Hobbesian critique of religion, this is not to say that in that work Hobbes sets forth his actual view undisguisedly. Hobbes generally proceeds by beginning with fully or mostly orthodox-sounding statements, in order to lead these statements afterward, in a more or less veiled manner *ad absurdum*. In the further course of the investigation, however, he often makes no explicit use of the result of his critique, but rather avails himself of the previously rejected opinions as though they were self-evidently correct, in order to refute other traditional teachings covertly. In order to get to know his actual view, one must therefore attempt to

⁵⁸⁷ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 101.

⁵⁸⁸ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 100-101, emphasis added.

collect, as Hobbes no doubt intentionally neglected to do, the results of his critique, which are strewn among many passages of the work. This depends not so much on the completeness of the collection or even on the selection of the most offensive heresies as such on connecting the central thoughts in the critique of religion.⁵⁸⁹

In the second half of the manuscript, Strauss adds that Hobbes is careful not to endanger himself to the “suspicion of atheism,” by refraining from denying “resurrection,” “the inner distinction between true and false prophets,” and “miracles.”⁵⁹⁰ Hobbes’s thinly veiled esotericism was sufficient enough to deceive Strauss at the time that he wrote *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*. Two decades later, in *Persecution*, Strauss notes that in his book on Spinoza he had mistakenly rejected the view “that Hobbes was an atheist.”⁵⁹¹

Far more important than the discovery of Hobbes thinly concealed atheism for Strauss’s understanding of esotericism and his use of Hobbes after World War II, however, is *Strauss’s disagreement with Hobbes’s egalitarian understanding of the human animal’s capacity for reason*. Already before the war, in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss wrote: “Because all men are equal, i.e., because there is no natural order in general, and therefore no natural gradation of mankind, the difference between the wise minority and the unwise majority loses the fundamental importance it had for traditional political philosophy.”⁵⁹² The traditional esoteric-exoteric division between the wise minority and the unwise majority is opposed by Hobbes’s claim that “[b]y nature *all* men are *equally* reasonable.”⁵⁹³ What really troubles Strauss is thus not Hobbes’s rebellion against God, but his revolt against human nature and, more precisely, against the hierarchical view of individuals’ natural capacity for rational pursuits.

⁵⁸⁹ Strauss, *Hobbes’s Critique of Religion*, 32-33.

⁵⁹⁰ Strauss, *Hobbes Critique of Religion*, 80-81, 84, 86. In the first of two parts, Strauss argues that Hobbes first criticized the theological tradition from the view of the highest authority—the bible.

⁵⁹¹ Strauss, *Persecution*, 28n 10.

⁵⁹² Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 101-102.

⁵⁹³ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 159, emphasis added.

Strauss counters Hobbes's conception of rationality with an appeal to classical rationalism at the end of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*. Just as with Hobbes's egalitarian rational foundation for popular and modern sovereignty, ancient rule, Strauss suggests, is also legitimized by reason. But unlike Hobbes's view of reason or wisdom (he notes that Hobbes perverts the meaning of the latter by reducing it to the former), Strauss argues that for the ancients, wisdom is only attainable by the few. Strauss enforces the rule of the wise over the many. "The view of classical rationalism" is "that only *reason* justifies *dominion*," which means, Strauss explains, that "the rational should rule over the irrational (the old over the young, the man over the woman, the master over the slave) and therefore law over men."⁵⁹⁴ Strauss is perfectly aware that Hobbes argues that "allegedly natural gradation concerning the faculties of the mind proceeds from 'a vain concept of ones own wisdom, which almost all men think they have in a greater degree, than the Vulgar'."⁵⁹⁵ And further, Strauss suggests that Hobbes's perception of *intellectual* vanity (the belief in one's own intellectual superiority) is the main cause behind the war of all against all. Despite Hobbes's warning, Strauss insists on a natural gradation of rational capacity against Hobbes's modern enlightenment view. Strauss thus sides with the pre-modern rationale behind esotericism. Or as one of Strauss's students puts it:

It was this permanent distinction between the elite and the vulgar that the modern Enlightenment denied was necessary. Strauss thought that it was necessary, and hence preferred the medieval Enlightenment to its modern counterpart, as he had worked out in *Philosophy and Law*. [...] In contrast to the modern Enlightenment, the medieval rationalists took for granted the elitist and esoteric nature of philosophy. According to the medieval rationalists, the great divide between the elite and the many was a permanent feature of human societies, and no amount of education or human advancement could change it. Hence, all proper philosophical

⁵⁹⁴ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 161, 158.

⁵⁹⁵ Strauss, *The Political philosophy of Hobbes*, 167n 2.

writing had to be exoteric. In contrast, most Enlightenment thinkers believed that human beings can progress through education and the development of their rational facilities.⁵⁹⁶

Does it then follow from Strauss's belief in an ancient/ medieval division of intelligence that Strauss also practiced the art of writing between the lines? Is there, in other words, more to his excavation of esotericism than a hermeneutical guide to reading past (and some modern) philosophers?

4. 1. 7. *Strauss's esotericism*

That Strauss wrote esoterically is commonly agreed in the secondary literature. For example, Lampert, Sheppard, Kraemer, and Geoff Waite all argue that Strauss practiced ancient esotericism.⁵⁹⁷ Indeed, only the ancient rationale for the practice of esotericism makes sense in a liberal society—the need to enlighten the masses and protect the philosopher from the city is less of an existential necessity in regimes in which freedom of speech is guaranteed by statute. Or as Jacques Lacan (another well-known student of Kojève's interpretation of Hegel in the 1930s) pointed out after *Persecution* was published: “paradoxically,” the book was written in “the land [US] that traditionally offered asylum to those who have chosen freedom.”⁵⁹⁸ Anticipating Lacan's question, Strauss duly asked: “of what use” is the esoteric art “in a truly liberal society”?⁵⁹⁹

The first part of Strauss's “simple” answer is a reference to Plato's *Symposium*.⁶⁰⁰

The exoteric art teaches the few potential philosophers how to find the most “beautiful”

⁵⁹⁶ Kraemer, “The Medieval Arabic Enlightenment,” 165, 150.

⁵⁹⁷ Kraemer, “The Medieval Arabic Enlightenment”; Lampert, “Strauss's Recovery of Esotericism”; Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*; Geoff Waite, *Nietzsche's Corps/e: Aesthetics, Politics, Prophecy, or, The Spectacular Technoculture of Everyday Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*.

⁵⁹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, ed. and translated by Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 421.

⁵⁹⁹ Strauss, *Persecution*, 36.

⁶⁰⁰ Strauss, *Persecution*, 36.

hidden part within an esoteric text, as a way to lead a naturally gifted non-philosopher to philosophy. It is along these lines that Smith, Frazer, Zuckert and Zuckert, Kerbal and Arthur Melzer have suggested that if Strauss wrote esoterically, it was, in Frazer's words, as "pedagogic" device to "design to seduce students into a life of philosophy."⁶⁰¹ Esoteric argument forces the readers/students to reason on their own. Strauss replaces Plato's dialogues with incomplete and paradoxical statements, or as Zuckert and Zuckert point out, he admits in *On Tyranny* that he does not "dot all the i's," which forces the reader to put together the puzzle of truth on their own.⁶⁰² Zuckert and Zuckert have suggested Strauss wrote esoterically only to prove that it was indeed possible to write esoterically, and not in order to hide secrets.

The view of esotericism as a pedagogy relates to the second part of Strauss's answer, an answer which echoes the reported discovery of classical liberalism in "German Nihilism": "Education, they [ancients] felt, is the only answer to the always pressing question, to the political question par excellence, of how to reconcile *order* which is not *oppression* with *freedom* which is not *license*."⁶⁰³ If the question is always pressing, then it is also Strauss's question, and education, the ancients' answer, is also his answer. It was largely to education and the making of a school of thought (Straussianism) that Strauss dedicated his later life. In *On Tyranny*, Strauss points to the separation between the political and the philosophical in his interpretation of Xenophon's *Hiero*:

⁶⁰¹ Frazer, "Esotericism Ancient and Modern: Strauss Contra Straussianism on the Art of Political-Philosophical Writing," 33; Hannes Kerbal, "Strauss and Schleiermacher on How to Read Plato: An Introduction to 'Exoteric Teaching,'" in Yaffe & Rudermann: *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, (New York: Palgrave, 2014); Arthur Melzer, *Between the Lines: The Lost Art of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Smith, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*; Zuckert, Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy*.

⁶⁰² Catherine H. Zuckert and Michael P. Zuckert. *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy*, 136.

⁶⁰³ Strauss, *Persecution*, 37, emphasis added.

“Ultimately, the dialogue serves the purpose of contrasting *the* two ways of life: the political life and the life devoted to wisdom”.⁶⁰⁴ Drury has suggested that Strauss thought of himself as a teacher of scholars (possible philosophers) on the one hand and “gentlemen” (civil servants, possible statesmen) on the other.⁶⁰⁵ By education, however, Strauss has in mind more than a teacher/philosopher-student relation that leads students to philosophy and statecraft respectively. It also concerns political education of the many (“common man”) through an exoteric doctrine. The ancient understanding of a regime emphasized education of its citizenry more than its institutions, Strauss notes in *Natural Right and History*:

The classics had conceived of regimes (*politeiai*) not so much in terms of institutions as in terms of the aims actually pursued by the community and its authoritative part. Accordingly, they regarded the best regime as that regime whose aim is virtue, and they held that the right kind of institutions are indeed indispensable for establishing and securing the rule of the virtuous, but of only secondary importance in comparison with ‘education,’ i.e., the formation of character.⁶⁰⁶

To “reconcile order which is not oppression” with liberty in the modern era, Strauss holds that the principle of rule should be based on the consensus of the ruled (I return to this question in this chapter’s final section). In his role as a writer and teacher, Strauss never sought to reach the many directly; his audience was small, but influential. The popularization of his ideas was left for others.

So how should Strauss’s final pieces on Hobbes, which follow the full discovery of esotericism, be read? So far, I have established that Strauss’s new findings on Hobbes cannot be due to his esotericism, as he had already uncovered the thinly veiled esotericism that concealed Hobbes’s atheism by the early- to mid-1930s. What I have not

⁶⁰⁴ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 79.

⁶⁰⁵ See Drury, *The Political Thought of Leo Strauss*, xv.

⁶⁰⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 193.

yet addressed is how Strauss presents his final insights on Hobbes. Is there a double rhetoric at play in his post-war texts on Hobbes? Does Strauss write the way he reads? And if he does, is it to hide beautiful parts for the philosopher-to-be, and present an easily available doctrine of natural right for future civil servants? Or is it simply a pedagogical tool to lure potential philosophers? I think that there is more to it than this, as I will now explain.

Let us return to *Persecution* for some more clues. In this passage, Strauss speaks of ancient esoteric written and oral communication:

[Philosophers] must conceal their opinions from all but philosophers, either by limiting themselves to oral instructions of a carefully selected group of pupils, or by writing about the most important subject by means of ‘brief indication.’ [...] Those to whom such books are truly addressed are, however, neither the unphilosophical majority nor the perfect philosophers as such, but the young men who might become philosophers [...] All books of that kind owe their existence to the love of the mature philosopher for the puppies of his race, by whom he wants to be loved in turn: all exoteric books are ‘written speeches caused by love.’⁶⁰⁷

If we account for Strauss’s forms of communication outside of his publications, this allows us to see if there is a discrepancy between the two, which could reveal an esoteric-exoteric distinction, either between the published and unpublished material, or among the published texts. The difference between Strauss’s publication and his *classroom teaching* is examined in detail in the next chapter, where I take a close look at Strauss’s 1964 seminar on Hobbes. At this stage, it suffices to say that although Strauss explains his last

⁶⁰⁷ Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, pp. 34-36. Strauss does not provide the source for the quotation: “written speeches caused by love.” If the quotation is not by Strauss own making, my bet is that he is referring to *Phaedrus* 227c —the dialogue from which Strauss extract his method of logographic necessity: “Indeed, Socrates, you are just the man to hear it. *For the discourse about which we conversed, was in a way, a love-speech.* For Lysias has represented one of the beauties being tempted, but not by a lover; this is just the clever thing about it; for he says that should be granted rather to the one who is not in love than to the lover [καὶ μὴν, ὦ Σώκρατες, προσήκουσα γέ σοι ἡ ἀκοή: ὁ γὰρ τοι λόγος ἦν, περὶ ὃν διετρίβομεν, οὐκ οἶδ’ ὄντινα τρόπον ἐρωτικός. γέγραφε γὰρ δὴ ὁ Λυσίας πειρώμενόν τινα τῶν καλῶν, οὐχ ὑπ’ ἐραστοῦ δέ, ἀλλ’ αὐτὸ δὴ τοῦτο καὶ κεκόμμευται: λέγει γὰρ ὡς χαριστέον μὴ ἐρῶντι μᾶλλον ἢ ἐρῶντι]” (Plato, *Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus*. Loeb classical library, *Vol. 1 Plato*, ed. and translated Harold North Fowler, Walter Rangeley Maitland Lamb, and Robert Gregg (MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 415, emphasis added).

and major insight on Hobbes in much greater detail in the seminar than he does in any of his publications, no essential point is absent from his publications.⁶⁰⁸

The same seems to hold true of his *letters*. Kraemer observes that Strauss, depending on the addressee, “conveyed his thoughts in plain, uncoded language.”⁶⁰⁹ Strauss, as Lampert has shown, is more straightforward in his correspondence with Klein (January 1938 to November 1939) about his discovery of esotericism than in his subsequent publications.⁶¹⁰ What I have found in the archive shows that nothing that he writes about Hobbes in his letters is absent from his publications. However, his thoughts on Hobbes are presented, as Lampert has suggested about his writings on Maimonides, Halevi, Farabi and Averroes, in a less forthright way. As we shall see in the next chapter, Strauss hides away his final major insight in a footnote in *What is Political Philosophy* (1959) and in a short 1964 review of Macpherson’s *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: From Hobbes to Locke*. In these texts, he never explicitly indicates that this is a final major discovery. He does, however, point to the Hobbes footnote from *What is Political Philosophy* in a later preface to *Natural Right and History* (1970) and the German edition of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (1965).

Thornier is Rosen’s claim — Rosen had been one of Strauss’s doctoral students in the early 1950s — that Strauss communicated esoteric truths in *private gatherings* away from the classroom as it is impossible to verify what exactly Strauss said in private.⁶¹¹ This conundrum is, however, inconsequential if Kerbal is correct that it is unnecessary to

⁶⁰⁸ Strauss outlines the crux of his final insight in a footnote in chapter seven, “On the New Basis of Hobbes”, in *What is Political Philosophy* (1959), and again in his “Review of C. B. Macpherson: *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*”, *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 45, no.1 (June 1964): 69–70.

⁶⁰⁹ Kraemer, “The Medieval Arabic Enlightenment,” 138.

⁶¹⁰ Lampert, “Strauss’s Recovery of Esotericism,” 63–76.

⁶¹¹ Stanley Rosen, “Leo Strauss in Chicago,” *Daedalus* 135 (2006): 104–113.

chase the goose beyond the written word if Strauss wrote in the way he read the pre-moderns:

Orality, while being the original form of philosophic communication and therefore a conceivable option for the transmission of the esoteric teaching, has major defects: Not only does oral communication require permanent political stability and perfect comprehension on the part of each successor, it also limits the potential audience to those who happen to be a link in the chain of the tradition. In a word, oral *tradio* is very unlikely to achieve the goal of preserving over time an undistorted *tradio* for the intended audience.⁶¹²

If it is correct, as I have argued, that Strauss subscribed to the ancient natural ground for esotericism, he believed in and likely would want to communicate his most important ideas across generations to a wide scope of potential philosophers without the risks inherent to oral communication. Be this as it may, I do not have access to Strauss private conversations (there are no such recordings in the archives), and I have decided not to use as evidence recollections of his past students.⁶¹³ My conclusion is that Strauss's core views are accounted for in his publications, but that his final major insight on Hobbes is not easily detectable, and it is virtually impossible to unpack without the aid of his seminars.

Strauss's final insight on Hobbes, which I will discuss at length in the following chapter, were articulated in the mid-1950s and early 1960s, at which point in time Strauss's extra-textual interpretative intentions were kept to a minimum, and his approach was that for which he has become known: to understand a thinker as he understood himself. In this chapter, however, I consider Strauss's first text on Hobbes after the war ("On the Spirit of Hobbes" and its reappearance as part one of chapter five, "Modern

⁶¹² Hannes Kerbal. "Strauss and Schleiermacher on How to Read Plato: An Introduction to 'Exoteric Teaching,'" in Yaffe & Rudermann. *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 205.

⁶¹³ See for example a series of interviews conducted by Stephen Gregory and Gayle McKeen with former students of Strauss: <https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/interviews>.

Natural Right”, in *Natural Right and History*), in which Strauss’s main intention is to fit Hobbes into a larger view of the history of political philosophy. The question is, is there an esoteric dimension to this work? One way to find out is to apply the keys of what Strauss identifies as esoteric ways of writing to Strauss’s own text. Throughout *Persecution*, Strauss lists different ways to read and write “between the lines.”⁶¹⁴ Since these interpretative keys mostly concern pre-modern philosophical dialogues or treatises, or other styles of writing that do not apply to, or match Strauss’s own writing, few of these tricks apply to his Hobbes essay. What does apply is that there are “certain obtrusively enigmatic features in the presentation,” such as “obscurity of the plan, contradictions, pseudonyms, inexact repetitions of earlier statements...”⁶¹⁵ The esoteric question is if these inconsistencies are, in Strauss’s words, “blatant enough to shame a schoolboy”; that is to say, are they intentionally designed to separate between an exoteric doctrine and esoteric teaching?⁶¹⁶

I suggest below that the most significant obtrusively enigmatic features do not disguise an esoteric teaching, but rather, reveal Strauss’s extra-textual philosophical

⁶¹⁴ In *Persecution*, Strauss instructs his reader into the art of esoteric writing: “only when he reached the core of the argument would he write three or four sentences in that terse and lively style which is apt to arrest the attention of young men who love to think” (Strauss, *Persecution*, 24). And having read “the book for the second third time, he would detect in the very arrangement of the quotation from the authoritative books significant additions to those few terse statements which occur in the center of the rather short of the first part” (25). And “[if] a master of the art writing commits such blunders as would shame an intelligent high school boy, it is reasonable to assume that they are intentional, especially if the author discusses, however incidentally, the possibility of intentional blunders in writing” (30). An esoteric writer “would leave it to his philosophical readers to detangle the truth from its poetic or dialectic presentation. But he would defeat his purpose if he indicated clearly which of his statement expressed a noble lie, and which the still more noble truth” (35). And “some great writer writers might have stated certain important truths quite openly by using as mouthpiece some disreputable character [...] devils, madmen, beggars, sophists, drunkards, epicureans and buffoons” (36). And finally: “the potential philosophers are to be led step by step from the popular views which are indispensable for all practical and political purposes to the truth which is merely and purely theoretical, guided by certain obtrusively enigmatic features in the presentation of the popular teaching—obscurity of the plan, contradictions, pseudonym, inexact repetitions of earlier statements, strange expressions, etc” (36).

⁶¹⁵ Strauss, *Persecution*, 36.

⁶¹⁶ Strauss, *Persecution*, 30.

motives at the time. That is, to place Hobbes's thought in Strauss's account of the history of political thought as a quarrel between the ancients and the moderns and show that Hobbes's views and modern philosophy are contrary to human nature. An esoteric interpretation of "Spirit of Hobbes," in comparison, would be less exact. In *Persecution*, Strauss indeed cautions and instructs a reader prepared to undertake an esoteric interpretation:

Reading between the lines is strictly prohibited in all cases where it would be less exact than not doing so. Only such reading between the lines as starts from an exact consideration of the explicit statements of the author is legitimate. The context in which a statement occurs and the literary character of the whole work as well as its plan, must be perfectly understood before and interpretation of the statement can reasonably claim to be adequate or even correct.⁶¹⁷

I do, however, consider not only Strauss's explicit statements, but also what is not said (i.e., what is omitted). And again, not because they expose an esoteric teaching, but rather, because they speak to how Strauss tacitly abandons his earlier disclosure of a pre-scientific Hobbes that reveals human evil. The contradictions and silences reveal Strauss's new extra-textual political philosophical motive: that is, to fit Hobbes into the role of the founder of modern natural right in Strauss's history of political thought. The same holds true of Strauss as what he himself says of Hobbes in his preface to the German edition of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*: while Hobbes's conclusions are clear, his "presuppositions are shrouded in obscurity."⁶¹⁸ Strauss's criticism of Hobbes and liberalism is built on the Socratic-Platonic philosophical view on reason and natural law. The main challenge to Strauss's philosophical position remains historicism.

⁶¹⁷ Strauss, *Persecution*, 30.

⁶¹⁸ Strauss, *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft in ihrer Genesis*, 3; translation in Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 454.

4. 1. 8. *Esotericism and historicism*

Beyond reproach is the fact that Strauss wrote more about the existence of philosophical esotericism than any previous writer in the history of political thought. What is left to consider before we turn to Strauss's criticism of Hobbes in *Natural Right and History*, is why Strauss would write *about* openly about the art of esotericism if now philosophical truths (such as the criticism of modern civilization/liberalism) were dangerous to society? Is it explained by the fact that while Strauss's general thesis that ancient and modern philosophers wrote esoterically for different reasons is quite easily digested, the dissection of the esoteric teaching of a specific philosopher requires not only a great deal of time, but also a natural capacity, which few have at their disposal. This argument, however, appears rather unconvincing in light of the fact that, in *Persecution*, Strauss not only guides the reader through the work of unpacking the specific esoteric teaching of Farabi, Maimonides, Halevi and Spinoza, but also reveals that the hidden agenda — albeit in somewhat sugar-coated form, as Lampert has shown in contrast to his letters — of the first three philosophers is in essence the same: they were all philosophical atheists, for whom religion was not only incompatible with philosophical truths, but a rhetorical trope to bring an order to the commonwealth that approximated the order in nature, and preserved philosophy as a private pursuit.

Strauss's decision to go public about the tradition of philosophical esotericism added little fuel to the fire since the dangerous truth was already out: Nietzsche's declaration that God is dead, hand in hand with the radical historicist thesis that there is no metaphysical or supra-human foundation for a moral-political order. As we shall see below, Strauss agrees with the historicist claim that a metaphysical ground for a moral

law/natural law does not exist, or rather, has not yet been proven to exist. He, however, refuses to concede to historicism that there is no human rational faculty that provides a trans-historical authoritative standard. In other words, Strauss's case for rationalism is not that nature (the universe) is structured according to rational laws — whether non-teleological physical laws or those of a teleological design — but that nature is rational insofar as some individuals have an inborn rational capacity. With the historicist challenge in mind, some scholars have suggested that there is a philosophical motivation for Strauss's decision to spill the long-kept secret about the practice of esotericism.

The fundamental philosophical question concerns whether or not ancient Platonic philosophy escapes Heidegger's destruction of the Western metaphysical tradition. Addressing this concern, Lampert, Melzer and Zuckert and Zuckert have all independently proposed that Strauss's recuperation of philosophical esotericism should be considered a proof against historicism.⁶¹⁹ The excavation of the largely forgotten tradition of philosophical esotericism revealed that past philosophers wrote against the predominant thought of their time, and thus escaped the historicist cave. According to Strauss, the historicists fail to read exo/esoterically insofar as they read philosophers 'of all times' through a strict modern historicist lens and not in the way these thinkers understood themselves or intended their work to be read, namely in a twofold manner:

⁶¹⁹ Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines: the Lost History of Esoteric Writing*; Zuckert & Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy*. Contrary to Lampert and Melzer, Rosen has argued that Strauss's esotericism is not a philosophical defense against historicism: "It is quite clear from Strauss's own words that he has no adequate defence against Heidegger's fundamental views" (Stanley Rosen, "Leo Strauss and the Problem of the Modern," *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. by Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 122-23). Instead he suggests that Strauss's esotericism serves to hide the impossibility of philosophy after Heidegger's destruction of the tradition of western rationality (the exoteric or noble lie is that philosophy is possible). The only thing that Strauss is capable of, Rosen concludes, is to "show the disastrous consequences of its [historicism] misuse in the study of human affairs," and the recovery of esotericism is an attempt to mitigate these disastrous effects (122-23).

exoterically and esoterically. The mark of a true philosopher is precisely that he transcends the time in which he lives.⁶²⁰ Lampert puts this in the context of Strauss own intellectual trajectory:

The judgment about our age underlying Strauss's innovations in esotericism seems previewed in his Zionist writings of the 1920s and his essays and letters of the early 1930s: they attest to his extreme opposition to the modern Enlightenment, his contempt for it, and his judgment that its disastrous failure, most visible intellectually in the radical historicism of Heidegger, required a new beginning for philosophy. Strauss judged his age the logical completion of the modern Enlightenment, its theoretical self-destruction. That judgment sent him back to the medieval enlightenment and then to the Greek enlightenment to investigate, as a man of enlightenment, their treatment of philosophy. Strauss's innovations in esotericism seem to be what he judged a responsible preparation for philosophy's place in a postmodern, post-Enlightenment world. [...] In the face of the most powerful sophism of the present age, the belief that philosophy itself is bound to its time and place in what it thinks — that philosophy in its classical sense is impossible — Strauss's recovery of the philosophers' esotericism proves philosophy to be possible by showing it to be actual. Insight into the philosophers' esotericism makes it evident that the great philosophers transcended their time and place in thought and then descended, as it were, reporting their gains exoterically by accommodating them to the prevailing prejudices of their time. Strauss's recovery of esotericism is nothing less than the recovery of the possibility of philosophy.⁶²¹

Lampert presents the discovery of esotericism as a recovery of the possibility of philosophy and a necessary preparation for philosophy's place in a post-enlightenment world. In the context of the historicist assault on philosophy in the 20th century, Strauss thinks it necessary to make people aware of its existence. I would like to suggest that if it is the prospect of the "end of philosophy" that prompts Strauss to broadcast the existence of an esoteric philosophical tradition, *he does so in order to ground the classical view that there is an intellectual order of rank among humans*. Beside it being a natural fact that necessitated ancient esotericism, as we shall see below, intellectual elitism is also the

⁶²⁰ Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss: Essays and Lectures by Leo Strauss*, selected and introduced by Thomas L. Pangle (University of Chicago Press, 1989), viii.

⁶²¹ Lampert, "Strauss's Recovery of Esotericism," 89, 76.

foundation for the Socratic-Platonic natural right tradition that Strauss adopts, and against which he assesses Hobbes's doctrine. In *Natural Right and History*, however, Strauss does not explicitly mount esotericism as a challenge to the historicist thesis that reason and human nature change over time. Instead, he turns historicism on historicism to point out a logical fallacy in the historicist thesis. This allows him to account for both the rise of historicism and a non-historicist ancient philosophy.

Part II

4. 2. 1. *Historicism and natural right*

In *Natural Right and History*'s "preface," Strauss suggests, in the words of Ernst Troeltsch, "that what became the order of the day in German in the 1930s, is now true in America, 'natural right' and 'humanity' have 'become incomprehensible.'"⁶²² The reason for this, as Strauss had pointed out to his colleagues at the New School back in the winter of 1941, is that German nihilism exceeded National Socialism and as such "the defeat of National Socialism will not necessarily mean the end of German nihilism."⁶²³ Strauss now confirms this prediction: "it would not be the first time that a nation [Germany], defeated on the battlefield, and, as it were, annihilated as a political being, has deprived its conquerors of the most sublime fruit of victory by imposing on them the yoke of its own thought."⁶²⁴ Historicism puts into question both modern and ancient natural right: "The view that truth is eternal and that there are eternal standards, was contradicted by historical consciousness, i.e. by the opinion that all 'truths' and standards are necessarily relative to a given historical situation, and that, consequently, a mature philosophy can raise no higher claim than that to express the spirit of the period to which it belongs."⁶²⁵ The destruction of metaphysical systems, rational and divine, leads to the rejection of modern universal natural right. For it follows from historicism that "[i]f our principles have no other support than our blind preference, everything a man is willing to dare will be permissible. The contemporary rejection of natural right leads to nihilism—nay, it is

⁶²² Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 2.

⁶²³ Strauss, "German Nihilism," 357.

⁶²⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 2.

⁶²⁵ Strauss, "The Living Issues of German Post-War Philosophy," 132.

identical with nihilism.”⁶²⁶ The war, or more precisely, the intellectual war, over the hearts and minds and the overall intellectual horizon or *Zeitgeist* was not over.

In the “Introduction” to *Natural Right and History*, Strauss appears to call for a defense of the American constitution against German historicism. The Declaration of Independence, adopted by the 2nd Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, prescribed inalienable universal rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and stated that government authority derived from the consent of those it governed. Strauss’s book as a whole, however, reads as a defense, not of modern universal human rights, but rather of what Strauss defines as the “classical,” or “Platonic-Socratic” tradition of natural right. It is impossible not to note the intricacy in the fact that Strauss’s attack on modern natural right was first delivered as a lecture in the same country and year in which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was ratified by the United Nations General Assembly, in light of what he had identified as the unfathomable consequence of such philosophical criticism in Weimar Germany.

From the viewpoint of ancient philosophy (accounted for in chapter three and four in *Natural Right and History*), he first criticizes what he identified as an ancient *egalitarian* and *hedonistic* tradition that foreshadows Hobbes’s modern natural right doctrine. In his fifth chapter on Hobbes and Locke, Strauss examines universal modern natural rights from the perspective of classical natural right, and accepts consent (popular sovereignty) as a necessary element for an orderly and non-tyrannical regime, or to put it in Strauss’s words from *Persecution*, he proposes a regime that “reconcile[s] *order* which is not *oppression*” with liberty.⁶²⁷ In the book’s final chapter, Strauss opens an additional

⁶²⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 5.

⁶²⁷ Strauss, *Persecution*, 37, emphasis added.

front against Hobbes in a discussion of Rousseau's criticism and appropriation of Hobbes's theory of the state of nature, and Burke's attack on the French Revolution and the Rights of Man, arguing that Hobbes's natural right is not only defective, but resulted in historicist relativism. Historicism, in effect, Strauss argues, turns on its own origin, undoing the basis for modern natural right. This is why Lampert writes that Strauss "judged his age the logical completion of the modern Enlightenment, its theoretical self-destruction."⁶²⁸

Strauss sets out to criticize modern natural right, not from the vantage point of historicism, but from that of ancient Greek philosophy and classical natural rights. He, however, cannot ignore historicism, as the historicist thesis not only puts into question modern natural right, but also ancient philosophy and natural right. I will now summarize the essential aspect of Strauss's case *against* historicism, and *for* Socratic-Platonic philosophy and natural law as succinctly as possible. The most important point to keep in mind is that Strauss, at the end of the day, employs what he defines as Socratic-Platonic philosophy and natural right, as the measure against which to judge Hobbes's natural right doctrine, independent of the historicist thesis.

4. 2. 2. *Historicism against historicism*

In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss both accounts for the rise of historicism and investigates philosophy and natural right from a non-historicist philosophical perspective. Or, as Strauss puts it: "We need, in the first place, a non-historicist understanding of non-historicist philosophy. But we need no less urgently a non-historicist understanding of historicism, that is, an understanding of the genesis of historicism that does not take for

⁶²⁸ Lampert, "Strauss's Recovery of Esotericism," 89.

granted the soundness of historicism.”⁶²⁹ Addressing the second need — accounting for the rise of historicism — Strauss argues that historicism arises as a conservative reaction to the French revolution, and that it is “[Hobbes’s] natural right doctrines that had prepared that cataclysm.”⁶³⁰

In short, the modern natural right doctrine advances the idea of the universal principles of equality and freedom. People use these rights to judge the reality in which they live and to seek, and put in praxis politics that would transcend the present situation insofar as it falls short of such ideals, as with the French and American Revolutions. The conservative reaction to the rights of man, in turn, points to the tradition that challenged the idea that human beings are equals and have inviolable rights, which Strauss argues, results in the belief that “[t]he local and temporal have higher value than the universal.”⁶³¹ This reactionary form of historicism eventually results in “radical” historicism. Radical historicism annuls tradition as an authoritative value standard. Historicism views not only thought but also human nature as malleable and conditioned by history. Strauss shows how Rousseau's use and criticism of Hobbes leads to this view.

Strauss points out that Rousseau adopts Hobbes’s “a-social” view of human nature, while Hobbes in fact reads civilized behavior and passions into the state of nature. According to Rousseau’s criticism, the state of nature that Hobbes describes is thus not pre-cultural. In Rousseau’s recovery of the real state of nature, Strauss writes that “human nature” is “almost infinitely malleable.”⁶³² Strauss defines the pre-rational

⁶²⁹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 33.

⁶³⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 13.

⁶³¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 15.

⁶³² Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 271.

humans that Rousseau depicts in the state of nature as “subhuman.”⁶³³ Strauss’s evaluation of Rousseau’s noble savage as a *subhuman*, by which he means that the creature in the state of nature is not yet human *qua* rational human says a great deal about Strauss’s own perspective. He adopts from the classical political philosophy the insight that what “distinguish[es] man from the brutes, is speech or reason or understanding.”⁶³⁴ Against the historicists, who read together human nature and reason with history and condition the former to the latter, Strauss reads together human reason with a Socratic-Platonic conception of human nature. Another point that Strauss makes through Rousseau is that Hobbes’s natural laws (i.e., rational precepts) are not rational since they are conditioned by a passion: fear.⁶³⁵ Platonic rationalism, on the other hand, holds the view that reason is part of our natural constitution. Strauss dismisses Hobbes’s, or modern mathematical (calculative) reason/logic as grounded in the passions. Historicism, however, remains an obstacle to Strauss’s classical understanding of human nature and reason, as it also claims that ancient reason is historically specific and contingent.

At the outset of *Natural Right and History*, Strauss brackets the historicist challenge by applying the historicist logic to itself. He argues that if the historicist thesis is subjected to its own claim, the historicists cannot foreclose the possibility that the historicist outlook itself could in the future be replaced by a different paradigm, or as he puts in “The Living Issues of German Post-War Philosophy” a few years earlier:

The liberation from historicism requires that historical consciousness be seen to be, not a self-evident premise, but a *problem*. And it necessarily is a *historical* problem. For historical consciousness is an opinion, or a set of opinions, which occurs only in a certain period. Historical consciousness is, to use the language of that consciousness, itself a historical phenomenon, a phenomenon which has

⁶³³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 271.

⁶³⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 127.

⁶³⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 269.

come into being and which, therefore, is bound to pass away again. Historical consciousness will be superseded by something else.⁶³⁶

Strauss points out that the historicist claim that all knowledge is historically relative is contradictory, since it exempts itself from that verdict (i.e., the claim that all knowledge is historical is not relative to history).⁶³⁷ So while the historicists agree that the historicist thesis appeared at a particular point in history, it transcends that moment as a truth claim about all human consciousness — past, present, and future. This “absolute moment” or truth is suspended into the future, or at least until the end of human self-consciousness. The historicist thesis is thus predicated on a trans-historical claim, which Strauss equates with a philosophical truth claim; if not, it is itself one historical viewpoint among others, and destined to be superseded.

This contradiction, Strauss claims, leaves the “issue” between historicism and non-historicist philosophy unsettled, and allows the question of natural right to remain “an open question.”⁶³⁸ Chapters three, four, five and six (on ancient and modern natural right), are written as if *history* will have liberated the world from historicism. Strauss,

⁶³⁶ Strauss, “The Living Issues of German Post-War Philosophy,” 133.

⁶³⁷ As Strauss explains: “The historicist thesis is then exposed to a very obvious difficulty, which cannot be solved but only evaded or obscured by considerations of a more subtler character. Historicism asserts that all human thoughts or beliefs are historical, and hence deservedly destined to perish; but historicism itself is a human thought; hence historicism can be of only temporary validity, or it cannot be simply true. To assert the historicist thesis means to doubt it and thus to transcend it. As a matter of fact, historicism claims to have brought to light a truth which has come to stay, a truth valid for all thought, for all time: however much thought has changed and will change, it will always remain historical. As regards the decisive insight into the essential character of limitation of humanity, history had reached its end. The historicist is not impressed by the prospect that historicism may be superseded in due time by the denial of historicism. He is certain that such a change would amount to relapse of human thought into its most powerful delusion. 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 (Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 25).

⁶³⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 33. Sentence in full: “If the existence and even the possibility of natural right must remain an open question as long as the issue between historicism and nonhistoricist philosophy is not settled, our most urgent need is to understand that issue” (Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 33).

however, does not prove that human nature and philosophical truths are *not* conditioned by the historical horizon. In other words, he does not prove philosophically that there is an essence in human nature that defines human *qua* human, which extends across historical horizons and societies. Pippin has claimed that Strauss never provides such proof: “Strauss is not engaged in a metaphysics of nature or any account of how there could be historically immutable value properties in reality, and he proposes no epistemology that would demonstrate permanently possible, presumably noetic access to such properties.”⁶³⁹ He merely operates as if this position was valid in *Natural Right and History* (and in *Persecution*); however, in his 1964 seminar on Hobbes, as we shall see in the next chapter, Strauss explores why he thinks that a specific human ability for rational thought constitutes the essence of human nature. While the proof of this postulate of human nature is left hanging in *Natural Right and History*, it is nevertheless this understanding that serves as the basis for Socratic-Platonic natural right.

4. 2. 3. *Modern natural right and science*

In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss confronts one additional obstacle to his acquired ancient philosophical position on natural right. He writes, “The period between Hooker and Locke witnessed the emergence of modern natural science, of nonteleological natural science, and therewith the destruction of the basis of traditional natural right. The man who was the first to draw the consequences for natural right from this momentous change was Thomas Hobbes.”⁶⁴⁰ Modern science claims to have generated non-teleological universal timeless laws, deduced through mathematical rationality, whereas,

⁶³⁹ Pippin, “The Unavailability of the Ordinary: Strauss on the Philosophical Fate of Modernity,” 342.

⁶⁴⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 166.

Natural right in its classic form is connected with a teleological view of the universe. All natural beings have a natural end, a natural destiny, which determines what kind of operation is good for them. In the case of man, reason is required for discerning these operations: reason determines what is by nature right with ultimate regard to man's natural end. The teleological view of universe, of which the teleological view of man forms a part, would seem to have been destroyed by modern natural science.⁶⁴¹

Natural right in its classical form concerns what is just or good in light of human beings' natural end. Modern science and right denies that there is such an end or orientation for beings and the universe. There is thus not a standard in nature to determine what is right or wrong. To Strauss, modern science answers why or what something is, or how it became that way; it does not answer why it ought to be that way. For that to occur, there must exist a natural end in mind against which to judge something. Strauss writes, "an adequate solution to this problem of natural right cannot be found" until there is a way to bridge the modern "dualism of a non-teleological natural science and a teleological science of man."⁶⁴² For natural right to exist, there must be an answer to the question of how the entirety of the universe is structured, or the "whole" as he also calls it. Strauss, however, does not offer an alternative model of the universe that would resolve this impasse.

The only instance in which the whole is discussed is in a brief commentary on Socrates. Strauss writes that "to be" something is to be part of a whole, while at the same time different from other parts of a whole. The whole itself, on the other hand, has nothing that is different from it, but instead contains all different parts: "To understand the whole then means to understand all the parts of the whole or the articulation of the

⁶⁴¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 7-8.

⁶⁴² Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 8.

whole.”⁶⁴³ In *Natural Right and History*, there is no articulation of the whole or of all its parts. Strauss defined philosophy as a quest for truth, as a way of life, or as he writes in “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization”: “philosophy is meant — and that is the decisive point — not as a set of propositions, a teaching, or even a system, but as a way of life, a life animated by a peculiar passion, the philosophic desire, or *eros*; it is not understood as an instrument or a department of human self-realization.”⁶⁴⁴ This has led Tanguay to categorize Strauss’s philosophy as “zetetic” — meaning that “philosophy is not wisdom but the quest for wisdom, it cannot settle the fundamental problems beyond appeal.”⁶⁴⁵ As Tanguay explains, philosophy is possible if there are permanent *questions*; natural law, however, is only possible if there are permanent *answers* to the permanent questions (i.e., knowledge of all the parts or the whole): “The possibility of philosophy is [therefore] only the necessary and not the sufficient condition for natural right.”⁶⁴⁶ Strauss does not prove that ancient natural right exists, and that for Strauss natural right remains a philosophical problem. In Strauss’s words: “Therefore, the right way of life cannot be established metaphysically except by a completed metaphysics, and therefore the right way of life remains questionable.”⁶⁴⁷ Instead, Strauss proceeds with the Socratic-Platonic view that human beings by nature are rational animals and have natural ends. He does not claim, however, that the universe is

⁶⁴³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 122.

⁶⁴⁴ Strauss, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization”, in Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 35; first published, Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization”, *Modern Judaism* 1. (1981): 17-45

⁶⁴⁵ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 125. In his reading of *On Tyranny*, Pippin has made the same case as Tanguay: “It is an awareness, difficult to achieve and rare, of ‘the fundamental problems,’ and an awareness, equally difficult, of how little is known in answer to such questions. Philosophy is radically zetetic, can never become wisdom” (Robert Pippin, “Being, Time, and Politics: The Strauss-Kojève Debate”, *History and Theory* 32, no. 2 (May, 1993): 138-161, 146).

⁶⁴⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 35.

⁶⁴⁷ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 89.

structured according to rational laws. The only thing that Strauss takes as certain, and accepts as *a priori* is that the human animal is the rational animal, and that some individuals have a higher cognitive ability than others. It is on these premises that he builds an ancient natural right.

4. 2. 4. *Ancient philosophy and Socratic-Platonic natural right*

Addressing the first need he had identified — a non-historicist understanding of non-historicist philosophy — Strauss returns to the origin of philosophy and natural right prior to the rise of historicist thought. The idea of a natural right arises from the discovery of nature by philosophy, as that which is different from convention: “the discovery of nature is identical with the actualization of a human possibility which, at least according to its own interpretation, is trans-historical, trans-social, trans-moral, and trans-religious.”⁶⁴⁸ Philosophy and the idea of a natural right both arise with the possibility of distinguishing between what exists purely by nature (*physis*) and what is conventional (*nomos*).⁶⁴⁹ Philosophy is the investigation of the natural “principles” of all things by means of human rationality. The Socratic dialectical method begins with conventional everyday opinions and successively, by engaging discussion with others, replaces the *doxa* with knowledge about the “natural constitution” of things.⁶⁵⁰ This understanding of reason is different from Hobbes’s understanding of reason as a mathematical calculation. The “natural constitution” is what sets humans apart from other entities in the whole. It is the capacity for rational thought and understanding that distinguishes humans from

⁶⁴⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 89.

⁶⁴⁹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 81-84.

⁶⁵⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 127. In the third chapter of *Natural Right and History*, “The Origin of the Idea of Natural Right,” Strauss argues that sensation and perception come before reason and philosophy (just like art and convention) but the with use of unguided reason, philosophy rediscovers nature retroactively.

animals (i.e., from other beings in the whole), and it is the defining feature that remains a permanent part of the human animal.

One of Strauss's two examples of how the ancients discerned the essence of a thing is Aristotle's distinction between natural and artificial slavery. This example is telling, since Strauss, like his Aristotle, holds the view that different humans have qualitatively different rational capacities. Strauss is primarily concerned with the difference between the few able philosophers and the many less capable. For Aristotle to make the distinction between who is by nature a slave and who is not, he must first have considered "man's natural constitution."⁶⁵¹ The natural constitution, which separates human from other species in the whole, is the very ability that makes it possible for some humans to raise and pursue the question of "man's natural constitution" in the first place: "that which distinguishes the human soul from the souls of the brutes, that which distinguish man from the brutes, is speech or reason or understanding."⁶⁵² For Strauss, as I showed in my discussion of esotericism above, the fact that the human animal is distinguished by its ability for reason is not the same as the claim that all individual possess reason, or at least not in equal capacity. In other words, reason not only separates humans from animals, it is also the attribute that separates humans from humans, and most importantly, the few that are capable of philosophy from the many that are not.

In Strauss's account, natural difference is intimately tied to the question of ancient natural right. He writes, "To determine what is by nature good for a man or the natural human good, one must determine what the nature of man, or man's natural constitution, is. It is the hierarchic order of man's natural constitution which supplies the basis for

⁶⁵¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 127.

⁶⁵² Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 127.

natural right as the classics understood it.”⁶⁵³ The Socratic-Platonic natural right doctrine aims at the actualization of the highest good in all of human nature. Through the use of reason, the Socratic-Platonic tradition arrives at the insight that the highest human end is the rational pursuit of wisdom. The fact that not all individuals are equally equipped to pursue wisdom, affects the way in which duties and rights should be distributed:

since the classics viewed moral and political matters in the light of man’s perfection, they were not egalitarians. Not all men are equally equipped by nature for progress toward perfection, or not all ‘natures’ are ‘good natures’. While all men, i.e., all normal men, have the capacity for virtue, some need guidance by others, whereas others do not at all or to a much lesser degree. [...] Since men are then unequal in regard to human perfection, i.e., in the decisive respect, *equal rights for all* appeared to the classics as most *unjust*. They contended that some men are by nature superior to others and therefore, according to natural right, the rulers of others.⁶⁵⁴

According to Socratic-Platonic law, rights should be distributed in accordance to each individual’s natural capacities. Strauss identifies an ancient egalitarian and hedonistic tradition that pre-shadowed Hobbes’s modern natural right doctrine. This egalitarian pre-Socratic right doctrine opposes the idea of a gradation in human nature, and for this reason, Strauss argues, “pre-Socratic natural right” is “rejected” by the “Socratic,” or “classical,” natural law tradition.⁶⁵⁵ Strauss thus criticizes the egalitarian basis of Hobbes’s natural right before he arrives at the chapter on Hobbes and modern natural right.

Contrary to the pre-Socratic egalitarian natural law, classical natural law holds that society should be structured to enable the highest good of the community:

The good life is the perfection of man’s nature. It is the life according to nature. One may therefore call the rules circumscribing the general character of the good

⁶⁵³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 127.

⁶⁵⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 134-35, emphasis added.

⁶⁵⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 118-119. In chapter four, he outlines classical natural law and right, and in chapter five he contrasted Hobbes’s modern natural right to classical natural right.

life ‘the natural law.’ The life according to nature is the life of human excellence or virtue, the life of a ‘high-class person,’ and not the life of pleasure as pleasure.⁶⁵⁶

At the end of chapter four, Strauss makes a distinction between the Aristotelian and Socratic-Platonic natural right over the relation between natural right and the laws of society. Strauss follows Socrates in believing that justice is one thing for philosophers and something else for the city. This position — and one he argues is shared by Jewish and Islamic medieval rationalists — holds that there is a difference, “between the justice of natural right, which is independent of law, and the justice of the city, which is of necessity dependent on law.”⁶⁵⁷ The Aristotelians disagree; for them, “there is no fundamental disproportion between natural right and the requirements of political society.”⁶⁵⁸ Strauss adheres to what he understands as the Socratic-Platonic distinction, which is shown in the way he employs the words “justice” and “just” in the relevant sections of *Natural Right and History*. *Justice* is used in respect to the moral law of the city, and if good, it permits for the cultivation of natural excellence overall. The *just*, according to nature, is the cultivation of the highest of the human attributes/virtues — wisdom. The just or good life according to nature is the life of the philosopher.⁶⁵⁹ Natural

⁶⁵⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 127.

⁶⁵⁷ Leora Batnitzky, "Leo Strauss", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/strauss-leo/>>.

⁶⁵⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 156.

⁶⁵⁹ Tanguay explains in more detail: “In *Natural Right and History* he further develops the point of view of the philosophers. The Socratic-Platonic doctrine of natural right manifests what is essential to it. According to this doctrine, genuine natural right is that of the philosopher. In fact, only the philosopher lives a truly natural life since he achieves the human end, that is, the theoretical quest. The philosopher who fulfills the idea of man realizes by the same stroke natural right. However, the natural right of the philosopher must be moderated by the idea of justice. The philosopher is in fact also a political being who needs society and feels a natural attachment for the city. The natural right of the philosopher must therefore be diluted or moderated. This is the meaning of Strauss’ formula: ‘Civil right requires the dilution of natural right by merely conventional right’ The natural law of the theologians could provide a good example of the conventional right with which natural right must be harmonized in order to become a political good (Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 204; quotation from Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 152-53).

law should enable the highest good of the community, the life of the philosopher, as well as the rule of the wise: “The classical natural right doctrine in its original form, if fully developed, is identical with the doctrine of the best regime.”⁶⁶⁰ The contemplative life is the highest human activity/end according to Strauss’s ancient view of human nature and thus the supreme title to rule, which corresponds to the best regime—the rule of the wise.

4. 2. 5. *Hobbes’s philosophy*

Up to this point, I have unpacked Strauss’s conception of classical or Platonic-Socratic natural right, to be used as the criterion against which Strauss assesses Hobbes’s natural and political philosophy. Earlier, we saw that Hobbes figures as the counterpoint to Strauss’s own position on human reason and esotericism; now we shall see how this difference includes natural right as well.

In part one of chapter five, “Modern Natural Right,” in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss uses Hobbes to draw the line between modern and ancient, Socratic-Platonic natural right. In the chapter (which in large is a reproduction “On the Spirit of Hobbes”), Strauss restates the “basic premises” of the ancient Socratic-Platonic natural right that he outlines in in chapter three and four, and against which Hobbes’s natural right is weighed:

[T]he *noble* and the *just* are fundamentally distinguished from the *pleasant* and are by nature preferable to it; or, there is a natural right that is wholly independent of any human compact or convention; or, there is a best political order which is best because it is according to nature. [...] The predominant tradition [the Socratic-Platonic] had defined natural law with a view to the end or the perfection of man as a rational and social animal.⁶⁶¹

⁶⁶⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 144.

⁶⁶¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 167, 180.

It is against this standard that Strauss will compare and contrast Hobbes's modern natural right along the following points:

- *Social vs. a-social.* Hobbes adopts the Epicurean understanding of the human animal as an *a-social* or *a-political* animal, in contradistinction to the Socratic-Platonic view of man as a *social* animal.
- *Hedonistic vs. noble.* Hobbes favors individual bodily *pleasure* over noble ends, such as the highest societal pursuit — philosophy. The aim of Hobbes's social whole is not to strive for the highest human virtue, but the preservation of life, and the attainment of bodily pleasures.
- *Right vs. obligation.* Hobbes places individual *right* before *obligation/duty* to the state. This is a shift from the ancient social conception of morality, from the highest good to individual rights. The shift from the primacy of duty to right is the key mark of the doctrine Strauss defines as liberalism.
- *Teleological vs. non-teleological.* Unlike Socratic-Platonic natural right, Hobbes's non-teleological doctrine of rights does not strive to transcend its beginning or basic nature. The end or purpose (the preservation of life and pleasure) of the state is to secure peace. Teleological natural right is directed at the good — and the highest good is the pursuit of theoretical knowledge. Modern natural right is inferior to the Socratic-Platonic tradition, because it is *contrary* to human nature.
- *Will vs. nature.* Classical Socratic-Platonic natural right is independent of human convention (i.e., there is right according to nature outside of human *will*), and the state should be ordered in accordance to hierarchical order in

human nature. Hobbes's natural right is secured artificially by the contract and thus is humanly *willed*.

- *Best regime vs. public law/folly*. Hobbes's theory of sovereignty is the regime of *folly* vs. the best political order according to nature, the rule of the *wise*, or the most practical regime, the mixed regime, in which *gentlemen* rule.

Overall, Strauss's first account of Hobbes's thought after the war reflects the agenda of renewing the quarrel between the ancient and modern. He reconsiders Hobbes's natural and political philosophy as the counterpoint to his resurrection of a Socratic-Platonic rationality and natural right/best regime. In his persistence to show how Hobbes's natural right is contrary to human nature and classical natural right, Strauss makes two incompatible claims: First, by turning to Hobbes's natural philosophy, Strauss argues that Hobbes's natural right is constructed as fully detached from human nature. Secondly, in order to show that Hobbes's natural right is inferior to the Socratic-Platonic tradition, Strauss argues that the doctrine is grounded in the lowest part of human nature (passion), as opposed to a classical natural right, which is prescribed with the highest human end in mind (reason). These two mutually exclusive claims cannot be simultaneously correct.

4. 2. 6. *Hobbes's materialist view and method*

Recall that in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss had detached Hobbes's science from his political philosophy, arguing that the latter is an add-on that convoluted the real basis for Hobbes's political thought (a bourgeois morality and a pre-scientific understanding of human nature). In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss seems to overturn his earlier view on the relation between Hobbes's political science and natural science. He now introduces Hobbes's natural right doctrine as reflective of modern natural

science—a non-teleological mechanistic view of the whole (the universe). Hobbes, he suggests, is the first philosopher to draw out the consequence of modern non-teleological natural science for natural right.⁶⁶²

In the first of a few unexpected and contradictory turns of this essay, Strauss qualifies Hobbes's natural science as not fully modern. Hobbes, he argues, adopts the non-teleological “materialistic-mechanistic” physics from the Democretian-Epicurean tradition, and his method of geometrical deduction from Plato.⁶⁶³ While Hobbes rejects Plato's idea that the universe is ruled by divine intelligence, he agrees with Plato's view that “mathematics is ‘the mother of all natural science.’”⁶⁶⁴ Strauss here builds on his argument in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* that Hobbes's philosophy is steeped in the tradition of skepticism. Hobbes, he writes, arrives at the conclusion that only mathematics passes the test of radical skepticism.⁶⁶⁵ That means that only what is deductively derived from *known* causes abides by the laws of mathematical certainty.⁶⁶⁶ Strauss then suggests that Hobbes's materialist and mechanical understanding of the universe cannot be substantiated, since not all the natural causes can be known. As a result, a rift arises between Hobbes's mathematical method and his materialist-mechanical conception of the universe.

The mathematical model cannot generate reliable knowledge about the universe, and thus his materialist view of the universe as operating after non-teleological laws cannot be verified. As a consequence, Strauss concludes that Hobbes's “notion of

⁶⁶² Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 166.

⁶⁶³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 170.

⁶⁶⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 170.

⁶⁶⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 171.

⁶⁶⁶ Recall that Hobbes arrives at these known causes or axioms, Strauss had argued in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, through observation of self and others.

philosophy or science has its root in the conviction that a *teleological cosmology* is impossible and in the feeling that a [non-teleological] *mechanistic cosmology* fails to satisfy the requirement of intelligibility.”⁶⁶⁷ Thus, Strauss concludes that Hobbes has a “desire to be a ‘metaphysical’ materialist” (i.e., to have an understanding of the cosmos and human nature), but must limit himself to “‘methodical’ materialism.”⁶⁶⁸ If true to his mathematical method, Hobbes should have abandoned his model of a non-teleological materialist universe. On one hand, Hobbes’s materialist view does not allow for the existence of God; on the other, the limit of his method cannot foreclose the existence of an incorporeal mind—be it Plato’s divine mind or a single God. As Strauss adds in a footnote: “I cannot prove here that Hobbes was an atheist, even according to his own [materialist] view of atheism.”⁶⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Strauss holds onto the view that Hobbes was an atheist, and stresses that what was most important to Hobbes at the end of the day, was not his methodology, but his non-teleological view of the universe.

What his methodical materialism allows for, however, Strauss argues, is the construction of an artificial universe. It is the unintelligibility of both human nature and the universe that becomes the precondition for an artificially constructed natural right doctrine. It is only in what humans make from scratch, in its entirety, that all causes can be known:

⁶⁶⁷ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 176, emphasis added.

⁶⁶⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 174.

⁶⁶⁹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 199n 43. Strauss explains: “The discovery or invention of that island seemed to guarantee the possibility of a materialistic and mechanistic philosophy or science, without forcing one to assume a soul or mind that is irreducible to moved matter. That discovery or invention eventually permitted an attitude of neutrality or indifference toward the secular conflict between materialism and spiritualism. Hobbes had the earnest desire to be a ‘metaphysical’ materialist. But he was forced to rest satisfied with a ‘methodical’ materialism” (Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 174-75). Hobbes’s materialist view does not allow for God: “Whatever may have been Hobbes's private thoughts, his natural philosophy is as atheistic as Epicurean physics” (146).

Man can guarantee the actualization of wisdom, since wisdom is identical with free construction. But wisdom cannot be free construction if the universe is intelligible. Man can guarantee the actualization of wisdom, not in spite of, but because of, the fact that the universe is unintelligible. Man can be sovereign only because there is no cosmic support for his humanity. He can be sovereign only because he is absolutely a stranger in the universe.⁶⁷⁰

Hobbes constructs an *artificial* commonwealth with mathematical precision, estranged from human nature and the universe as a whole. Hobbes's doctrine of natural right provides this artificial island with morality and order.

4. 2. 7. *Hobbes's modern natural right*

Strauss introduces Hobbes as the founder of modern natural right (and by extension, as we shall in the section below, liberalism), but new to his account in *Natural Right and History* that Machiavelli has replaced Hobbes as the first modern philosopher. Due to his discovery of the esoteric dimension of Machiavelli's *Discourses*, Strauss re-evaluates his earlier take on Machiavelli: "Classical political philosophy had taken its bearing by how man *ought* to live"; Machiavelli, on the other hand, maintains that "the correct way of answering the question of the right order of society consists in taking one's bearing by how men *actually* do live."⁶⁷¹ Machiavelli "deliberately" lowers the goal of politics "in order to increase the probability of its attainment."⁶⁷² Furthermore, Strauss points out that for Machiavelli there is "no superhuman, no natural, support for justice."⁶⁷³ Unlike Strauss's medievalist who designs a religious exoteric natural law in place of a non-existent support for justice, Machiavelli replaces "morality" with "patriotism."⁶⁷⁴

⁶⁷⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 175.

⁶⁷¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 178.

⁶⁷² Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 178.

⁶⁷³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 178.

⁶⁷⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 178.

Hobbes agrees with Machiavelli that ancient natural law is not applicable, and thus also rejects the classical tradition as “useless.”⁶⁷⁵ However, as Tanguay points out, Strauss goes on to argue, Hobbes is unsatisfied with Machiavelli’s *amoral* patriotic political alternative, and tries to restore, in Strauss’s words, “the moral principle of philosophy, i.e., of natural law, on the plane of Machiavelli’s ‘realism.’”⁶⁷⁶ Hobbes “presents his novel doctrine as the first truly scientific or philosophic treatment of natural law; he agrees with the Socratic tradition in holding the view that political philosophy is concerned with natural right,” or with what is just.⁶⁷⁷ Hobbes sets out to make natural right applicable, which the classical natural tradition had failed to do. The way Hobbes does this is by separating the doctrine of natural right from the classical “idea of man’s *perfection*.”⁶⁷⁸ Or, as Strauss puts it, Hobbes “abandoned the original meaning of wisdom in order to guarantee the actualization of wisdom.”⁶⁷⁹ For “only if natural law can be deduced from how men *actually* live, from the most powerful forces that actually determine all men, or most men most of the time, can it be effectual or of practical value. The complete basis of natural law must be sought, not in the *end* of man, but in his *beginnings*,” not in his *highest* virtue but in his most *basic* nature.⁶⁸⁰ Strauss then restates his pre-war insight on Hobbes: “What is most powerful in most men most of the time [for Hobbes] is not reason but *passions*. Natural law will not be effectual if its principles are distrusted by passion or not agreeable to passion. Natural law must be deduced from the most powerful of all passions.”⁶⁸¹ The view that Hobbes’s natural law is axiomatically

⁶⁷⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 178.

⁶⁷⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 179; Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 104.

⁶⁷⁷ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 168.

⁶⁷⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 180, emphasis added.

⁶⁷⁹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 178.

⁶⁸⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 180, emphasis added.

⁶⁸¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 180, emphasis added.

deduced out of the most powerful human passions, contradicts Strauss's earlier methodological claim that Hobbes constructs his political philosophy independently of knowledge about human nature and the universe. Strauss makes an attempt to outwit this contradiction in his discussion of the fear of violent death.

4. 2. 8. *Fear of violent death*

In his brief discussion of the fear of violent death, Strauss seeks to show that Hobbes's commonwealth is constructed independently of human nature:

But the most powerful of all passions will be a natural fact, and we are not to assume that there is a natural support for justice or for what is human in man. Or is there a passion, or an object of passion, which is in a sense antinatural, which marks the point of indifference between the natural and the nonnatural, which is, as it were, the *status evanescendi* of nature and therefore a possible origin for the conquest of nature or for freedom? The most powerful of all passions is the fear of death and, more particularly, the fear of violent death at the hands of others: not nature but 'that terrible enemy of nature, death'...⁶⁸²

Despite the effort, Strauss cannot avoid the objection that fear — whether it takes as its object violent death, or something else — is still a human passion and considered a part of human nature. He says as much himself in the chapter.

Strauss also uses fear of violent death to show how Hobbes's natural right is different from Socratic-Platonic teleological natural right. "Premature death," Strauss notes, is to be "avoided" at all cost, and thus death "supplies the ultimate guidance. Death takes the place of the *telos*."⁶⁸³ In Hobbes's non-teleological natural right doctrine, there is no progression from the lower to the higher, but the beginning/premises of natural right coincide with the end (i.e., violent death is avoided by what the social contract aims at, is

⁶⁸² Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 180.

⁶⁸³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 181.

formed to establish, which is civil peace). Ancient natural right, on the contrary, strives to perfect the condition of its existence, turning reason into wisdom.

An insight thus shared between “Notes on Hobbes,” *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* and *Natural Right and History*, is that it is the fear of violent death that brings man to reason, to the rational decision to enter a covenant, and establish natural law. In line with this view, Strauss stresses, just as he had before the war, that reason is “impotent” on its own, but can become “omnipotent” in collaboration with the strongest of passions, and from this concludes: “the strongest passion [fear of violent death] is the most rational passion.”⁶⁸⁴ Hobbes breaks with Platonic-Socratic natural right in that he deduces natural right and reason from human *passion*: “Man can guarantee the actualization of the right social order because he is able to conquer human nature by *understanding* and manipulating the mechanism of the passion.”⁶⁸⁵ Not only does Strauss suggest in this sentence that the passions are part of human nature, but also that human passion is “understood,” which contradicts Strauss’s claim that, in accordance with Hobbes’s methodology, the universe and human nature are unintelligible and that the very construction of Hobbes’s natural right doctrine is predicated on it being artificially conjured out of thin air. The reason for this is that Strauss wants to use fear of violent death to support his argument that Hobbes breaks with ancient natural right on three mutually exclusive grounds: (i) Hobbes’s artificial state is *estranged from human nature*; (ii) the social contract is constructed by *appeal to the lowest in human nature* (passions); (iii) the end of modern natural right *mirrors the baseness of its beginning*. This contradiction reveals Strauss’s extra-textual motive to show that Hobbes’s modern non-

⁶⁸⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 201.

⁶⁸⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 194.

teleological conception of the universe is methodologically unfounded, and that Hobbes's natural right is estranged from human nature, or at best, built around what classical natural right considered the lowest in human nature.

4. 2. 9. *Vanity*

Recall from chapter three that, in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss introduces fear of violent death as the antithesis to vanity (as the only passion that tames vanity), and that which defines the consciousness of the bourgeoisie. He makes the distinction between human and animal by an appeal to human vanity, which unlike animal desire, he argues, is infinite, irrational and self-originating. This is contrary to Strauss's later adoption of the classical tradition's view that it is the faculty of reason that defines human *qua* human. Strauss tacitly moves away from his earlier position, as he no longer points to vanity as the innate primordial desire that defines the human animal and marks humans, unlike animals, as non-innocent and evil by nature.

The only time Strauss mentions vanity in the part on Hobbes in *Natural Right and History* — he returns to the nature of vanity in the section on Rousseau, which I will discuss at length in the next chapter — is when he describes it not as *evil*, but in accordance with his adoption of ancient virtue ethics, as a “*vice*”:

If virtue is identified with peaceableness, vice will become identical with that habit or that passion which is per se incompatible with peace because it essentially and, as it were, of set purpose issues in offending others: vice becomes identical for all practical purposes with pride or vanity or *amour-propre* rather than with dissoluteness or weakness of the soul.⁶⁸⁶

⁶⁸⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 188. While this is all he has to say about vanity in the section on Hobbes, Strauss does return to vanity in the final chapter on Rousseau and Burke. Strauss agrees with Rousseau's claim that “the desire for superiority to others [vanity] can come into its own only within the city” (Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 269). Having accepted Hobbes's premise that humans by nature are “a-social,” Rousseau argues, contrary to Hobbes, that the noble savage in the state of nature was not naturally vein, but motivated by “self-love” and “compassion,” and therefore “by nature good” (269).

The *philosophical* explanation for Strauss's reevaluation of vanity is his adoption of Socratic-Platonic philosophy, its definition of the human animal as the rational animal, and its separation of philosophy from morality. The *political* explanation for it is that Strauss no longer sought a moral ontological foundation (i.e., human nature being by nature evil) for a non-liberal regime (i.e., a right-wing authoritarian regime). Instead, as will be discussed in more detail below, it is with a view to rationality that Strauss proposes his new preferred regime.

The question of the separation between human and animal remains at the center of Strauss's philosophy. The basis for ancient natural right requires the differentiation of humans from other beings in the whole. As we have seen in this chapter, Strauss moves from his neo-Hobbesian insight that it is vanity (passion) that sets human apart from other animals, to the Socratic-Platonic view that it is reason that sets humans apart from other animals. This shift enables Strauss to argue that Hobbes's modern natural right doctrine, unlike the ancient tradition, is *not* grounded in what constitutes human *qua* human. Instead, Strauss argues that Hobbes's "natural law must have its roots in principles which are anterior to reason, i.e., in passions which need *not* be specifically human."⁶⁸⁷ This non-specific human passion (i.e., one shared with other animals) is self-preservation.

4. 2. 10. *Natural right and liberalism*

To make the case that Hobbes's natural right doctrine is estranged from what is specifically human and that his natural right doctrine is the theoretical core of liberalism, Strauss must shift his discussion from the fear of violent death, for fear of violent death, like vanity, is exclusively a human passion, to self-preservation—an instinct shared with

⁶⁸⁷ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 267, emphasis added.

animals. Identification of self-preservation as the basic human desire, as opposed to vanity, is what Strauss had dismissed as Hobbes's mature scientific view in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, and identified as that which conceals the real moral basis of Hobbes's political philosophy. It is telling that Strauss does not mention in *Natural Right and History* his argument in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* that the defining mark of liberalism is the fear of violent death, repressing human nature (vanity), and defining the bourgeois consciousness. Instead, building on his argument in "Notes on Schmitt," Strauss now defines liberalism, as Tanguay argues, solely as the doctrine that places individual *rights* over *obligations* to the state.⁶⁸⁸ Strauss argues that Hobbes made self-preservation the one and only unconditional right. Life itself, in Strauss's rendition of Hobbes in *Natural Right and History*, becomes the standard for morality.

Strauss's account of the relation between the fear of violent death and self-preservation is far less elaborated than in his previous studies. Only one sentence accounts for it: "to preserve the ambiguity of Hobbes's thought, let us say that the fear of violent death expresses most forcefully the most powerful and the most fundamental of all natural desires, the *initial desire, the desire for self-preservation*."⁶⁸⁹ Strauss had previously tried to make Hobbes's conception of fear of violent death square with the view that Hobbes attempts to construct his natural right regime as fully separated from human nature. After Strauss switches from the fear of violent death to self-preservation, he makes no such attempt. Instead, he insists, as he had in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, that the desire for self-preservation is not uniquely human, but a passion shared with other animals.

⁶⁸⁸ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 102.

⁶⁸⁹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 181.

It is from this “most powerful and the most fundamental” of all natural passions that natural law is derived:

If, then, natural law must be deduced from the desire for self-preservation, if, in other words, the desire for self-preservation is the sole root of all justice and morality, the fundamental moral fact is not a duty but a right; all duties are derivative from the fundamental and inalienable right of self-preservation. There are, then, no absolute or unconditional duties; duties are binding only to the extent to which their performance does not endanger our self-preservation. Only the right to self-preservation is unconditional or absolute. By nature, there exists only a perfect right and no perfect duty. Since the fundamental and absolute moral fact is a right and not a duty, the function as well as the limit of civil society must be defined in terms of man’s natural right and not in terms of his natural duty. The state has the function, not of producing or promoting a virtuous life, but of safeguarding the natural right of each. And the power of the state finds its absolute limit in that natural right and in no other moral fact.⁶⁹⁰

Strauss claims that Hobbes equates the *desire* for self-preservation with a *right* to self-preservation. This right to self-preservation is the “moral fact” and the foundation of natural or moral law (i.e., the rational precepts after which the commonwealth is ordered). The right to life is “unconditional,” and the obligations/natural laws, which derive from the right to life, are *conditional* on this right. Natural laws are all derivatives from the natural right to life and thus, as Tanguay points out, different from ancient natural law:

By nature, there exist only a perfect right and no perfect duty. The law of nature, which formulates man’s natural duties, is not a law, properly speaking [...] The moral law, in its turn, was to be greatly simplified by being deduced from the natural right of self-preservation. Self-preservation requires peace. The moral law became, therefore, the sum of rules which have to be obeyed if there is to be peace.⁶⁹¹

⁶⁹⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 181.

⁶⁹¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 181, 187; Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 105-106.

Strauss points out that Hobbes is the first to subordinate natural law to natural right. The transference of primacy from *obligations/duties* to *rights* is what prompts Strauss to declare that Hobbes is the founder of liberalism:

If we may call liberalism that political doctrine which regards as the fundamental political fact the rights, as distinguished from the duties, of man and which identifies the function of the state with the protection or safeguarding of those rights, we must say that the founder of liberalism was Hobbes.”⁶⁹²

In this key sentence — the only instance in which Strauss names “liberalism” outside of the introduction — he equates Hobbes’s modern natural right doctrine with liberalism, on one hand, *and*, on the other, leaves open the possibility of an alternative definition of liberalism: “if we may call liberalism....”

This is where the liberal rule of law tradition that Strauss had discovered while living in England can be thought of as a different understanding of liberalism.⁶⁹³ Furthermore, in the decades that followed Strauss would introduce a conception of ancient liberalism as the pursuit of intellectual/natural excellence through the cultivation of the mind that he thought captured in present times by liberal education or the Great book approach.⁶⁹⁴ In other words, in addition to modern liberalism that originates in Hobbes’s natural right doctrine, Strauss elsewhere speaks of both a liberal republican rule of law tradition, and of ancient liberalism as liberal education. Despite this, Strauss asserts that the theoretical core of modern liberalism is the doctrine of individual right as primary to obligation/state power (over the greater good of the state) and the role of the

⁶⁹² Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 181-182.

⁶⁹³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 142.

⁶⁹⁴ Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*.

state to safeguard these rights. I will return to Strauss vision of a liberal regime in the concluding chapter.

4. 2. 11. *The state of nature*

A significant change from Strauss's earlier work on Hobbes is his discussion of the state of nature. In the previous two chapters, I pointed to the centrality of the state of nature for Strauss's understanding of politics (as the mirror to Schmitt's conception of the political) and for philosophy more generally (as the site upon which the "eternal nature of man" is examined, undisguised from liberal or modern civilization or science). In "Modern Natural Right" Strauss does not link the antagonism in Hobbes's state of nature with the political, as he does his earlier neo-Hobbesian adaption of Schmitt's concept of the political. As we will see in the next chapter, Strauss does, however, hold onto the view that humans are by nature vain, and that it is this peculiar human passion that results in political antagonism and justifies the need for a "closed society," as opposed to the open society promoted by liberals and socialists. The reason behind Strauss's temporary retreat from the state of nature as a window into the ontology of politics is his concern to classify Hobbes's natural right as contrary to classical natural right. Strauss suggests that according to the ancients, who thought that the regime should approximate the natural order as closely as possible, the state of nature would be the state that most closely corresponded to the best political regime, and not, as in Hobbes, the state that is negated by the political regime.

Instead, Strauss focuses on the significance of the state of nature in Hobbes's natural right doctrine: "The state of nature became an essential topic of political philosophy only with Hobbes, who still almost apologized for employing that term. *It is*

only since Hobbes that the philosophic doctrine of natural law has been essentially a doctrine of the state of nature.”⁶⁹⁵ Strauss argues that Hobbes adopts the view that the human animal is an a-social animal from the Epicureans; Hobbes however, departs from the Epicureans in that he places these autonomous individuals in the state of nature. The Epicureans have no need for a state of nature, for they are not concerned with the construction of the social order. The state of nature, for Hobbes, who is concerned with the construction of a social order, is a device necessary in order to place the individual, and his unconditional natural right to life, prior to the individual’s obligation to the state:

One could not assert the primacy of [modern] natural rights without asserting that the individual is in every respect prior to civil society: all rights of civil society or of the sovereign are derivative from rights which originally belonged to the individual. The individual as such, the individual regardless of his qualities [...] had to be conceived of as essentially complete independently of civil society. This conception is implied in the contention that there is a state of nature which antedates civil society.⁶⁹⁶

It is by the use of the concept of the state of nature, Strauss argues, that Hobbes can portray the human animal as independent of society and counter the classical primacy of obligation: “The [classical natural law] tradition which Hobbes opposed had assumed that man cannot reach the perfection of his nature except in and through civil society and, therefore, that civil society is prior to the individual. It was this assumption which led to the view that primary moral fact is duty and not rights.”⁶⁹⁷ Individuals enter society first to secure self-preservation (avoid violent death). Strauss concludes that Hobbes’s “state has the function, not of producing or promoting a virtuous life, but of safeguarding the natural right of each.”⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁹⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 184, emphasis added.

⁶⁹⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 183.

⁶⁹⁷ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 183.

⁶⁹⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 181.

Additionally, Strauss suggests that the aim of Hobbesian individual, and by extension, the function of the state, is not only to secure self-preservation, but also, to secure bodily pleasure. From this, it follows that Hobbes, in Strauss words, “radically” redefines the classical conception of the “good life,” from the quest for the *virtuous* life, to the attainment of *bodily pleasure*.⁶⁹⁹ The “good [in Hobbes’s materialism] is fundamentally identical with the pleasant.”⁷⁰⁰ Opposing classical virtue ethics, Hobbes lifts the ancient moral restraints on the basic desires, with the exception of “those restrictions that are required for the sake of peace.”⁷⁰¹ Since the bodily pleasure ranks at the bottom of the Socratic-Platonic hierarchy of human attributes, “the *basic* part of the classical natural right teaching is the *critique of hedonism*.”⁷⁰²

Nevertheless, Strauss argues that Hobbes is the first to bring together aspects of both the Epicurean and the Socratic-Platonic tradition. From the Epicureans, he takes the equation of the good with pleasure, and sides with the Platonic tradition insofar as his political philosophy is “public spirited” or “idealistic” — i.e. concerned with what Hobbes understands as “the best regime or the simply just social order.”⁷⁰³ The Epicureans on the contrary, do not concern themselves with the best regime, but only with how to attain private gain through society, as it already exists.⁷⁰⁴ The aim of

⁶⁹⁹ Strauss explains: [T]he emancipation of the desire for comfort required [...] above all, that the function of civil society be radically redefined: ‘the good life,’ for the sake of which men enter civil society, is no longer the life of human excellence but ‘commodious living’ as the reward of hard work. And the sacred duty of the rulers is no longer ‘to make the citizens good and doers of noble things’ but to “study, as much as by laws can be effected, to furnish the citizens abundantly with all good things . . . which are conducive to delectation” (Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 189).

⁷⁰⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 169. Earlier in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss notes that Plato reduced what he called the “conventionalism” thesis to the premises that “the good is identical with the pleasant” (Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 108). The most developed form of classical hedonism is Epicureanism for which the good is the pleasure of the body” (109).

⁷⁰¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 189.

⁷⁰² Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 126, emphasis added.

⁷⁰³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 167.

⁷⁰⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 168.

Hobbes's commonwealth is to secure life and pleasure, and thus Strauss names him the inventor of "political hedonism."⁷⁰⁵ It is no coincidence that, as Strauss writes, "[p]olitical atheism" and "political hedonism" were born of the same mind.⁷⁰⁶ Hobbes's "philosophy as a whole may be said to be the classic example of the typically modern combination of *political idealism* with a *materialistic* and *atheistic* view of the whole."⁷⁰⁷ Hobbes's commonwealth, insofar as it secures survival and the satisfaction of desire, is the antithesis of Plato's beautiful city.

4. 2. 12. *Strauss's favored regime at the time*

Just as in the 1930s, and as I argued in chapter two and three, Strauss reads a moral dimension into Hobbes's state of nature. He argues that for Hobbes there are just and unjust acts prior to the social contract: only acts conducive to survival are just. Since it is up to each individual to judge what is conducive to his or her survival, everything can be considered just in the state of nature. The only standard of justice that remains is thus the judgment of each individual; Strauss called this a "natural right of folly":

If everyone has by nature the right to preserve himself, he necessarily has the right to the means required for his self-preservation. At this point the question arises as to who is to be the judge of what means are required for a man's self-preservation or as to which means are proper or right. The classics would have answered that the natural judge is the man of practical wisdom, and this answer would finally lead back to the view that the simply best regime is the absolute rule of the wise and the best practicable regime is the rule of gentlemen. According to Hobbes, however, everyone is by nature the judge of what are the right means to his self-preservation. For, even granting that the wise man is, in principle, a better judge, he is much less concerned with the self-preservation of a given fool than is the fool himself. But if everyone, however foolish, is by nature the judge of what is required for his self-preservation, everything may legitimately be regarded as

⁷⁰⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 169.

⁷⁰⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 169.

⁷⁰⁷ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 126, emphasis added.

required for self-preservation: everything is by nature just. We may speak of a natural right of folly.⁷⁰⁸

Hobbes's Sovereign is thus not sovereign because of his theoretical or practical wisdom, but because his authority is formed by the decision of each individual to agree to the covenant as to secure their self-preservation.⁷⁰⁹ The "laws are laws," Strauss writes, because of the authority given to the Sovereign by each individual. Hobbes's principle for rule is thus not *wisdom* (based on nature), but *authority* (based on individual will or folly). The shift from the primacy of obligation to right, Strauss points out, is also a shift from the *natural order* to human *will*. In classical natural law, nature is independent of human will:

If the only unconditional moral fact is the natural right of each to his self-preservation, and therefore all obligations to others arise from contract, justice becomes identical with the habit of fulfilling one's contracts. Justice no longer consists in complying with standards that are independent of human will. All material principles of justice — the rules of commutative and distributive justice or of the Second Table of the Decalogue — cease to have intrinsic validity. All material obligations arise from the agreement of the contractors, and therefore in practice from the will of the sovereign. For the contract that makes possible all other contracts is the social contract or the contract of subjection to the sovereign.⁷¹⁰

It is out of the principle of survival that Hobbes deduces a natural law that fully reflects that moral fact. Strauss differentiates between a moral fact and justice in Hobbes. In Strauss's account, for Hobbes, preservation of life is that which provided the moral foundation; justice is observing the social contract.

⁷⁰⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 185-86; see Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 107.

⁷⁰⁹ Consent then becomes the only source of legitimacy and wisdom is dismissed. Consent is made truly effective through the submission of individual wills to the sovereign. Will takes the place of reason in legitimizing the political order: the sovereign is not sovereign because he is deemed to be reasonable, but because his sovereignty is the product of the contract entered into by willing individuals and of the transfer of power from their particular wills (Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, pp. 107-108).

⁷¹⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 187-88.

Strauss then argues that Hobbes's proposed commonwealth is constructed to hold under all times and circumstances. He speaks of Hobbes's theory as a "natural public law regime" that forecloses any difference between "political theory" and "statesmanship."⁷¹¹

Classical political philosophy had recognized the difference between the best regime and legitimate regimes. It asserted, therefore, a variety of types of legitimate regimes; that is, what type of regime is legitimate in given circumstances depends on the circumstances. Natural public law, on the other hand, is concerned with that right social order whose actualization is possible under all circumstances. It therefore tries to delineate that social order that can claim to be legitimate or just in all cases, regardless of the circumstances. Natural public law, we may say, replaces the idea of the best regime, which does not supply, and is not meant to supply, an answer to the question of what is the just order here and now, by the idea of the just social order which answers the basic practical question once and for all, i.e., regardless of place and time. Natural public law intends to give such a universally valid solution to the political problem as is meant to be universally applicable in practice. In other words, whereas, according to the classics, political theory proper is essentially in need of being supplemented by the practical wisdom of the statesman on the spot, the new type of political theory solves, as such, the crucial practical problem: the problem of what order is just here and now. In the decisive respect, then, there is no longer any need for statesmanship as distinguished from political theory. We may call this type of thinking 'doctrinarism'.⁷¹²

The natural public law tradition that grows out of Hobbes's philosophy leaves little flexibility to the governing statesmen. For this reason, Strauss writes, Hobbes lowers the standards for politics: "Hobbes's teaching on sovereignty in particular [...] implies the denial of the possibility of distinguishing between good and bad regimes (kingship and tyranny, aristocracy and oligarchy, democracy and ochlocracy) as well as of the possibility of mixed regimes and "rule of law."⁷¹³ "Accordingly," those who follow Hobbes in the public law tradition, "deliberately lower the goal of politics; they are no longer concerned with having a clear view of the highest political possibility with regard to which all actual political orders can be judged in a responsible manner. [...] The

⁷¹¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 186. See Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 103.

⁷¹² Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 191-92.

⁷¹³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 192.

‘natural public law’ school replaced ‘the best regime’ by ‘legitimate government.’”⁷¹⁴

Hobbes natural public law makes rules to apply under all circumstances and thus “natural law becomes independent of the best regime and takes precedence over it.”⁷¹⁵

According to the classical natural law tradition, the best regime according to nature is the “rule of [wise] men;” however, Strauss notes, such rule is highly unlikely. In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss charges Hobbes with having made the likelihood of the rule of the wise ever more difficult in present/modern times by denying the natural gradation of intelligence—the many would hardly be convinced of the virtue of the intellectual superior few. The reason for this is that a regime ruled by the wise requires that the inferior “recognize” the “superiority” of those fit to “rule,” which is all good in theory; but in practice, the few run into trouble trying to convince the many ignorant why they are entitled to rule.⁷¹⁶ The rule of the wise easily falls into despotism since a tyrant is better equipped than the wise to convince the many vulgar of his right to rule and will thus easily topple the rule of the wise.⁷¹⁷ In *On Tyranny*, published the year before he delivered his lecture on Hobbes, Strauss compares tyrannical teaching or the rule of the wise with the rule by law:

The ‘tyrannical’ teaching, we shall answer, serves the purpose, not of solving the problem of the best political order, but of bringing to light the nature of political things. The ‘theoretical’ thesis which favors beneficent tyranny is indispensable in order to make clear a crucial implication of the practically and hence theoretically true thesis which favors rule of law and legitimate government. The ‘theoretical thesis’ is a most striking expression of the problem, or of the problematic character, of law and legitimacy: legal justice is a justice which is imperfect and more or less blind, and *legitimate* government is not necessarily ‘good government’ and almost certainly will not be government by the wise. Law and legitimacy are problematic from the highest point of view, namely, from that of

⁷¹⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 191.

⁷¹⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 144.

⁷¹⁶ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 158.

⁷¹⁷ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 141.

wisdom. [...] We have stated that according to that teaching beneficent tyranny is *theoretically superior* and *practically inferior* to rule of laws and legitimate government.⁷¹⁸

The rule of law is preferable to the rule of the wise as it restrict the actions of the unwise: “We have stated that according to that teaching beneficent tyranny is *theoretically superior* and *practically inferior* to rule of laws and legitimate government.”⁷¹⁹ The rule of law is inferior from the perspective of wisdom — from the perspective of the philosopher. This problem, Strauss writes, results in that “the classical natural right teaching [...] culminate in a twofold answer to the question of the best regime: the simply best regime would be the absolute rule of the *wise*; the practically best regime is the rule, under law, of *gentlemen*, or the *mixed regime*.”⁷²⁰

The classics devised or recommended various institutions which appeared to be conducive to the rule of the best. Probably the most influential suggestion was the mixed regime, mixed of kingship, aristocracy, and democracy. In the mixed regime the aristocratic element — the gravity of the senate — occupies the intermediate, i.e., the central or key position. The mixed regime is, in fact — and it is meant to be — an aristocracy which is strengthened and protected by the admixture of monarchic and democratic institutions.⁷²¹

Is the mixed regime translatable into the modern regime of Strauss’s adopted country, United States, or a liberal constitutional regime in general? If we begin with the aristocratic and democratic element, is it possible that Strauss saw the Senate as the aristocratic institution, in the presidency, Kingship, and viewed the House as an institution closer to the people, as the democratic element in a mixed regime. Or is the democratic element simply that the sovereignty is supposedly vested in the people insofar as there are free public elections on a regular basis?

⁷¹⁸ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 99, emphasis added.

⁷¹⁹ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 99, emphasis added.

⁷²⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 142-143, emphasis added.

⁷²¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 142.

This democratic element is the one thing that Strauss seems to have retained from Hobbes's contract theory, namely the insight that publicly expressed *consent* is a necessary evil for a modern regime, and a way to “reconcile *order* which is not *oppression* with *freedom* which is not *license*.”⁷²² Strauss writes in *Natural Right and History* that “[t]he political problem consists in reconciling the requirement for *wisdom* with the requirement for *consent*. But whereas, from the point of view of egalitarian natural right *consent takes the precedence over wisdom*, from the point of view of classic natural right, *wisdom takes precedence over consent*.”⁷²³ Strauss proposes a classical solution to this problem that fits with a constitutional regime:

According to the classics, the best way of meeting these two entirely different requirements — that for wisdom and that for consent or for freedom — would be that a wise legislator frame a code which the citizen body, duly persuaded, freely adopts. The code, which is, as it were, the embodiment of wisdom, must be as little subjected to alterations as possible; the rule of law is to take the place of the rule of men, however wise.⁷²⁴

So unlike Hobbes's sovereign, Strauss classical answer is constitutionalism, where also the sovereign is subjected the law. The code or constitution is the exoteric natural law that the citizens duly accept. The aristocratic element of the mixed regime is secured by the code or constitution. Strauss seems not to support infringement on the vote here; he simply says that the many would freely adopt the constitution the code. Or as Strauss would write a few years later in “Liberal education and Responsibility”: “the gentlemen share power with the people in such way that the people *elect* the magistrate and the council from *among* the gentlemen and demand an account of them at the end of their

⁷²² Strauss, *Persecution*, 37, emphasis added.

⁷²³ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 141, emphasis added.

⁷²⁴ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 141.

term of office.”⁷²⁵ However, the elected official should legislate little away from the constitution as originally formed by the wise. Besides theoretical wisdom, Strauss appeals to Aristotelian *phronesis* (practical wisdom) to describe the type of people, “gentlemen,” to implement the law that he finds more suitable than the wise:

The administration of the law must be entrusted to a type of man who is most likely to administer it equitably, i.e., in the spirit of the wise legislator, or to ‘complete’ the law according to the requirements of circumstances which the legislator could not have foreseen. The classics held that this type of man is the gentleman. The gentleman is not identical with the wise man. He is the political reflection, or imitation, of the wise man. Gentlemen have this in common with the wise man, that they ‘look down’ on many things which are highly esteemed by the vulgar or that they are experienced in things noble and beautiful. They differ from the wise because they have a noble contempt for precision, because they refuse to take cognizance of certain aspects of life, and because, in order to live as gentlemen, they must be well off.⁷²⁶

In the American liberal democratic representative regime, the “gentlemen” are presumably represented by the president, members of the Senate and possibly the House, and officials in other state institutions, such as the judiciary. The gentlemen, in short, are the elected representatives and statesmen of a certain wealth.

4. 3. 1. *Conclusion*

We have seen in this chapter that Strauss shares with the German nihilists their philosophical criticism of liberal civilization. In Strauss’s view, however, the young German nihilists threw the baby out with the bath water; following Nietzsche, Heidegger and Schmitt, they rejected not only modern rationality, but also ancient rationality. Responding to this rejection, Strauss defends classical rationalism — reconsidering medieval and ancient philosophy — against historicism. I have argued that Strauss’s discovery of both ancient esotericism and classical natural right are premised on a

⁷²⁵ Strauss, “Liberal education and Responsibility,” 15, emphasis added.

⁷²⁶ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 141-42.

hierarchical view of the individual's rational capacities in particular, and overall capabilities in general. Hobbes appears as the counterpoint to Strauss's Platonic-Socratic view of the human animal as the rational animal. Strauss begins his study of Hobbes in the 1920s and 1930s by coupling morality with nature. As I argue in this chapter, Strauss gradually moves beyond a biblical conception of good and evil. Having separated morality from philosophy, with an appeal to Socratic-Platonic tradition, Strauss argues that what sets humans apart from animals is reason, not vanity, and that it is reason that provides the definitive title to rule.

The few wise cannot not secure obedience, however, as most people will not be persuaded by reason. Strauss suggests that the solution to this political impasse lies in the design of a public moral doctrine and constitution or code that can secure a social order. The principle for *obedience* remains morality; but, as I argue in my discussion of Strauss's rediscovery of esotericism, the moral code for society is political rhetoric (i.e., an exoteric doctrine). But how then do we explain the fact that Strauss openly attacks modern natural right doctrine in *Natural Right and History*? Why can the modern or liberal universal individual right to life not serve as an exoteric moral doctrine in Strauss's eye? Is it because Hobbes's modern natural right results in historicism and moral relativism? Or is it because a regime based on the preservation of life and pleasure works toward inferior ends that are not reflective of the natural constitution of the human animal, as the rational being in the universe, with the capacity for greatness? For Strauss, the answer seems to be both: Strauss opposes Hobbesian, modern and liberal, egalitarian rights, since they are contrary to his classical understanding of human natural right. He

also opposes Hobbesian, modern and liberal, egalitarian rights because they resulted in historicism, and by extension relativism and nihilism.

In England, Strauss discovered a pre-modern constitutional tradition. Having arrived in New York, Strauss appears to support liberal constitutionalism, while still criticizing the liberal doctrine he argues originates in Hobbes. He defines “rational liberalism” as the doctrine that originates with Hobbes and places individual right over, and prior to duty/obligation to the state. In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss appears to sanction a mixed regime under the rule of law that was appropriate for the time in which he lived. This regime adjusts Hobbes’s liberal/modern natural right doctrine as the right of folly. It is rule by the gentlemen, but allows for the pursuit of the best—philosophy. It is a regime that is not defined by the expressive aim to transcend popular sovereignty on the one hand, or liberal constitutionalism on the other. Strauss no longer aims to move beyond the liberal state—at least not in the case of the United States where he lived until he died.

In the concluding chapter, I will return to Strauss’s later thoughts on a liberal democratic regime in more detail. In the 1950s, Strauss begins to distinguish between modern and ancient liberalism along the lines of education, the pursuit of theoretical excellence or virtue he argued is a form of ancient liberalism.⁷²⁷ He considers philosophy or wisdom the highest achievement of the human collective. The life of the mind, however, he argues, can only be pursued by the few capable, and only their life is just and good according to nature. In this regard, Strauss seems to view the modern era as being more suitable to the perfection of virtue than ancient Greece in one respect, since he thought that industrialization allows more people to become educated, and the chance

⁷²⁷ Allan Bloom, “Foreword,” in Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*, v.

that a potential philosopher receives an education “for which they are *fitted by nature*” is greater.⁷²⁸ For the attainment of the highest end, natural intelligence is in most cases not enough, but requires education in the great books. Strauss devoted the remaining years his life to this liberal education, partly to defend ancient rationalism against historicism, and partly to reinforce an intellectual order and rank. We shall now turn to Strauss last thoughts on Hobbes that Strauss presented in print and in the classroom as a teacher.

⁷²⁸ Strauss, “Liberal Education and Responsibility,” p. 25, emphasis added. There is a natural limit to how many are fitted by nature to become a philosopher: “we must not *expect* liberal education can *ever* become universal education. It will *always* remain obligation and the privilege of a minority” (Strauss, “Liberal Education and Responsibility,” 24, emphasis added). The limit Strauss put on the reach on education, is thus not as Frazer has argued, one simply due to economic factors (Frazer, “Esotericism Ancient and Modern: Strauss Contra Straussianism on the Art of Political-Philosophical Writing,” 51). For Strauss, political economy is one thing, natural ability another. The two are interrelated insofar as the division of labor within the polis should in a regime be as close as possible to the natural ability and desire of its population. Strauss preferred criteria for a social order of rank was not private ownership but intellectual capacity. He strongly opposed the egalitarian principle of modern liberalism and socialism, and the latter’s idea of a classless society. Strauss did, however, view the production (division of labor) and some relocation of resources (through markets and state taxation) in capitalist states more advantageous to education than, say, ancient Greece, where the leisure time required for education was a privilege exclusive to a small land-owning class.

5

Strauss's Last Thoughts on Hobbes

5. 0. 1. *Introduction*

My aim in this chapter is to examine Strauss's final studies of Hobbes. A year after the publication of *Natural Right and History*, Strauss wrote a final longer review essay relating to Hobbes, which was followed, over the next ten years, by a series of seminars and two short book reviews directly concerned with Hobbes's thought.⁷²⁹ During this period, Strauss lived and taught in the High Park neighborhood in Southside Chicago, with the exception of a couple of leaves at different universities. In Chicago, he became one of the main intellectuals of the neoconservative movement, which had its epicenter at the university — Strauss counted as his colleagues Hans Morgenthau and Friedrich Hayek, among others. This was the height of the Cold War, and Strauss sided strongly with his new home country, and the liberal capitalist west in general against the communist bloc. Though some of his findings on Hobbes still informed Strauss's politics,

⁷²⁹ Leo Strauss. "Les fondements de la philosophie politique de Hobbes," *Critique* 10, no. 83 (April 1954): 338–362. Leo Strauss. "Review of C. B. Macpherson, "The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: from Hobbes to Locke," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (June 1964): 69–70 (henceforth, "Review"), republished in Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, introduction by Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 129-30; Leo Strauss, "Samuel I. Mintz's 'The Hunting of Leviathan: Seventeenth-Century Reactions to the Materialism and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes,'" *Modern Philology* 62, no. 3 (February 1965): 253-55; Strauss also refers to Hobbes in Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1958) and Leo Strauss *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

his final studies of Hobbes had to do less with his own politics and overall philosophical project than his earlier work. In these final studies, we find Strauss finally following the interpretative method that he champions after his arrival in the United States: he tries to understand Hobbes as Hobbes had understood himself, something that is especially prevalent in the seminars.

Strauss records his final major insight into Hobbes thought in the seventh chapter of his 1959 book, *What is Political Philosophy*, entitled “On the basis of Hobbes’s Political Philosophy” (henceforth, “On the Basis”). This chapter was initially published in French translation five years earlier, as “*Les fondements de la philosophie politique de Hobbes*,” in the Parisian journal *Critique*.⁷³⁰ The English reprint in *What is Political Philosophy* includes a notable addition to the chapter’s second footnote.⁷³¹ I reproduce the addition to the footnote in full here and dissect it in detail in part two of the chapter:

—According to Hobbes, the only peculiarity of man’s mind which precedes the invention of speech, i.e., the only natural peculiarity of man’s mind, is the faculty of considering phenomena as causes of possible effects, as distinguished from the faculty of seeking the causes or means that produce “an effect imagined,” the latter faculty being “common to man and beast”: not “teleological” but “causal” thinking is peculiar to man. The reason why Hobbes transformed the traditional definition of man as the rational animal into the definition of man as the animal which can “inquire consequences” and hence which is capable of science, i.e., “knowledge of consequences,” is that the traditional definition implies that man is by nature a social animal, and Hobbes must reject this implication (*De Cive*, I, 2). As a consequence the relation between man’s natural peculiarity and speech become obscure. On the other hand, Hobbes is able to deduce from his definition of man his *characteristic doctrine of man*: man alone can consider himself as a cause of possible effects, i.e., man can be aware of his *power*; he can be concerned with power; he can desire to possess power; he can seek confirmation for his wish to be powerful by having his power recognized by others, i.e., he can be *vain* or *proud*; he can be hungry with future hunger, he can anticipate future

⁷³⁰ Leo Strauss, “Les fondements de la philosophie politique de Hobbes,” *Critique* 10, no. 83 (April 1954): 338–362.

⁷³¹ Strauss, Leo “On the Basis of Hobbes’s Political Philosophy” in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959): 170–196.

dangers, he can be haunted by long-range *fear*. Cf. *Leviathan*, chs. 3 (15), 5 (27, 29), 6 (33-36), 11 (64), and *De homine* X, 3.⁷³²

This addition represents the first published instance of Strauss's final thought on Hobbes. Strauss directs his readers to the footnote in the 1965 preface to the first German edition of his 1936 *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* with the words: "only there did I succeed in laying bare the simple leading thought of Hobbes's teaching of man."⁷³³ And five years later, in the 1970 preface to the seventh impression of *Natural Right and History*, he refers in particular to the footnote as that which he "wrote on the *nerve* of Hobbes's argument."⁷³⁴ It is not the case, however, that Strauss intentionally withheld from his French readers the "leading thought of Hobbes's teaching of man," as he did not make his final discovery until 1956, two years after the publication of the original French version.

Knowing where to look, however, is just the beginning; Strauss's final insight on the nerve of Hobbes's political philosophy is not easy to decipher. Only two scholars — Meier and Stauffer — have tried to do so in print. Meier, in a recent book on Machiavelli, refers to the extended footnote in a footnote of his own, reading the footnote in line with Strauss's layers of esoteric arguments in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*.⁷³⁵ Meier argues that Strauss's footnote concerns Hobbes's critique of revealed religion in general, and specifically the difference between the "political" or "Napoleonic strategy" (i.e. moving beyond the orthodox grip on public imagination on the basis of transforming society politically and materially, in the absence of any philosophical critique), and Hobbes's philosophical attempt to show that "Biblical revelation is against reason," with respect to

⁷³² Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, 176-177n 2.

⁷³³ Strauss, *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft in ihrer Genesis*, 3; translation in Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 454.

⁷³⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, vii.

⁷³⁵ Heinrich Meier, *Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion*, translation by Robert Berman. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 62-63n 77.

the difference between natural theology and natural religion.⁷³⁶ In this chapter, I will give a detailed account of this, Strauss's final major finding on Hobbes, for the first time and discuss its implications for his earlier interpretations of Hobbes.

In the chapter that the footnote accompanies, "On the Basis of Hobbes's Political Philosophy," Strauss revisits, as the title suggests, the *basis* for Hobbes's political thought. As I discussed in chapter three, in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss identifies the basis of Hobbes's thought in the pre-natural scientific anthropological observation of the human passion, as informed by a bourgeois morality. In "On the Basis," Strauss builds on, while also altering his understanding of the relation between Hobbes's natural and political science that he previously developed in *Natural Right and History*. In that earlier work, Strauss had maintained the view that Hobbes's natural scientific view of the whole (the physical universe in its entirety), however faulty, supports his political science (i.e., his modern natural right doctrine). In "On the Basis," however, Strauss argues that the main contradictions in Hobbes's thought (i.e. the incompatibility between his political theory/natural right doctrine and his account of human nature and behavior), arise first when Hobbes applies his natural science to the study of the physical nature of humans, as opposed to the physical universe as a whole. Strauss suggests, as he does in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, that the natural scientific view that human nature cannot account for the antagonistic behavior described in the state of nature. Instead, he upholds his argument from the 1930s that the reason each individual in the state of nature incessantly seeks for ever more power over others is vanity. And he arrives at the conclusion that Hobbes's view of the human animal as a uniquely vain animal has its origin in the pre-modern philosophical view of human

⁷³⁶ Meier, *Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion*, 63n 77.

nature, as opposed to Hobbes's natural scientific perspective.

This theory concerning Hobbes's political philosophy is put into question in the extended footnote that accompanied the inclusion of this essay in Strauss's 1959, *What is Political Philosophy*. Besides not knowing where to look, the absence of any comprehensive account of Strauss's final insight, and consequently, no account of its bearing on the relation between Hobbes's political science and natural science, is explained by the fact that Strauss states his final insights as conclusive statements, bereft of any explanation. It is therefore left for the readers of the footnote to make out Strauss's comment on causal thought as best they can. The chapter that the footnote accompanies is of little help here. The reason for this is that Strauss arrives at the discovery two years after that he had completed the article, while teaching a seminar on Hobbes's *Leviathan* at the University of Chicago.⁷³⁷ Unfortunately there are no existent audio recordings or transcripts from this seminar.

The only other place in his published works that Strauss, refers to causal reason is in a short review of Macpherson's *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: From Hobbes to Locke* (henceforth, "*Possessive Individualism*"), published in June, 1964. In 1962, Macpherson had offered a rival and highly influential interpretation of Hobbes's thought. Strauss repeats the definition of causal reason in the central sentence around which the short review turns: "man" is "distinguished from brutes by the faculty

⁷³⁷ Autumn Quarter 1956: "Seminar in Political Philosophy — Hobbes". Strauss offered four courses in total on Hobbes during his tenure at the University of Chicago. The other three were: Winter quarter 1950: "Seminar in Political Philosophy — Hobbes's *The Citizen*"; Autumn Quarter 1953: "Seminar in Political Philosophy — Hobbes's *Leviathan*"; and Winter Quarter 1964: "Seminar in Political Philosophy: Seminar on Hobbes". Transcripts are available from the 1953 and the 1964 seminars, but only the latter have a surviving audio recording. Strauss's courses "were scheduled for ninety minutes twice a week," starting at 3:30 p.m., but they often ran over time (See George Anastaplo, "Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago," in *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime*, ed. Kenneth L. Deutsch & John A. Murely (Maryland – Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 14-18).

of considering phenomena as causes of possible effects, and therefore by awareness of potentiality and power.”⁷³⁸ In the same section of the essay, Strauss faults Macpherson for not having fully accounted for Hobbes’s understanding of human nature and its relation to why the state of nature is a state of war. Strauss implies that these factors lead Macpherson, to argue that there is in Hobbes’s philosophy an implicit external cause to account for the antagonism in the state of nature. In his criticism of Macpherson, Strauss is simultaneously directing the readers’ attention to an oversight in his own earlier work on Hobbes, including the essay in which the footnote appears. It is an oversight amended by the extended footnote in *What is Political Philosophy*. The review was published a few months after Strauss concluded a winter seminar on Hobbes at the University of Chicago, which besides the *Leviathan* and selections from *De Cive*, included as required reading Macpherson’s *Possessive Individualism*. There exists an audio recording and a transcript of this seminar.⁷³⁹ In the seminar, Strauss discusses at length his final insight that concerns Hobbes’s understanding of causal reason and vanity.

⁷³⁸ Strauss, “Review,” 230. The review is short — comprising four paragraphs that address Macpherson’s chapter on Hobbes only.

⁷³⁹ Strauss, Leo, “Winter Quarter 1964: “Seminar in Political Philosophy: Seminar on Hobbes”, University of Chicago. I have corrected the existing transcript after the audio recording from the time available as digital copies < <https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/hobbes-leviathan-and-de-cive-winter-quarter-1964>> The seminar met twice a week for a total of eight weeks (sixteen sessions in total), during the winter semester of 1964. When I quote from a session, I will refer to the session by its number (from 1 to 16). The recording gives us the words of Strauss the teacher. He did not read from pre-written lectures; instead, he spoke freely from notes. He had singled out the passages to be read out loud beforehand, what themes to explore and explain, and which questions were to be raised. The participants in the seminar were mainly students; however, in attendance was also at least one theologian. Strauss took the opportunity to reconsider positions, and not, as he told his students on the first day of class, to be a “prisoner” of his own publications. Most of the seminars began with one or a few students presenting a paper on the assigned reading, and on a few occasions, the students were asked to present some time into the session. He commented on the paper, which had been submitted before the class, judging its merits (in terms of “good” or “very good”) and asked the presenters to clarify certain aspects of their case. Subsequently, Strauss turned to comment on the assigned reading. With the aid of a student, primarily Charles Butterworth (Today Emeritus Professor of Political Philosophy at Maryland University) selected passages from the assigned texts were read out loud. Throughout the sessions, the participants asked questions, and periodically, Strauss himself engaged the floor with questions. The final section of the seminars was generally devoted to question. In past

The other scholar who has discussed this footnote is Stauffer, who devotes a chapter to “On the Basis” in a recent collection of essays on *What is Political Philosophy*.⁷⁴⁰ However insightful Stauffer’s article is in outlining Strauss’s essay’s argument, he stops short of unpacking the final insight tucked into the extended footnote; Stauffer’s comment on the content of the extended footnote is brief:

Strauss suggested that Hobbes’s very abandonment of the traditional definition of man as the rational animal in favor of the definition of man as the animal that can imagine the possible effects of potential causes was guided by the necessity, for Hobbes, of rejecting the implication of the traditional definition that man is a social animal.⁷⁴¹

As I will argue in this chapter, Stauffer is both right and wrong: right in suggesting that Strauss argues that Hobbes looks to the “definition of man as the animal that can imagine the possible effects of potential causes,” or what he called “causal reason,” in order to assert that man is an a-social animal; wrong in that Hobbes’s definition of the human animal as capable of causal reason is an abandonment of the ancient definition of humans as rational animals. As Strauss tells his students in 1964, “He [Hobbes] always repeated the traditional definition, man is a rational animal. But as we have seen, it meant something very different in his doctrine than what it meant in the tradition.”⁷⁴² This different meaning of the human animal as a rational animal for Hobbes is our ability for causal reason; as he explains to his students, “What is peculiar to man is to consider things as possible causes of effects, whereas finding means for ends is common to men

seminars, Strauss had, according to his own account, “devoted each seminar to a single text, and to each text in its entirety”, but the 1964 Hobbes seminar was different. “For some dubious reasons,” Strauss told his students, he “decided for the first time to deviate from that and to take two texts and not to read either of them in its entirety” (Strauss, Session 1).

⁷⁴⁰ Devin Stauffer, “Leo Strauss’s ‘On the Basis of Hobbes’s Political Philosophy,’” in *Leo Strauss’s Defense of the Philosophic Life: Reading What Is Political Philosophy?*, ed. and introduction by Rafael Major (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 137-152.

⁷⁴¹ Stauffer, “Leo Strauss’s: ‘On the basis of Hobbes’s Political Philosophy,’” 148.

⁷⁴² Strauss, Session 4.

and brutes. It means causal reason.”⁷⁴³ Strauss further suggests that power, vanity and fear are all derivatives of causal reason. Strauss’s reconceptualization of how Hobbes understands causal reason from his *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (1930) has “major” consequences for how the basis of Hobbes’s political thought is conceived. The reason for this is that the definition of causal reason belongs to Hobbes’s natural science, not his pre-scientific understanding. As a consequence, Strauss’s final insight links vanity, as well as power — conceived of as connected to, but also distinct from, vanity — to Hobbes’s natural scientific description of human nature. Strauss’s argument about the relation between Hobbes’s *political science* and his *natural science* is thus fundamentally altered. In this lengthened footnote, then, Strauss accounts for a new relation between Hobbes’s *natural science* and his *political science*. This is a major change in Strauss’s understanding of Hobbes: it rejects all previous separations of vanity from Hobbes’s natural science, and it reverses the *causal* relation between vanity and reason.

Strauss’s response to Macpherson also prompted him to return to the question why mortal enmity arises in the state of nature one last time. On the first day of his 1964 seminar, Strauss tells his class that the main contention between Macpherson and himself boils down to the question on which his study of Hobbes in the 1930s had turned: “What causes the antagonism between each individual in the state of nature?”⁷⁴⁴ Over the course of this semester, Strauss discusses why each individual incessantly seeks ever more power over others, responding to Macpherson’s competing interpretation, while also reconsidering his own earlier answers. In the seminar, Strauss aims to give Hobbes his full due, not only with respect to Macpherson’s interpretation, but also with respect to his

⁷⁴³ Strauss, Session 5.

⁷⁴⁴ Strauss, Session 1.

earlier writings. As he tells the students, “We must seek for more, we must begin at the beginning and see how it looks there.”⁷⁴⁵ It is when he begins at the beginning that he uncovers his final insight on Hobbes: the discovery of causal reason.

So, what has thus far been at stake politically in question of why the state of nature is a state of war of all against all? In his earlier work in the 1930s, Strauss treats Hobbes’s state of nature as a ground zero for politics. In chapter two, I pointed out, as Meier did before me, that Strauss argues that Hobbes’s state of nature in the most important respect is analogous to Schmitt’s conception of the political. In chapter three, I showed that this correlation allows Strauss to seek an answer in Hobbes’s anthropological view of human nature (beyond the liberal thought horizon) as to why the political antagonism arises in the first place. Strauss’s answer, vanity, allows him to claim that human beings are by nature evil, and which in turn provides Strauss with an unliberal moral-ontological foundation for a right-wing authoritarian theory of the state. The foundation for this hypothetical right-wing authoritarian regime is first conceived by Strauss as an alternative to liberalism and socialism, and in time, to National Socialism as well. In chapter four, I outlined how Strauss, in his return to Hobbes after World War II, steers clear of a discussion of the state of war and its causes. His extra-textual intention lies elsewhere during this period. Strauss’s central aim after the World War II is to show that Hobbes’s egalitarian modern natural right doctrine is contrary to human nature and the Socratic-Platonic natural right tradition. I showed how Strauss came to support liberal constitutionalism, while still criticizing the liberal theoretical doctrine that he argues originates in Hobbes.

The quest to understand Hobbes’s philosophy in its own right becomes the

⁷⁴⁵ Strauss, Session 1.

dominant goal of interpretation in his final essay and the 1964 seminar. In the former, “On the Basis,” Strauss makes the same claim as he had in *Natural Right and History*: that an atheist worldview is central to both Hobbes’s natural and political science. If there is any other major philosophical concern that Strauss indirectly touches upon in the essay, besides establishing beyond any doubt that Hobbes was an atheist, it is over Heidegger’s existentialist rejection of rationalism by making reason a prisoner of language. Polin argues that Hobbes makes reason/science dependent on the arbitrariness of language. This is something that Strauss’s reverses in his final insight on Hobbes: making the case that Hobbes’s ontology of human nature places reason prior to language and the passions—Strauss’s final discovery present Hobbes as a classical rationalist.

5. 1. 2. *Hobbes revisited*

The occasion for Strauss’s final article on Hobbes was the 1952 release of a book on Hobbes by the French philosopher, Raymond Polin.⁷⁴⁶ Just as in his first freestanding article on Hobbes two decades earlier, “Notes on Hobbes,” Strauss’s final essay on Hobbes, “On the Basis,” is an extensive review-essay, ostensibly on Polin’s book. In the beginning of “On the Basis,” Strauss suggests that the question “why should we study Hobbes?” implies that we “doubt whether Hobbes’s teaching is the true teaching.”⁷⁴⁷ Having alerted the reader to the notion — one that Strauss believes in — that there is such a thing as a true and trans-historical teaching, he rephrases the question to primarily bear on his times: “Why then is Hobbes important for the present generation?”⁷⁴⁸

In “Notes on Hobbes” published as the Weimar era came to a close, Strauss spells

⁷⁴⁶ Raymond Polin, *Politique et philosophie chez Thomas Hobbes* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1952).

⁷⁴⁷ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 171.

⁷⁴⁸ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 170.

out (as I examined in chapter three) the political subtext of his having turned to Hobbes in the 1930s: to find an alternative to liberalism and socialism. In “On the Basis,” he begins with an account of the rehabilitation of Hobbes in the 19th and 20th century. Only after Nietzsche, Strauss writes, does Hobbes’s atheism become “respectable;” only after Nazism and communism, does Hobbes’s morality appear “decent,” and his ruler, the “enlightened and human King,” preferable in comparison with modern tyrants, like Hitler and Stalin.⁷⁴⁹ This account, however, overlooks the philosophical hazard that Strauss had previously exposed in *Natural Right and History*: that Hobbes’s modern natural right doctrine results in historicist relativism, of which Nazism appears as its most vulgar political symptom.

In “On the Basis,” Strauss suggests that he is not alone in reassessing Hobbes in light of modernity’s perils:

Modernity has progressed to the point where it has visibly become a problem. This is why respectable people [...] turn again to a critical study of the hidden premises and hence the hidden origins of modernity—and therefore to a critical study of Hobbes. For Hobbes presents himself at first glance as the man who, for the first time, breaks completely with the pre-modern heritage, the man who ushers in a new type of social doctrine: the modern type.⁷⁵⁰

The main problem with Polin’s book, Strauss notes, is that it assesses Hobbes against later modernity, not the ancients. As a consequence, Polin’s analysis leaves unacknowledged the way in which Hobbes’s “[m]odern philosophy emerged in express opposition to classical philosophy. Only in the light of the quarrel between the ancients and moderns can modernity be understood.”⁷⁵¹ Strauss recommends his own approach in *Natural Right and History*: to study both the way Hobbes’s understands the ancient

⁷⁴⁹ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 171.

⁷⁵⁰ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 172.

⁷⁵¹ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 172.

tradition and classical philosophy on its own merit. Hobbes, Strauss notes critically, points out the deficiencies in ancient philosophy as the “lack of exactness,” and the overestimation of the “power of reason,” which Hobbes holds results in “anarchy.”⁷⁵² It is anarchy — in the form of civil-religious wars — that confronts Hobbes as *the* political problem of his time. As we saw in the previous chapter, Strauss, on his end, appeals to ancient reason to counter German relativism and nihilism in post-war America.

In “On the Basis,” Strauss spends little time on the ancients, but suggests that Hobbes does not fully break with the ancients, insofar as his account of human behavior in the state of nature continues to reflect a pre-modern conception of human nature. Strauss revisits the question of the *basis* of Hobbes’s thought and suggests, as he had in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, that the contradictions in Hobbes’s thought are the result of having adopted a natural scientific perspective of human nature. It is Hobbes’s non-natural scientific conceptualization of human nature that is required for (the basis of) his natural right doctrine, as well as being reflected in the state of nature. Strauss, however, adjusts this thesis to fit with his suggestion in *Natural Right and History* that Hobbes’s natural science plays a role in his political theory. In Strauss’s final essay, there are thus three different meanings of natural science at play. I will discuss them in order and explain how they relate to Hobbes’s political theory, and also offer explanatory and conclusive references to Strauss’s earlier studies. I present the transition of Strauss’s scholarship first in diagram form before I present it in prose, as it might be helpful for the reader to return to the diagram as a memory-guide:

⁷⁵² Strauss, “On the Basis,” 172.

Strauss's three different conceptions of Hobbes's natural science:

- (1) The materialist and mechanical understanding of the whole physical universe.
- (2) The mathematical/analytical/deductive method.
- (3) The natural scientific understanding or "naturalistic" view of the human animal (as one part in the whole).

The distinction between the first and third of these meanings is first introduced in "On the Basis". The key question for Strauss is over the *relation* of these conceptions of natural science to Hobbes's political theory. There are two main parts to Hobbes's political theory in Strauss's account:

- (4) The state of nature and human behavior and the passions on display therein.
- (5) The modern/liberal natural right doctrine/theory of obligation.

In "Notes on Hobbes," *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, and "On the Basis," Strauss argues that the human behavior described in the state of nature does not correspond with the scientific description of human nature. In these three studies, Strauss argues for an alternative view of human nature in Hobbes's thought that corresponds to the behavior in the state of nature:

- (6) The non-natural scientific description, the "humanistic interpretation," or the ancient understanding of the human animal.

In "Notes on Hobbes," *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, and "On the Basis," he argues that the contradiction in Hobbes's thought is caused by the fact that (3) does not reflect (4) (i.e. the natural scientific view of human nature does not reflect the behavior and passion displayed in the state of nature that leads to war of all against all). The two axioms of his political theory, vanity and fear, are not compatible with the natural scientific view of human nature. Vanity accounts for (4) why the state of nature is a state

of war of all against all and fear is required to move from (4) to (5). A brief summary of the relations between these components in Strauss's freestanding published work on Hobbes follows:

- In "Notes on Hobbes" and *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (1936) all three meanings of natural science (1, 2, 3) are mainly considered as one and the same, as Strauss argues that Hobbes's political philosophy is independent of natural science. Instead, it is (6) that informs (4) and (5) (i.e., the view of the human animal as the vain and fearful animal that informed Hobbes's doctrine of the state of nature and his political theory of political obligation).

- In "On Hobbes's Political Philosophy" ("Modern Natural Right" in *Natural Right and History* (1949/1952), only the first two understandings (1, 2) of science are in play. Strauss argues that (5) reflects (1) (i.e., that Hobbes's natural right doctrine reflects a non-teleological view of the universe). And that (5) is deduced by the use of (2) (i.e., Hobbes's natural right doctrine is deduced by his mathematical method).

- In "On the Basis" (1954), he retains the view that (5) reflects (1) (i.e., that Hobbes's natural right doctrine reflects a non-teleological view of the universe). But he argues that (6), not (3), must inform (4 & 5) Hobbes's political theory in order for it not to be contradictory.

- In the final insight in *What is Political Philosophy* (1959) and the 1964 Seminar on Hobbes, Strauss suggests that (6 & 4) are in fact informed by (3) (i.e., that vanity and fear are derivative of Hobbes's scientific description of the human animal as the animal that is capable of causal thought).

Part. I

5. 1. 3. *The view of the whole natural universe*

In chapter three, I argued that Strauss, in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, advances the hypothesis that Hobbes's adoption of natural science is the source behind the main contradictions in his work. Hobbes's natural scientific description of human nature cannot account for why the state of nature is a state of war as it portrayed individuals as simply selfish, not peculiarly vain. In other words, Hobbes's anthropology of the passions, on display in the state of nature, does not square with his natural scientific account of the human animal. Strauss separates Hobbes's natural science from a pre-scientific view of human nature, and argues that it is the latter that constitutes the real basis for his political science. His pre-scientific view of the human animals as vain does explain why each individual engaged in a struggle for ever more power over others.

In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss alters his view and suggested that Hobbes's natural science plays an important role for his political science. First, he contributes to the argument, first articulated in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, in which Strauss places Hobbes in the tradition of skepticism, that only mathematics can pass the test of radical skepticism. The method by which Hobbes builds his edifice therefore becomes axiomatic logic (reason understood as a mathematical calculation). Second, Hobbes's materialist view of the universe, Strauss points out, cannot pass the test of skepticism since all the causes of nature cannot be known. Axiomatic certainty applies only to human affairs, for the reason that the political order is an artificial construct built on first causes that are created by humans, barren of any natural segmentation, and therefore all known. If he

had been true to his methodology, Hobbes should have abandoned his model of a non-teleological mechanical universe. Nevertheless, his non-teleological model of the universe informs Hobbes's modern natural right doctrine.

In his final essay, "On the Basis," Strauss reconfirms the insight from *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* that the everyday experience of self and others is sufficient to build Hobbes's political science/natural right doctrine.⁷⁵³ The method Hobbes applies to deduce his theory of obligation is mathematically deductive, while the irrefutable axioms are inductively (but not systematically) established through observation of self and others. He points out that Polin agrees with him that the two main axioms on which Hobbes's political theory is built are vanity and fear.⁷⁵⁴ The former is the reason why the state of nature is a state of war, the latter is its remedy. And just as in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss points out, in his discussion of Polin's interpretation of Hobbes that Hobbes's materialistic and mechanical theory of the whole physical universe, in which all that exists is matter in motion, is not provable by his own method.

In "On the Basis," Strauss explains why this is the case, with reference to Polin's discussion of the relation between language and rationality: "Hobbes radically transforms the traditional understanding of man as the rational animal: man is the animal which invents speech, and most important: 'the faculty of reasoning [is] consequent to the use of speech.'" ⁷⁵⁵ Reason is built on speech. Speech is based on arbitrary definitions, and therefore reason is relative. He also argues that since natural science is made up of words,

⁷⁵³ Strauss, "On the Basis," 180.

⁷⁵⁴ Strauss, "On the Basis," 192.

⁷⁵⁵ Strauss, "On the Basis," 174. Just as in *Natural Right and History*, the claim that Hobbes's non-teleological view of the natural and constructed universe is not verifiable fits Strauss's larger political-philosophical project (ancient vs. modern) that contests the grounds of modern philosophy as a reflection of a non-teleological universe (Strauss did not address the theoretical physicists and astronomers of his time).

not material bodies and, in accordance to Hobbes's materialism, only bodies exist, therefore what is not corporeal, like natural science, is "phantastical."⁷⁵⁶ The uncertainty over the structure of the physical universe also applies to human artificial constructions: "In the light of Hobbes's natural science, man and his works become a mere phantasmagoria."⁷⁵⁷ Despite Hobbes's inability to establish comprehensive knowledge about the human and physical universe, Strauss nonetheless insists on what he concludes in *Natural Right and History*: Hobbes's mechanical non-teleological model of the universe remained important to Hobbes's political theory of obligation, or what Strauss, in *Natural Right and History*, refers to as the modern natural right doctrine.

Strauss now uses an allusion to theology to explain the relation between Hobbes's *political science* and *natural science*:

While Hobbes's political science cannot be understood in the light of his natural science, it can also not be understood as simply independent of his natural science or as simply preceding it. [...] The relation between his *political science* and his *natural science* may provisionally be compared with that between *theological dogmatics* and *theological apologetics*.⁷⁵⁸

What Strauss has in mind is that whereas Hobbes's two postulates (vanity and fear) upon which he builds his political theory are extracted "from his [non-natural scientific] experience of man" and "are put forth as indubitably true", these postulates, however, "must be *defended* against misconceptions of man which arise from vain opinions [religious accounts] about the whole."⁷⁵⁹ The most important function of Hobbes's natural science for his political science is the atheistic view of the universe. Hobbes's natural science is thus a rational defense (this is what Strauss means by theological

⁷⁵⁶ Strauss, "On the Basis," 178.

⁷⁵⁷ Strauss, "On the Basis," 178.

⁷⁵⁸ Strauss, "On the Basis," 180, emphasis added.

⁷⁵⁹ Strauss, "On the Basis," 180.

apologetics) against “vain [religious] opinions of the whole.”⁷⁶⁰ The theological dogmatism refers to the axioms (vanity and fear), which Strauss argues Hobbes discovers by direct experience, and the theory of political obligation deduced from these axioms. The need for a rational or theological apologetics is, in other words, due to what Hobbes thinks is the gravest of all problems caused by human vanity, revealed religion, as first discussed by Strauss in *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*: “The blinding passion *par excellence* is then glory or presumption or pride. The most extreme form of pride which a man can have is the belief that the first cause of the whole has spoken to him.”⁷⁶¹ Hobbes’s natural science is thus a rational defense of his political theory against theological worldviews, especially those promoted by monotheistic accounts, just as theological apologetics provide the dogmas of the church (theological dogmatics) with a rational defense.

The defense of a non-teleological and an anti-theological model of the universe, is also, Strauss points out, the main function of Hobbes’s exegesis of the scriptures (more important than Hobbes’s exegetical catering to stubborn believers to obey a civil Sovereign until Christ’s return): “The most important element of Hobbes’s view of the whole is his view of the deity. Polin states without any ambiguity that Hobbes was an atheist. Since his thesis is by no means universally accepted, it will not be amiss if we indicate how it can be established.”⁷⁶² Strauss devotes a good third of the essay to Hobbes’s critique of religion, and ends with the conclusion that “unbelief” is imperative for the doctrine of the state of nature on which Hobbes’s political science rests in so far

⁷⁶⁰ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 180.

⁷⁶¹ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 181.

⁷⁶² Strauss, “On the Basis,” 182-83.

as the overcoming of the state of nature depends on the fear of violent death.⁷⁶³ In a letter to Strauss, Alexandre Koyré wrote: “I don’t quite understand why you took such pain to supplement P[olin’s] insufficient demonstration of Hobbes’ atheism. After all, nobody has ever doubted it, as far as I know.”⁷⁶⁴ Strauss replies:

As for my criticism of Polin, you are mistaken if you think that no one doubted Hobbes’ atheism. The respectable Anglo-Saxon scholars today did hesitate to say that. This is a very general phenomenon. The decline of religious belief is accompanied by an increase in the belief of former generations. This is a kind of vicarious faith which I think has never been studied by the professionals in the field of psychology of religion.⁷⁶⁵

The atheistic outlook is imperative for Hobbes’s philosophy for two reasons, the first one is related to the applicability of Hobbes’s political theory of the state of nature: fear of violent death secures obedience to a corporeal Sovereign. Only if people are convinced that God is dead, is it possible for the fear of a violent death to outmaneuver the fears generated by religious accounts of the universe. Hobbes’s scientific materialism is thus designed to work on two levels, as Strauss had argued since the 1930s: it is both *demonstrative* and *rhetorical*. The natural scientific non-teleological view of the whole universe is an actual fact, *and* if effective, provides the affective function that would replace rival theological doctrine and which would be required for Hobbes’s theory of political obligation. The atheist view of the whole, therefore, Strauss claims, is a prerequisite for Hobbes’s theory of natural right. The religious criticism, as he discovered in his uncompleted manuscript of Hobbes’s critique of religion, is not central to the inner logic of Hobbes’s science or political philosophy, but is historically relevant for Hobbes in that religion remained the obstacle that had to be countered for Hobbes’s political

⁷⁶³ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 189.

⁷⁶⁴ Letter from Alexandre Koyré to Leo Strauss, April 17, 1954. Leo Strauss Papers; Box 2, Folder 8.

⁷⁶⁵ Letter from Leo Strauss to Alexandre Koyré, April 27, 1954. Leo Strauss Papers; Box 2, Folder 8.

theory of political obligation to be effective. Hobbes's considered his theory to be analytically consistent without a critique of religion, but it would not be politically efficacious in the world if he did not confront religion's grip on the human psyche. However, during Hobbes's life, his philosophy (or enlightenment atheism) did not replace religion's grip over most people, and thus he made his political theory compatible with an idiosyncratic exegesis of the bible and argued that the civil sovereign should be the head of the church as well as the commonwealth.

5. 1. 4. *Natural right and justice*

The second reason that Hobbes's non-teleological view of the universe, which informs his doctrine of the state of nature, is imperative for his natural right doctrine relates to the question of justice:

That teaching [on the state of nature] is the authentic link between his natural science and his political science: it defines the problem which political science has to solve by inferring from the preceding exposition of the nature of man, and especially of the human passions, the condition concerning felicity and misery in which man has been placed by nature. More specifically, the teaching about the state of nature is meant to clarify what the status of justice is prior to, and independently of, human institution, or to answer the question of whether, and to what extent, justice has extra-human and especially divine support. One may express Hobbes's answer by saying that independently of human institutions, justice is practically non-existent in the world: the state of nature is characterized by irrationality and therewith by injustice. But Hobbes has recourse to the state of nature in order to determine, not only the status or manner of being of justice or natural right, but its content or meaning as well: natural right as determined with a view to the condition of mere nature, is the root of all justice.⁷⁶⁶

In Hobbes's natural scientific view of the universe, which encompasses the question of the state of nature, there is no God, nor any other teleological or theological principle; as a consequence, there are no teleological or theological foundations for morality. Instead, as the final sentence of the above quotation suggests, Strauss argues that Hobbes's

⁷⁶⁶ Strauss, "On the Basis," 190.

modern natural right doctrine builds on “mere nature”—the only principle that remains once teleological accounts of the universe are rejected.

With mere nature Strauss has in mind the preservation of nature. The principle of justice is immanently derived from the principle of self-preservation:

We have said that in Hobbes's state of nature justice is practically non-existent. This does not mean that it is simply non-existent in the state of nature: the root of justice must be found in the state of nature, and it reveals itself with perfect clarity only in the state of nature. The root of justice is the right of nature, a ‘subjective’ natural right.⁷⁶⁷

What is by nature just is the preservation of life. Just as in all his previous studies, Strauss adds that the right to self-preservation implies the liberty to undertake whatever actions individuals see fit to preserve their life. He repeats his insight from *Natural Right and History* that the right is “subjective,” or that of “folly,” in that each individual is the sole and highest authority to judge what means are required for survival.

Nevertheless, as in his earlier studies, Strauss suggests that there is a moral distinction at play in Hobbes’s definition of freedom/right and the state of nature: just acts are rooted in self-preservation (or otherwise stated, the fear of a violent death), and unjust acts are rooted in vanity. Polin, he points out, shares his view:

Man has the natural power to act in the spirit of fear of violent death, i.e., of concern with his self-preservation, and he has the natural power to act in the spirit of glory, i.e., of concern with the gratification of his vanity. Yet, as Polin noted, fear is always legitimate, whereas glory is not. Fear is the natural root of justice and glory is the natural root of injustice. Unlike Spinoza, Hobbes does distinguish between what is natural and what is by nature right.⁷⁶⁸

The principle of survival is translated into a moral right. Strauss thereby reaffirms the interpretation he introduced in the 1930s, which reads liberal or bourgeois’ morality back into Hobbes’s Godless and non-teleological state of nature.

⁷⁶⁷ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 191.

⁷⁶⁸ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 192.

It is on this indefeasible right to self-preservation — and this right alone — that Hobbes’s theory of sovereignty is based. Strauss suggests, as he had in the exchange with Schmitt, that Hobbes makes sovereignty (sovereign power sanctioned by the citizens) derivative of the individual’s indefeasible right to life. Citizens agree to obey a Sovereign, and hand over their right to act in whatever manner they seem fit, since their unlimited freedom results in a solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short life. The logical contradiction in Hobbes’s theory of sovereignty arises from the fact that, on the matter of state security (internal and external — sending citizens to war, or punishing citizens with death), the *absolute* sovereign’s power stands in conflict with, and is limited by, the natural right of citizens to preserve their life:

According to Hobbes, the rights of sovereignty, which are natural rights of a certain kind are derivative from the laws of nature, and the laws of nature in their turn are derivative from the right of nature: without the right of nature there are no rights of sovereignty. The right of nature, being the right of every individual, antedates civil society and determines the purpose of civil society. More than that: the fundamental right of nature persists within civil society, so much so that whereas the right of the sovereign is defeasible, the fundamental right of the individual is indefeasible.⁷⁶⁹

The fact that the natural right to life is “indefeasible,” whereas the power of the Sovereign — due to its being conditioned by this right — is “defeasible,” results in the conflict between the liberal right of the individual and the Sovereign’s exercise of power.

Following this line of argument, Strauss concludes his final essay with an insight he first introduced in “Notes on Hobbes”: Hobbes unsuccessfully tries to circumvent the natural right limit on Sovereign power by introducing justice in the second law of nature (it is unjust to break the contract). So, despite Hobbes’s insistence that it is citizens alone who form, and are bound by the covenant (thus excluding the Sovereign from the

⁷⁶⁹ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 191-192.

contract and its bound), Strauss argues that the Sovereign's power is nonetheless potentially limited by, or in conflict with, each individual's indefeasible right to life for which protection they formed a civil society. Strauss argues that Hobbes is the first liberal in that he bases the political contract on an indefeasible individual right to life. It is thus with the criticism that he had thrown at Schmitt in the 1930s, now directed at Polin, that Strauss ends his final essay on Hobbes.

Strauss thus holds on to his insight from the Weimar era that Hobbes founds the bourgeois doctrine of rights — or what in *Natural Right and History* he calls modern natural right — which undermines the authority of the state. To make the state conditional on each individual's right to life remains a mistake in Strauss's eyes for two reasons: first, Hobbes's non-natural scientific view of human nature as vain and nasty proves the need of a coercive state, not its dissolution (I will return to this point below). Second, it lowers the quest for human excellence. With respect to the second, recall that in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss argues that it is out of his dissatisfaction with ancient rationalistic and moral philosophy's failure to secure obligation that Hobbes turns to the study of history, but that Hobbes returns to philosophy or political science subsequent to this when he discovers unchanging principles among the human passions, upon which he could deductively construct a theory of political obligation that secures peace under all conditions, including the most extreme. In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss adds to this analysis the idea that the attainment of this result comes at the expense of human perfection. Hobbes, Strauss suggests, follows Machiavelli in lowering the standards of what to ask from citizens, and what kind of regime is possible.

5. 1. 5. *The natural scientific understanding of the individual*

As I pointed above, in “On the Basis,” Strauss restates this insight from *Natural Right and History* that Hobbes’s natural science (both his non-teleological mechanistic view of the universe and his mathematical deductive/analytical method) plays an important role for his political theory. Nevertheless, Strauss insists that a student of Hobbes must choose either to “understand Hobbes's political science by itself or he is going to understand it in the light of Hobbes’s natural science.”⁷⁷⁰ How do we explain this blatant contradiction between Strauss’s statements that Hobbes’s natural science stands in relation to his political theory as “theological dogmatics” to “theological apologetics,” and the claim that we must understand Hobbes’s political theory independently of his natural science?

I will suggest that this contradiction is resolved when we realize that what Strauss has in mind when he speaks of natural science as incompatible with his political theory is Hobbes’s natural scientific theory of human nature *only* (as one part in the whole), and not the *whole* physical universe, or the mathematical model of deduction that he applies in his political theory. The contradiction between Hobbes’s natural science and his political science arises first when the scientific view of the whole includes under its purview human nature. In other words, human nature must be exempted from the natural scientific worldview for his political theory to hold. Strauss tells his students in 1964 that the “fundamental difficulty,” in coming to grip with Hobbes’s thought, “concerns his [Hobbes] definition of man.”⁷⁷¹ The main contradiction in Hobbes was due to the fact that Hobbes fluctuated between two contradictory views of human nature: the modern

⁷⁷⁰ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 177.

⁷⁷¹ Strauss, Session 6.

natural scientific perspective and the phenomenological view based on self-experience and on display in the state of nature.

It is these two contradictory views of human nature that Strauss has in mind when he faults Polin for not providing an explanation as to why Hobbes never gave a non-contradictory “account of his teaching.”⁷⁷² Strauss does, however, credit Polin for displaying the ambiguities in Hobbes’s thought as it helps someone else to fit together the last pieces of the puzzle. There is one open slot but two pieces remaining, and only one fits. The two pieces are Hobbes’s two different views on human nature, the natural scientific or “naturalistic” view and the non-natural scientific or “humanistic interpretation” of human nature.⁷⁷³ The natural scientific piece does not fit the puzzle according to Strauss, which is to say, Hobbes’s political theory does not square off with the natural scientific view of human nature. The reason being that Hobbes’s theory of political obligation stands or falls with the insight that the human animal is a distinctively proud creature. This explains how Strauss can, on one hand, suggest that the natural scientific view of the whole physical universe stands in relation to Hobbes’s political theory as “theological dogmatics” stands in relation to “theological apologetics,” and, on the other hand, how the scientific understanding contradicts his political science. Hobbes does not fully free himself from a pre-modern view of human nature, or from his conviction that it is this view that forms the real *basis* of his political philosophy. This latter claim is investigated at length in a class Strauss gave on Hobbes in the winter semester of 1964, in which he discusses Macpherson’s alternative account of why the state of nature is a state of war.

⁷⁷² Strauss, “On the Basis,” 174.

⁷⁷³ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 177.

5. 1. 6. *Macpherson and social assumptions*

In addition to the *Leviathan* and selections from the *De Cive*, Strauss assigned Macpherson's book *Possessive Individualism* as a required text in his 1964 seminar on Hobbes. In *Possessive Individualism*, Macpherson engages Strauss's work on Hobbes, and follows Strauss in arguing that antagonism in the state of nature cannot be deduced from Hobbes's natural scientific description of human nature, but rather offers a rival explanation as to why the state of nature is a state of war. The cause behind the antagonism in the state of nature is not accounted for in Hobbes's philosophy, but reflects Hobbes's unstated assumptions about the social structure of the time, which Hobbes reads into the state of nature. Contrary to Strauss, Macpherson insists that the denizens of nature was not motivated by eternal principles of human nature. Rather, Macpherson sees Hobbes's "natural man" as a social construction, the historical product of bourgeois market society. Macpherson's contextual interpretation prompts Strauss to revisit the question of what causes the state of nature, as well as the question of his own conception of vanity.

I pointed out in the previous chapter that Strauss becomes foremost a textualist in his approach to the study of political philosophy when he returns to Hobbes after World War II. By the time Strauss addresses Macpherson's work, then, the two represent stark interpretive alternatives in their respective approaches to Hobbes. While Macpherson draws mostly from Strauss's argument in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, he confuses the method of that book (in which Strauss had contextualized/historicized Hobbes's thought) with Strauss's textual approach in his later work — specifically, in *On Tyranny* and *Natural Right and History*. This is evident from Macpherson's claim that

Strauss and his different accounts of why the state of nature is a state of war reflect their rival methods of interpretation. Strauss told the students:

he [Macpherson] says in his “Introduction” [to *Possessive Individualism*], that the alternatives are these: Either we admit that the great political theories are based on social assumptions, on assumption in which the orders are not necessarily available, or the way in which I proceed. In other words, assuming in the case of great men and powerful minds that the contradictions are deliberate.⁷⁷⁴

As I have shown in the previous chapters, what Strauss identifies as the main contradiction in Hobbes’s doctrine — that between his natural scientific description of human nature and human behavior in the state of nature — is not a contradiction by design (i.e., due to esoteric considerations).

Recall that in chapter four, I showed that Strauss’s believes that Hobbes writes esoterically about religion only, but that it is not prudence due to church power that lies behind the main contradiction in Hobbes’s doctrine. Strauss indicates this much to his students early in the semester: “I would only say that there are surely in the case of Hobbes also contradictions which cannot be explained as deliberate concealments, and of which it is at least an open question for me whether they can be explained only by reference to the social assumptions which he [Macpherson] has made.”⁷⁷⁵ So, while Strauss agrees with Macpherson’s description of the different interpretative schools that Strauss and Macpherson championed, with regard to Hobbes’s doctrine, the key contradictions are not due to esotericism. Nor does Strauss think that they are due to social assumptions, as Macpherson suggests. Just as in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, and “On the Basis,” Strauss tells his students that the contradictions in Hobbes’s

⁷⁷⁴ Strauss, Session 2.

⁷⁷⁵ Strauss, Session 2.

thought are due to the fact that Hobbes puts forth a *modern natural scientific view of human nature* that *contradicts the view of the behavior on display in the state of nature*.

Contrary to his own dismissal of Hobbes's natural scientific view of human nature, Strauss points out that Macpherson finds Hobbes's natural scientific view of human nature to be a good description, at the same time that Macpherson agrees with Strauss that this natural scientific view of human nature is not sufficient to explain why each individual seeks ever more power over others in the state of nature. Strauss explains Macpherson's position to his students:

If we take Hobbes' [natural scientific] definition of man, self-directing and self-moving animal, this has one crucial implication. Man is radically selfish, by nature. His concern for others is due either to calculation or to such fundamentally selfish things as luck, or of course coercion, but there is no natural impulse towards that. But, and I try now to state the case for Macpherson as strongly as I can, *that men are by nature selfish does not yet mean that they are by nature antagonistic*. In other words, if they are selfish, then in case of any complications, they will of course get nasty to the other fellow, but they have *not a basic nastiness in themselves*.⁷⁷⁶

Or as he put it "On the Basis" a few months after the end of the seminar: "If Hobbesian men are indeed nothing but 'self-moving and self-directing appetitive machines,' one does not see why they should be by nature in a state of war of everybody against everybody."⁷⁷⁷ Strauss agrees that the antagonism in the state of nature cannot be explained by Hobbes's natural scientific description of human nature, or the least the way as Macpherson defines it; he nevertheless disagrees with Macpherson about how to explain it. As Strauss addresses the matter to his seminar,

If we assume with Macpherson that the physiological model as he calls it is a model of a self-moving and self-directed being – man is by nature a self-moving and self-directed being – there is no reason on earth why they should be by nature in a war of everybody against everybody, why they should be by nature

⁷⁷⁶ Strauss, Session 2, emphasis added.

⁷⁷⁷ Strauss, "Review," 230.

antagonistic to each other. That is a good question. This part of the argument — if the premise is correct, if this is Hobbes’ physiological model, i.e., if this is Hobbes’ view of human nature, that he is a self-directed and self-moving animal. The antagonism, the natural antagonism, between men, this needs to be explained, and according to Macpherson does not follow from Hobbes’ psychological or whatever you call it, premise. And then he says, where did the antagonism come in? By a great penetrating look at the market society.⁷⁷⁸

Macpherson adopts Strauss’s view from *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* that 17th century England was capitalist, and that market competition had permeated Britain in the 17th century to the extent that it had become the dominant way in which labor was allocated. Market competition that was reflected in the state of nature. Strauss reiterates “Macpherson’s general thesis” to his students:

The fundamental syllogism of Hobbes has two premises [...] The major premise concerns man’s nature and as he says, man is a self-moving and self-directing animal, and then this would lead to the consequence that men are selfish by nature, but it would not lead to the consequence that they are antagonistic. The antagonism comes in through a minor premise, which states that society of men has necessarily this character of antagonism. What he calls the possessive market society, capitalistic society.⁷⁷⁹

Strauss concludes Macpherson’s argument by pointing out that Hobbes’s major premise regarding the nature of human nature does not lead to his “political theory, except if we make one additional assumption, not explicitly made by Hobbes, regarding the character of society. But if we make the additional assumption, Hobbes’s doctrine is perfectly lucid and consistent.”⁷⁸⁰

Macpherson thus argues that Hobbes’s political doctrine is *not* “monolithic,” meaning that the *antagonism* in the state of nature *cannot* be derived from his physiological postulate alone, but that the “social assumption,” the possessive market

⁷⁷⁸ Strauss, Session 2.

⁷⁷⁹ Strauss, Session 7.

⁷⁸⁰ Strauss, Session 2.

society, is required.⁷⁸¹ Strauss agrees that the natural antagonism cannot be deduced from Hobbes's scientific description of human nature as Macpherson defines it. He disagreed with Macpherson, however, that the antagonism cannot be accounted for from within Hobbes's corpus alone. He tells his students that Macpherson's appeal to an external variable to account for the enmity is premature. Macpherson refers to the *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, when he agrees that 17th century was a capitalist society, and that labour at this time was viewed as a commodity among others. Strauss mentions this approvingly to his students, but adds:

I must say that I am not the first to say that; it has been said by Tönnies before, probably by Marx himself, and I believe I quoted something from *Behemoth* in chapter 7 of my book [*The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*], I am familiar with it, but whatever mistakes I might have committed then, because I was much younger and had not liberated myself from what I now call historicism properly, surely this is not proper interpretation. You can refer to these social conditions only secondarily, after you have shown that Hobbes' doctrine is unreasonable, untenable. Then you can say how come a man of such a good mind made this error? And then you can find the explanation for the error in the circumstances, that is possible. But you cannot use it as long as you try to understand what he meant. You see the point. And therefore the possessive market society, whatever you call it, something of this is a part of Hobbes' teaching. To that extent I would agree with Macpherson. But the locus of it is not properly defined by him, it is not an independent postulate or premise, but a consequence of human nature as he understands it.⁷⁸²

Contrary to Macpherson, Strauss suggests that capitalist society is a consequence of human nature and not the other way around.

Strauss thus agrees with Macpherson that the human behavior on display in the state of nature reflects the behavior of individuals in a capitalist state. He tells his seminar students that it is Rousseau, in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, who first

⁷⁸¹ Strauss, "Review," 230; Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*, 19.

⁷⁸² Strauss, Session 8.

suggests that the behavior described in the state of nature was “civilized.”⁷⁸³ Strauss agreed with Rousseau and Macpherson: “It is true that Hobbes speaks of present day society” in the state of nature. Strauss continues with the caveat that Hobbes “would say we can discover natural man in civilized society because if these things are natural, they can *never be extricated*.”⁷⁸⁴ Rousseau makes a mistake that Macpherson would repeat: he reads a non-existent distinction between “primitive” and “civilized man” into the state of nature. Whatever differentiated “primitive man” from “civilized man,” Strauss explains to his students, it is not Hobbes’s concern: what Hobbes looked for was the “natural quality” in both “civilized” and “primitive man”.⁷⁸⁵ It follows that:

Hobbes’s analysis appears to be about man as such, not about civilized man. This in a way is true: Hobbes analysis is not about civilized man in particular, but is of course also concerned with civilized man, because civilized man is nevertheless still man. Yet, by the time the argument reaches the hypothetical state of nature, which is not hypothetical, it is about civilized man.⁷⁸⁶

The insight that it is individuals in a capitalist state who behave this way need not make their actions less natural in Strauss eyes: “If it is natural to man, it is always present; it may be modified, it may be controlled, it may be regulated, it may canalized, but it is fundamentally there, otherwise it wouldn’t be natural.”⁷⁸⁷ If what is “natural to man” is always present, it is also present in “civilized individuals.” It is this natural characteristic that is reflected in a market society. What exactly is it that Strauss thinks Hobbes sees as the natural human trait? And what is Strauss own view of what is “natural to man”? I will answer these two questions in that order.

⁷⁸³ Strauss, Session 2.

⁷⁸⁴ Strauss, Session 2, emphasis added.

⁷⁸⁵ Strauss, Session 2.

⁷⁸⁶ Strauss, Session 2.

⁷⁸⁷ Strauss, Session 4.

5. 1. 7. *Vanity*

In his 1964 seminar, Strauss points out that according to Hobbes's materialistic and mechanical worldview, which breaks with Aristotle's teleology, all entities (including both humans and animals) are self-directing automatons: "Let us then provisionally say Hobbes in his overall orientation replaces perfection, which doesn't exist for him, by passion, and the reason is because he implicitly denies natural inclinations."⁷⁸⁸ Later in the seminar, he continues: "natural inclinations direct man toward the perfection of his being; the passions do not. [...] human desires are just responses to stimuli, there is no unique, there is no one basic inclination peculiar to man."⁷⁸⁹ Strauss challenges this Hobbesian or modern view of the passions with the observation that "all animals have desires and aversions," and these "desires [are] simply a sequel of discontinued acts"; but, as Strauss had argued in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss points out that Hobbes thought that humans have a peculiar and *infinite* desire that contradicts this scientific description and is more akin to a natural inclination.⁷⁹⁰ Hobbes thus does not fully free himself from the pre-modern view of human nature, and it is this view that informs the basis of his political philosophy. For evidence of this, Strauss asks a student to read from *Leviathan's* chapter ten: "In the first place, I put for a general inclination of all man-kind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death."⁷⁹¹ Strauss then explains his case:

If man is that being of all beings which has this infinite desire forevermore to have superiority, from the moment of his birth [...] man is that peculiar beast, which strives ever more, is an infinitely striving being, whereas other animals are not. A lion or a mouse, when their desires are satisfied they don't desire more.

⁷⁸⁸ Strauss, Session 1.

⁷⁸⁹ Strauss, Session 3.

⁷⁹⁰ Strauss, Session 3. Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 11.

⁷⁹¹ Strauss, Session 2.

Hobbes says somewhere of man he is the only beast who is hungry from future hunger, i.e., man is never satisfied. Pride? I called it at the time when I wrote the book [*The Political philosophy of Hobbes*] vanity, because Hobbes is very much concerned that it has this petty element in it too. In other words, it is not the noble pride of which Hobbes will speak in the *Leviathan* in certain passages. *Man wants to assure himself of his superiority by showing himself superior to others by acts of conquest.* So the desire for ever more power is rooted in pride.⁷⁹²

Strauss notes that Hobbes defines vanity or “pride in the wide sense,” adopting a definition that corresponds to that given in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*: “*man’s concern with superiority and his recognition by others*” as superior.⁷⁹³

Strauss also repeats his argument from *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* that, over time, Hobbes de-emphasizes pride. This de-emphasis of pride, Strauss argues again, follows from Hobbes’s adopted natural scientific approach, which requires that he denies the difference between humans and animals. This is the reason why, Strauss argues, Hobbes excludes vanity from a list of human characteristics in the preface to *De Cive*:

Again you see the affects which he mentions are all empirically known to be common in man and the other animals. Again, pride is not mentioned. Pride is therefore the issue between the two potential doctrines of Hobbes—the doctrine which is strictly reductionist, and links man as much as possible to the brutes; and the doctrine which tries to see man in his essential difference from the brutes. Forgetting about pride in one case, emphasis on pride in the other case. Hobbes never resolved this difficulty, which doesn’t mean that it is not solvable.⁷⁹⁴

Vanity is excluded from the scientific reductionist outlook for which the difference between humans and animal is a question of degree, and for which all animals are moving bodies responding to external stimuli. Hobbes’s political science, however, is compatible only with the view of the human animal in the state of nature, as a distinctively proud creature.

Macpherson challenges Strauss argument in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*

⁷⁹² Strauss, Session 2, emphasis added.

⁷⁹³ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 11, 13, emphasis added.

⁷⁹⁴ Strauss, Session 3.

that vanity is a desire innate in every human being. In the seminar, Strauss asks a student to read Macpherson's criticism: "Strauss points also to the fact that Hobbes found the striving for honour or precedence over others and recognition of this precedence to be a universal characteristic of man. So he did, but he did not say this was innate in all men."⁷⁹⁵ Strauss summarizes Macpherson's take on vanity: "pride is universal, although not universally innate."⁷⁹⁶ And tells his students that the "issue between him [Macpherson] and me" therefore becomes the question, "Do all men have an innate desire for ever more power or only some men?"⁷⁹⁷ Over the course of the semester, the question is broken down into two parts: whether vanity is a passion shared by *all* or only *some* individuals and whether vanity is innate or socially acquired?

Answering the first question, Strauss first tells his student that he never argues that pride is universal, and that he knows of no such "evidence."⁷⁹⁸ Yet, later on in the same class, Strauss calls to his defense the passage in the *Leviathan* that all children desire to be tyrants, and which Macpherson singles out as the only time Hobbes claims that vanity is universal.⁷⁹⁹ Later, he contradicts this view and asks a student to read from the description of the state of nature in *Leviathan's* chapter 13; in this passage, Strauss identifies two different types of individuals in Hobbes: one group is driven by vanity, the other group engages in the struggle for ever more power over others out of self-preservation. Strauss moves back and forth on this question: "So let us then say that this nasty irrational striving which we now call from its root pride is a universal human phenomenon, and I believe there is some evidence for that because people can be

⁷⁹⁵ Strauss, Session 2.

⁷⁹⁶ Strauss, Session 2.

⁷⁹⁷ Strauss, Session 2.

⁷⁹⁸ Strauss, Session 2.

⁷⁹⁹ Strauss, Session 2.

extremely modest and this modesty is a clear sign of ambition. I mean I wouldn't assert that it is universal."⁸⁰⁰ At the end of the semester, Strauss seems to have settled with the interpretation that Hobbes's conclusive view is that the majority of individuals are vain by birth, that vanity is not universally innate, but still all individuals act as if they are vain: "We are then at this proposition: *pride is universal, although not universally innate.*"⁸⁰¹

The key point with respect to Strauss's dispute with Macpherson is that irrespectively of whether *every* individual strives for ever more power due to their vanity, or whether *some* individuals strive for ever more power due to the systemic antagonism caused by some individuals's vain pursuit for ever more power, vanity is sufficient to account for the natural antagonism in the state of nature:

The mere fact that some men desire innately ever more power is sufficient for explaining the universal antagonism, the *universal* antagonism, because these few create such an insecurity that all the others are affected by that, and they do not know when they see someone for the first time, is he one of these giddy or dull or messy or other things, but must immediately use his gun or at least (take) cover himself. So in other words the recourse to a special model of society is absolute not necessary.⁸⁰²

If only some individuals have an inborn desire for ever more power, there is still no need for a capitalist market model of society to deduce that every individual seeks ever more power over others, including those who have no innate desire for power. Strauss thus goes to some length in the seminar to refute Macpherson's claim that an external cause is required to account for the antagonism in the state of nature, irrespectively of whether or not the desire for power is innate in some, the many, or everyone.

⁸⁰⁰ Strauss, Session 2.

⁸⁰¹ Strauss, Session 2, emphasis added.

⁸⁰² Strauss, Session 2.

Strauss also addresses the objection that if vanity is not a human universal characteristic, how can it be one of the traits that sets human apart from other animals? He answers that the natural inclination which defines human essence does not need to be shared by every member of the species. Like Hobbes, Strauss tells his students, he takes his standard from the “best human beings,” not from the “inferior” beings.⁸⁰³ This stands in contrast, he said, to Macpherson, “who is a working man.”⁸⁰⁴ It is not necessary for vanity be shared by all humans (all elements in the set), but only by the higher type. The reference to a higher type appears somewhat inconsistent with Strauss reminding his students what Hobbes has in mind was everyday vanity — i.e. the desire for the recognition of one’s superiority — which, however, does not sound so noble.

5. 1. 8. *Strauss’s view of human nature and vanity*

In the fifth class, a student asks Strauss if he subscribes to Darwin’s theory of evolution. The answer Strauss gives is limited to whether or not humans developed out of non-humans, and leaves the theory of natural selection aside. Strauss answers in his *own* voice (i.e., *not* in Hobbes’s name) that evolution does not disqualify the pre-modern view that there exists a qualitative distinction between animals and humans:

Strauss: I think one cannot make sense in the things with which we are concerned with, human things, without presupposing and therefore making clear the essential difference between men and brutes. And even if one would had to assume, in a wholly unintelligible way, that the human species has come into being out of non-human, then we would have to say at that moment an essential change was taking place and not merely a quantitative change. In other words, this in itself is compatible with something like evolution [...]. Man is a mysterious creature, and by seeing how much in common he has with other animals, the mystery is, how should I say, blurred to some extent, but it is not abolished.

Student: But when we talk of things like man or whatever species, are you saying

⁸⁰³ Strauss, Session 9.

⁸⁰⁴ Strauss, Session 9.

then that you take the medieval view that this is given to us by nature, that this is not something at some point where we draw an arbitrary line and say, this makes man?

Strauss: Just the mere crude fact that the borderline cases are really very rare and crudely speaking [inaudible word], and since man exists we know only of clearly separated species. [Inaudible words]. We have to accept that the whole consists of essentially different parts. And the modern project is fundamentally based on the view that this essential difference can be reduced to quantitative differences or differences of degree.⁸⁰⁵

The difference that Strauss draws between the modern and ancient or medieval view is delineated by how they differentiate between human and animals, as a difference of *degree* (modern philosophy) or of *kind* (ancient philosophy). Strauss sides with the pre-modern view, which he opposes to Hobbes's natural scientific view. It is a view of humans as *qualitatively* different from animals. Hobbes's natural scientific view portrays the difference between humans and animals as a matter of degree, not kind. The whole, and its entities, as non-teleological, are material bodies in constant motion, and the human animal is self-directing, responding to external stimuli through a pleasure and pain calculus. The natural scientific view of the human animal is inconsistent with the petty proud animal described in the state of nature. As we have seen in this dissertation, in all his discussions of Hobbes, Strauss confirms that there is a qualitative difference between humans and animals. It is only the configuration of this binary that shifted over time.

In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss asserts through the young Hobbes that vanity is what marks the qualitative difference between human and other animals. It is this distinction, he argues, that the later natural scientific Hobbes obscures. In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss argues that it is reason that differentiates humans from animals. In his final essay and seminar on Hobbes, Strauss speaks of vanity and reason

⁸⁰⁵ Strauss, Session 5.

(as well as language, but since language is an invention, it's not a natural distinction) in order to mark the distinction. My observation in this thesis that, in all his work on Hobbes, Strauss defines the human animal as qualitatively different from other animals is in agreement with scholars such as Bloom, Zuckert and Zuckert, Pippin, Meier.⁸⁰⁶ The same position puts me in disagreement with scholars like Drury, Lampert and John Gunnel.⁸⁰⁷ The latter group argues that Strauss is Nietzschean, or someone who adheres to a post-modern viewpoint (as opposed to a pre-modern view) of human nature as created anew.⁸⁰⁸

So, what is Strauss's final word on the ontological status of vanity? He adopts Hobbes's definition of vanity, but amends it with some help from Rousseau and Aristotle. Against "Hobbes [who] believed he could prove that man is by nature not a social animal by showing that man is by nature anti-social," Strauss argues that Hobbes's "anti-sociality is only a mode of sociality."⁸⁰⁹ Despite Hobbes's claim to the contrary, Rousseau "proved absolutely that Hobbes understood man as a social animal because both pride and fear of violent death, i.e., hence of other men, self-preservation, are both social phenomena." Strauss affirms that "pride is clearly a passion which has to do with the others," as it depends on asserting one's "superiority to others."⁸¹⁰

Hobbes says in effect that man is not by nature a social animal. But if pride is of man's essence, then he must be by nature a social animal. That was the critique of

⁸⁰⁶ Alan Bloom, "Foreword", in *Liberalism, Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*; Zuckert, Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*; Pippin, "Being, Time, and Politics: The Strauss-Kojève Debate"; Pippin, "The Unavailability of the Ordinary: Strauss on the Philosophical Fate of Modernity".

⁸⁰⁷ Drury, *The Political Thought of Leo Strauss*; Gunnel, John, "Strauss Before Straussianism: Nature, Reason, and Revelation," in *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, ed. Kenneth Deutsch and Walter Nicgorski (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993); Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*.

⁸⁰⁸ Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 88.

⁸⁰⁹ Strauss, Session 2.

⁸¹⁰ Strauss, Session 2.

Rousseau. He said you cannot have it both ways; either man is asocial, and then pride cannot be in man's constitution; and then he said pride doesn't belong to man at all, to natural man; that is a consequence only of man in civil society. This point is of great importance.⁸¹¹

Strauss thus agrees with Rousseau that vanity is a social attribute, but sides with Aristotle's view, against both Hobbes and Rousseau, that "man is by nature a social or political animal," and could on this basis uphold Hobbes's insight that humans are by nature vain. Vanity is thus both *social* and *natural*.⁸¹² Reading Rousseau together with Aristotle, Strauss resolves the contradiction from *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* regarding the source of vanity as a non-social self-originating quality, on the one hand, and its fulfilment as social value, as requiring the recognition of others, on the other.

5. 1. 9. *Vanity and morality: the good, the bad, and the evil*

In the section above, I argued that Strauss's understanding of human nature as qualitatively different from that of other animals fits the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, but is the same true of his take on morality? In chapter three, I showed that Strauss in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, casts Hobbes as the founder of a new morality, a bourgeois morality, defined by the death/life horizon. In chapter three, I argued that he uses Hobbes's pre-scientific view of human vanity to point beyond liberal morality by asserting that humans by nature are evil. In other words, for the criticism of liberalism not to be immanent like Schmitt's, Strauss maintains that humans are morally evil by nature. Humans, he points out, are by nature morally evil because they are vain: because they seek to harm other individuals for the pleasure derived from contemplating one's own supremacy. Vanity marks humans, unlike animals, as non-innocent by nature. I

⁸¹¹ Strauss, Session 1.

⁸¹² Strauss, Session 2.

suggested that this moral-ontology remains trapped in a biblical morality insofar as it relies on a conception of guilt. In chapter four, I suggested that Strauss, with his adoption of a Platonic-Socratic philosophy and virtue ethics, drops the moral-ontological claim that humans are by nature morally evil when he returns to Hobbes after World War II. It is no longer the greatest moral evil, but the greatest good that primarily informs the regime that Strauss wishes to see in place. The best regime would reflect that natural order of rank of intellectual capacities. He opposes this to Hobbes's absolutist and egalitarian regime. Hobbes's natural right doctrine is contrary to Strauss's ancient conception of human nature. This pre-modern outlook reduces morality to an exoteric moral code that secures order in the city. The way that Strauss speaks of vanity in the seminar supports his post-war take on morality, and the hypothesis that he has come to adopt a standpoint in which he no longer holds that humans are by nature morally evil.

In his final studies of Hobbes, Strauss repeats his insight from *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* that vanity is a peculiar human inclination, but he no longer suggests that humans, due to their pride, are morally evil (i.e., non-innocent/guilty). And while he still refers to vanity as "evil" in the seminar, he uses the term interchangeably with the morally neutral terms "bad" and "nasty."⁸¹³ The main example is found when Hobbes addresses the classic locus for the question of moral evil. Strauss tells the students that in the preface of *De Cive*, Hobbes "rejects the thesis that man is by nature bad. The reason he gave was because that cannot be said without impiety, meaning, man is created by God, and as a creature of God he can't be bad, by nature bad. But the question of course is how far Hobbes accepted the biblical teaching and therefore how

⁸¹³ Strauss, Session 3.

difficult it would be for him to admit that men are by nature bad.”⁸¹⁴ If we add to this equation Strauss’s view of Hobbes as an atheist, any acceptance of the biblical teaching has to be exoteric. In other words, Hobbes disguises his esoteric view that humans are by nature bad, since it is “opposed to the opposite [Biblical] thesis that man is by nature good.”⁸¹⁵

In addition, Strauss tells his student that the first modern philosopher to advance the Christian thesis that man is by nature good is Rousseau, who opposes Hobbes: “I think it is generally known this nasty animal [Hobbes] from Malmesbury who taught that man is by nature nasty and this lover [Rousseau] of mankind from Geneva who taught that man is by nature good.”⁸¹⁶ Rousseau, as Strauss points out in *Natural Right and History*, argues that humans are by nature good, but made vain/bad by socialization. While Strauss drops his claim that humans are by nature morally evil, he still insists with Hobbes that humans are by nature bad/nasty, and this remained a core part of Strauss’s post-World War II political ontology.

5. 1. 10. *The political dimension*

I suggested in chapter three that Strauss’s identification of vanity as the primary cause of the antagonism in the state of nature has political and philosophical implications that exceed scholastic disagreement over the correct interpretation of Hobbes. Still unanswered is the question of whether there is a political dimension to Strauss’s answer to what causes the state of war of all against all in his final studies of Hobbes.

In “Notes on Hobbes” and *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss uses

⁸¹⁴ Strauss, Session 3.

⁸¹⁵ Strauss, Session 2.

⁸¹⁶ Strauss, Session 2.

vanity to argue that humans are morally evil by nature in order to argue against the anarchist position (within which he subsumes both liberalism and socialism) that human nature is either good or educable. The anthropological insights about human nature that Strauss extracts from Hobbes — the view that the human animal is a proud and nasty creature, if no longer morally evil — still proves that coercion is required to assure political obligation. One example of how Strauss’s Hobbesian view on vanity still informs his contemporary view on the political is found in Strauss’s *The City and Man* (1962). In the book’s preface, Strauss writes that liberals should by this point have learned from the actions of communists that human nature is not good: “no bloody or unbloody change of society can eradicate the evil in man: as long as there will be men, there will be malice, envy and hatred, and hence there cannot be a society which does not have to employ coercive restraint.”⁸¹⁷ Following his post-war project to alter the liberal regime from within (as discussed in the previous chapter), Strauss argues that liberals should abandon the view of human nature as good. Moreover, in light of our nasty nature (among other reasons), “liberalism” should abandon the “ultimate goal” which it shared with communism: “The goal may be said to be the universal and classless society or, to use the correction proposed by Kojève, the universal and homogeneous state of which every adult human being is a full member.”⁸¹⁸ Both liberals and Marxists, such as Macpherson, Strauss pointed out, oppose the nation state as the *limit* of the political community. He asks: “what is his [Macpherson’s] standard of judgment?”

Fundamentally, the needs [economic equality] of today which are not fulfilled by liberal democracy classically understood, and this means the whole issue raised

⁸¹⁷ Strauss, *The City and Man*, 5.

⁸¹⁸ Strauss, *The City and Man*, vii. With one important difference in regard to the end, “liberalism” as opposed to communism, “regard as sacred the right of everyone, however humble, odd, or inarticulate, to criticize the government, including the man at the top” (Strauss, *The City and Man*, viii).

by socialism in the 19th and 20th century; that's one key point, and the second is the bomb, atomic and nuclear bombs, meaning, the national state, which is taken as the normal political unit by Locke and Hobbes of course does no longer have significance. Man's loyalty can no longer be limited to the single national state. We all know this notion. Macpherson is a revisionist, Marxist, one could say. A very mild revisionist, a very mild man, but still the Marxism is absolute there [...] This is of some importance of course for the background and will naturally affect his interpretation. What a man regards as good or desirable does affect his interpretation and not only casually but fundamentally. This is unfortunately the case.⁸¹⁹

Both Strauss and Macpherson come to view Hobbes as the founder of a flawed strand of the liberal tradition: for Strauss it is “rational liberalism,” for Macpherson, “possessive individualism”. As we saw in chapter three and four, Strauss's insight that Macpherson's political alliances tilt his interpretation of Hobbes, is also true of his own studies — Strauss's politics, or what he regarded as “good” or “desirable,” informs his interpretation of Hobbes. It is also true that both Strauss's and Macpherson's different takes on Hobbes's contradictory remarks on human nature inform their respective views on politics and the state. Strauss believes that the nation state cannot (due to human vanity) be transcended. Macpherson thinks, since human nature is not antagonistic, that the nation state can be transcended. It is this that Strauss has in mind when he wrote in his review of Macpherson's book that there is a political subtext behind Macpherson's interpretation of Hobbes: “Macpherson's standard of judgment [against which he measures Hobbes] the idea of freedom as a concomitant of social living in an unacquisitive [socialist] society — in a kind of society which, to say the least, transcends the boundaries of any ‘single national state.’”⁸²⁰

In the “Review,” Strauss suggests moreover that *Possessive Individualism* “reads as if it were meant to show (or rather to contribute toward showing) the rationality of his

⁸¹⁹ Strauss, Session 2.

⁸²⁰ Strauss, “Review,” 229.

ideal [socialism] by laying bare the logical failures of the early theorists of possessive individualism and by tracing those failures to the contradictions of bourgeois society itself.”⁸²¹ What Strauss has in mind here is Macpherson’s claim that the contradiction in Hobbes’s political theory is caused by the possessive view of individuals in equal competition with each other, while the Marxist view of a class division of the market is a more accurate picture of the actual conditions of a capitalist economy. Hobbes’s state of nature accounts for individual competition, but not class extraction, which divides individuals into two distinct groups. In a developed capitalist economy, Macpherson argues that it is evident to most people that individuals, depending on which class they belong, are more unequal than they are equal. This awareness, he argues, has resulted in a crisis for liberal democracy, since the liberal theory of obligation is based on equality. Macpherson’s extra-textual intention is to show that a socialist economy is more conducive to a liberal democratic theory than a capitalist economy. If you remove the possessive aspect of the economy, as reflected in the state of nature, the contradiction in liberal theory is dissolved since individuals will be equal again. Macpherson’s diagnosis of the crisis of liberal democracy thus has a built-in solution: change the economic system and the liberal democratic crisis will be resolved. In other words, the contradiction in liberal theory can only be resolved by resolving the social contradictions. The social contradiction is resolved by changing the economy.

Macpherson’s case for a socialist theory of political obligation requires that he de-naturalize the possessive individualist behavior described in the state of nature. To that end, Macpherson argues that the incessant struggles for ever more power over others in Hobbes’s state of nature is not due to some intrinsic character of human nature, but an

⁸²¹ Strauss, “Review,” 229.

effect of historically changing economic structures. The competitive behavior described in Hobbes's state of nature is thus not a reflection of human physiological nature as such, but of individuals subjected to market rules. In contrast, Hobbes's natural scientific or physiological postulate of human nature reflects non-possessive individualists, which is compatible with a socialist theory of obligation.⁸²² What Macpherson adopts from Hobbes's philosophy is not the antagonistic behavior described in the state of nature, but exactly that which Strauss argues is the faulty link in Hobbes's philosophy — the natural scientific description of self-moving and self-directing individuals.

Strauss's theoretical disagreement with Macpherson thus evolves around Hobbes's teaching on human nature. Macpherson denies what Strauss, following Schmitt, had affirmed in the 1930s: that the political is an autonomous realm. For Macpherson, it is capitalist relations that cause the antagonism in the state of nature, as well as divide the liberal capitalist state. Strauss thinks that human behavior described in the state of nature accurately reflected the basis for Hobbes's political theory, while Hobbes's natural scientific view of human nature, and the view that Macpherson adopts, do not. His disagreement with Macpherson is not, however, over the description of the 17th century as a "possessive [capitalist] market society," or that Hobbes's political theory was at heart capitalist individualist. In the 1964 seminar, Strauss tells his students that he agrees with Macpherson: "there is some evidence [...] you know that modern capitalism begins more or less there [17th century], and a [Macpherson's] statement about labor, a commodity like any other, is very revealing."⁸²³ But that he would put it "the other way around" from

⁸²² He argues that human behavior in the state of nature is not reflective of individuals acting in accordance to Hobbes scientific physiological description, but possessive individualists subjected to capitalist market rules.

⁸²³ Strauss, Session 7.

Macpherson: Hobbes's non-natural scientific doctrine of human nature, which portrays humans as a vain creature, is not an effect of a capitalist market society, but that which is most conducive to a market or capitalist society and human well-being:

Hobbes's doctrine of human nature is generally speaking favorable to the possessive market society. The reason for this, however, is not that the English society of his time had 'become essentially a possessive market society' or because he thought that that kind of society is 'here to stay' but that he [Hobbes] held that kind of society to be most conducive to human well-being. Nor is Hobbes' view of men's natural competitiveness a reflex of the emerging market society; Hobbes found or would have found clear signs of that competitiveness not only in the market but in the courts of kings, in the most backward villages, among scholars, in covenants, in drawing rooms, and in slave pens, in modern as well as ancient times.⁸²⁴

Strauss thinks that our competitive nature transcends capitalism. Strauss tells his students that neither is he convinced by Macpherson's explanations of the inconsistencies in Hobbes's thought, nor is he fully satisfied with all of his own earlier accounts of Hobbes's natural science and its relation to the state of nature and to Hobbes's natural right doctrine.

[Hobbes's] analysis was surely insufficient, and I would grant Macpherson gladly, and I can do it so easily because I have said it before in print [...] Hobbes time can loosely be described as the theory of capitalist society is undoubtedly true. Labor is a commodity like any other and many other things like this kind. By the way I was by no means the first to say this, Tönnies, and Marx must have known that too. But the question is, if I try to understand Hobbes, I want to speak—Hobbes asserted his doctrine is the true political doctrine, never said there is any extraneous premise, like the character of the particular society, which enter. Now I must at least give him this benefit and try to see whether he was not in his way right.⁸²⁵

Strauss gives Hobbes one last hearing: Starting from what Hobbes thinks he has accounted for; namely, his natural scientific description of human nature accounts for why every individual incessantly seeks for ever more power over others.

⁸²⁴ Strauss, "Review," 230.

⁸²⁵ Strauss, Session 5.

Part II.

5. 2. 11. *Strauss's final insight*

In the key sentence of Strauss's review of *Possessive Individualism*, Strauss faults Macpherson for *not* "having even attempted to show that the natural antagonism of all men does *not* follow from Hobbes's 'understanding of man as distinguished from brutes by the faculty of considering phenomena as causes of possible effects, and therefore by awareness of potentiality and power.'" ⁸²⁶ In other words, Strauss suggests that Macpherson does not sufficiently justify his contextual reach to account for the enmity in the state of nature. For he "fails to show that it is necessary to have recourse to a certain notion of society [the possessive market society] in order to 'understand Hobbes's way from man's nature to the state of nature.'" ⁸²⁷ Before we turn to the seminar to help unpack what exactly it is that Strauss has in mind when he writes about Hobbes's understanding of "causal reason," we must first stop and reflect on the fact that Strauss, in all of his own studies of Hobbes, including his final 1954 essay, does *not* himself "attempt to show that the natural antagonism of all men does *not* follow from Hobbes's 'understanding of man as distinguished from brutes by the faculty of considering phenomena as causes of possible effects.'" ⁸²⁸ Strauss thus also fails to "show that it is necessary to have recourse" to the pre-scientific Hobbes, in order to "understand Hobbes's way from man's nature to the state of nature." ⁸²⁹

In 1965, the year after his seminar and the publication of the "Review," Strauss writes in the preface to the first German publication of *The Political Philosophy of*

⁸²⁶ Strauss, "Review," 230, emphasis added.

⁸²⁷ Strauss, "Review," 230.

⁸²⁸ Strauss, "Review," 230.

⁸²⁹ Strauss, "Review," 230.

Hobbes:

As far as the defects of the present book are concerned, I have tacitly corrected them, so far as they have become known, in *Natural Right and History* (chapter V, section A), and in my critique of Polin's Hobbes book (*What is Political Philosophy?*, 170-96). Only in the latter publication (176, note) did I succeed in laying bare the simple leading thought of Hobbes's teaching about man. For obscure reasons Hobbes himself never did this; his famous clarity is limited to his conclusions, while his presuppositions are shrouded in obscurity. His obscurity is, of course, not in every respect involuntary.⁸³⁰

It is in the footnotes to *What is Political Philosophy* that Strauss for the first time suggests that the "natural antagonism follows from" the human "ability of considering phenomena as causes of possible effects."⁸³¹ In his criticism of Macpherson, Strauss is thus simultaneously directing the reader's attention to an oversight in his earlier work on Hobbes, including his own essay, "On the Basis," which became chapter seven in *What is Political Philosophy*. It is an oversight that Strauss sought to amend with the added part to the footnote in the book version of the essay.

In the first version of the footnote that accompanied the 1954 French publication of the essay, Strauss projects Hobbes's two incompatible views on human nature as dependent on whether one views it from the standpoint of (i) Hobbes's natural science, or from (ii) the pre-natural scientific/humanistic/vitalistic/ancient perspective. He writes, "We are driven toward the delights of society, i.e., the gratification of vanity, 'by nature i.e., by the passion inborn in *all* living beings."⁸³² The claim that "all living beings," including animals, are vain is in accord to the naturalistic or natural scientific interpretation of Hobbes. Yet, before the sentence ends, Strauss inserts a mutually

⁸³⁰ Strauss, *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft in ihrer Genesis*, 3; translation in Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 454, See also Meier, *Vorwort* in Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, xxi.

⁸³¹ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, 176-177n 2.

⁸³² Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, 176-177n 2.

exclusive claim within another set of closed brackets: “(vanity is *distinctly* human).”⁸³³ That vanity is distinctively human follows from Hobbes's pre-natural scientific/humanistic/vitalistic/ancient view of human nature.⁸³⁴ Strauss thus reproduces Hobbes's two contradictory perspectives on human nature in the part of the footnote that accompanies the first version of the essay.

In the sentence to which the footnote refers (which remains the same in both versions), Strauss discusses Polin's take on the difference Hobbes's draws between humans and animals:

For while it may be true that the distinction between the natural mechanism and the social mechanism, or between natural bodies and political bodies, presupposes an essential difference between the nature of man the nature of brutes, it is also true that Hobbes tends to conceive of the difference between the nature of man the nature of brutes a mere difference of degree.⁸³⁵

I showed above that Strauss thinks that the only perspective from which Hobbes's teaching is consistent is the view of humans as the uniquely vain animals. In the essay to which the footnote is appended, Strauss tells his reader, as I stated earlier, that a student of Hobbes “must *decide* for one or the other, unifying will of Hobbes's thought.”⁸³⁶ In the body of the essay, Strauss writes that it is better to say that the student of Hobbes “must make up his mind whether he is going to understand Hobbes's political science by itself or whether he is going to understand it in the light of Hobbes's natural science.”⁸³⁷ I also showed that Strauss comes to understand Hobbes's political *by itself*, apart from the natural scientific view of human nature. The first part of the footnote is thus a rehearsal of earlier insights.

⁸³³ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, 176.

⁸³⁴ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, 177.

⁸³⁵ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, 176.

⁸³⁶ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, 177.

⁸³⁷ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, 177.

In the 1959 extension of the footnote, Strauss breaks with the above account and indicates a new way of understanding the relation between the natural scientific view of human nature and Hobbes's political science. Demarcated by a long dash, Strauss puts forth his new insight on the leading thought of Hobbes. I have reproduced the extended part of the footnote in its entirety, before I dissect its parts — four main propositions — with the aid of the seminar:

[1] –According to Hobbes, the only peculiarity of man's mind which precedes the invention of speech, i.e., the only natural peculiarity of man's mind, is the faculty of considering phenomena as causes of possible effects, as distinguished from the faculty of seeking the causes or means that produce "an effect imagined," the latter faculty being "common to man and beast": not "teleological" but "causal" thinking is peculiar to man.

[2] The reason why Hobbes transformed the traditional definition of man as the rational animal into the definition of man as the animal which can "inquire consequences" and hence which is capable of science, i.e., "knowledge of consequences," is that the traditional definition implies that man is by nature a social animal, and Hobbes must reject this implication (*De Cive*, I, 2).

[3] As a consequence the relation between man's natural peculiarity and speech become obscure.

[4] On the other hand, Hobbes is able to deduce from his definition of man his *characteristic doctrine of man*: man alone can consider himself as a cause of possible effects,

[4a] i.e., man can be aware of his *power*; he can be concerned with power; he can desire to possess power; he can seek confirmation for his wish to be powerful by having his power recognized by others,

[4b] i.e., he can be *vain* or *proud*; he can be hungry with future hunger, he can anticipate future dangers,

[4c] he can be haunted by long-range *fear*. Cf. *Leviathan*, chs. 3 (15), 5 (27, 29), 6 (33-36), 11 (64), and *De homine* X, 3.⁸³⁸

I will now treat each of these propositions with the help of the seminar to shed some more light on this enigmatic footnote: (1) definition of causal reason; (2) the reason why

⁸³⁸ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, 176-177n 2.

Hobbes redefined human causal reason; (3) the relation between speech and causal reason becomes obscure; (4a) causal reason is the precondition for the existence of power; (4b) causal reason is the precondition for the existence of vanity. Vanity and power are considered separate and both are deduced from the definition of man as capable of causal thought; and lastly (4c), causal reason is the precondition for fear.

(1) Causal reason

In the fourth session of his 1964 seminar on Hobbes, Strauss asks a student, Butterworth, to read from the description of causal reason in chapter three of the *Leviathan*:

The Trayn of regulated Thoughts is of two kinds; One, when of an effect imagined, wee seek the causes, or means that produce it: and this is common to Man and Beast. The other is, when imagining any thing whatsoever, wee seek all the possible effects, that can by it be produced; that is to say, we imagine what we can do with it, when wee have it. Of which I have not at any time seen any signe, but in man onely; for this is a curiosity hardly incident to the nature of any living creature that has no other Passion but sensuall, such as are hunger, thirst, lust, and anger.⁸³⁹

Strauss comments on the passage:

So man may have passions other than sensual passions. Other passions. And what is the rule of that? Here he speaks for the first time quite clearly of what we might call an *essential* difference between men and brutes. Now what is it? It is not regulated thought as such, as the brutes do have, but a kind of regulated thought. Now how can we describe it: “When of an effect imagined, we seek the causes, or means that produce it: and this is common to Man and Beast.” In other words, the things of which they talk now, a monkey or whatever it is, would like to get out of the cage. An end, to get out of it. The means, walking around trying to find an opening. This kind of finding means for ends, is not peculiarly human. If I may use a common term which has been used [inaudible word] in the literature, analogical thought is common to man and brute. Thinking, looking for means to ends. In other words, if we go from end to means, there is no difference, *but if we go the other way around, from cause to effect, then that is peculiar to man. So if we use the time-honored distinction between*

⁸³⁹ Strauss, Session 4; quotation from Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 3.

*teleological and causal thought, causal thought is peculiar to man. That's the point.*⁸⁴⁰

Here, Strauss locates the definition of causal reason in one of Hobbes's natural scientific chapters (*Leviathan's* chapter three). It is the ability that humans have to reason from cause to effect that Strauss calls "causal thought," and which Strauss opposes to the ability to reason from a wanted effect to a cause, which he called "teleological thought." The distinction between humans and animals thus turns around causal and teleological thought. Humans have the capacity for both *teleological* and *causal* reason, animals only the former. A student asks Strauss to further clarify the difference between teleological and causal thought:

Let us state it perhaps more simply — if some animal seeks, moves, for an end, it is not aware of the reversibility of its purpose. That it could say, now I know — I can now regard the means, whatever it may be based upon, and figure out, regard it as a cause of possible effects. The whole notion of possibility, which is the key difference. Therefore, also power is absent. What Hobbes is trying to understand is the peculiar limitation of animal thinking compared with human thinking. And one can state the result as follows: man is the only being which is capable of thinking in terms of the possible, whereas thought of the possible doesn't arise when the beast is trying to find a way out of the cage by probing here and there.⁸⁴¹

(2 & 3) Causal reason, the social and the place of language

Strauss suggests that the reason that Hobbes transforms the ancient definition of "man as the rational animal" into the animal that is capable of causal thought "is that the traditional definition implies that man is by nature a social animal, and Hobbes must reject this implication."⁸⁴² Rationality in the ancient sense required that human beings are social by nature. Hobbes describes the state of nature, and

⁸⁴⁰ Strauss, Session 4, emphasis added; quotation from Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 3.

⁸⁴¹ Strauss, Session 4.

⁸⁴² Strauss, "On the Basis," 174.

the “natural man” as asocial. Hobbes therefore needs a definition of reason that is asocial. For this reason, Strauss suggests that the role of language in Hobbes’s theory becomes obscure: “causal thinking as distinguished from teleological thinking is the fundamental peculiarity of man. That is natural, but speech is invented by man.” Causal reason does not require the social or language. The ability for causal reason precedes speech. Strauss’s final discovery of causal reason presents Hobbes’s philosophy as rationalistic in the ancient philosophical sense that causal reason is natural and speech is an invention. The question of the relation between language and reason is central to Strauss’s concern with Heidegger’s existentialism. In *Liberalism: Modern and Ancient*, Strauss points out that ancient philosophy “was rationalistic because it denied the fundamental dependence of reason on language.”⁸⁴³ Strauss here suggests, against Polin, that this is a view that Hobbes shares.

(4) Power

Strauss suggests that Hobbes holds that both humans and animals have the capacity of “teleological reason,” but *only* humans have the distinct capacity for “causal reason.”⁸⁴⁴ From the definition of causal reason, the conception of power arises. Strauss writes in the footnote:

Hobbes is able to deduce from his definition of man his characteristic doctrine of man: man alone can consider himself as a cause of possible effects, i.e., man can be aware of his power: he can be concerned with power; he can desire to possess power; he can seek confirmation for his wish to be powerful by having his power recognized by others.⁸⁴⁵

⁸⁴³ Strauss, *Liberalism: Modern and Ancient*, 27.

⁸⁴⁴ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 176.

⁸⁴⁵ Strauss, Session 5.

It is from the ability to reason from cause to a potential effect that Strauss argues we can become aware of power.

What is peculiar to man is to consider things as possible causes of effects, whereas finding means for ends is common to men and brutes... But to see the thing the other way around—to consider a thing as what can I do with it? What effect can I produce with it? And therefore also sense of power, because of power of the thing, which is clearly is my power, and therefore power is human and *power-consciousness* is specifically a human thing.⁸⁴⁶

It is because we can consider ourselves as cause for any possible effects that we are aware of ourselves as power. Power is not simply the means to an end. Animals think of the particular means to achieve a specific end but not of the means as power. Humans, on the other hand, are aware of themselves as causal agents:

If some animal seeks, moves, for an end, it is not aware of the reversibility of its purpose. That it could say, now I know—I can now regard the means, whatever it may be based upon, and figure out, regard it as a cause of possible effects. *The whole notion of possibility, which is the key difference.* Therefore, also power is absent. What Hobbes is trying to understand is the peculiar limitation of animal thinking compared with human thinking. And one can state the result as follows--man is the only being which is capable of thinking in terms of the possible, whereas thought of the possible doesn't arise when the beast is trying to find a way out of the cage by probing here and there. [...]

The dog is hungry. He seeks food, and seeking food means of course seeking the means, the means in the wide sense of what includes, first of all, the place—where is it. And also it's locked somewhere, how do you get it? That, the dog can do. But the dog cannot do this, say how can I, by arranging things, have food whenever I wish to have it again. The dog cannot be hungry of future hunger, as man. That I think is the point. The brutes are bound to the present situation, whereas man is not. This is only another way of saying man can be aware of power and possibility. For the animal there are no possibilities. When we say in Latin *potentia*, which means potency, power.⁸⁴⁷

⁸⁴⁶ Strauss, Session 5.

⁸⁴⁷ Strauss, Session 4, emphasis added.

Strauss concludes that “[t]he *future hunger* is a passion derivative from the fact that man has reason in the sense here defined.”⁸⁴⁸ Power does not simply arise from man's peculiar ability to reason from cause to effect, but from the ability to consider himself a cause for future effects. “A possible cause, and you consider what cause of what possible effects it can mean, and that means that only man can consider himself as possessing power.”⁸⁴⁹ Our ability to be concerned with power explains why the state of nature is a state of war, which brings us to vanity.

5. 2. 12. *Vanity revisited*

Strauss repeats his earlier interpretation that in Hobbes analysis humans seek power for the sake of power:

I am sure that if one takes this rationality in the way in which Hobbes takes it, one can deduce from that the antagonism of man. Man is the only being which can be concerned with power, and can therefore be concerned with contemplating himself in his power. Now that this latter, this contemplating of power, is foolish, silly, does not do away with the fact that it is essentially a possibility belonging to man as the only beast that is hungry from future hunger, i.e., which seeks power for power.⁸⁵⁰

This insight links back to Strauss's discussion in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* in which Strauss separates in Hobbes's teaching the vain striving for “reputation” from “power”.⁸⁵¹

The difference is that Strauss no longer suggests that vanity is “*irrational*,” instead it is derivative of causal reason.⁸⁵² The vain striving for reputation is gratified only by the attainment of the extra power one holds over another individual.⁸⁵³ Thus, the desired end,

the striving for reputation is inseparable from the means (the power) to attain it. This, Strauss had argues in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, is a “reversal” of a “natural

⁸⁴⁸ Strauss, Session 4.

⁸⁴⁹ Strauss, Session 4.

⁸⁵⁰ Strauss, Session 7.

⁸⁵¹ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 88.

⁸⁵² Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 89; Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 10.

⁸⁵³ Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 89.

relationship” between means and ends, in that it is the power itself that brings happiness; power is no longer a means to an end (happiness), but has transformed into the end for which it was a means to attain. The end has become the perpetuation of power for the sake of reputation *qua* power. Acquired reputation *is* differential power: the extra power one holds over another individual. Therefore, the striving for reputation is always for power *over others*.⁸⁵⁴

Causal reason is the precondition for both power and vanity. Vanity is an outcome of the self-awareness of one’s own self as cause/power:

Say you have this thing here, a possible cause, and you consider what cause of what possible effects it can mean, and that means that only man can consider himself as possessing power. Power means one’s ability to produce effects. And therefore man alone can be concerned with power, with power as power, whereas the brutes are not concerned with power as power. They [animals] want to achieve certain things, but they do not think of power as power. *And because man can be concerned with power, must be concerned with power, he can also make the mistake, as it were, of forgetting the use of power and be satisfied with contemplating his power. That is vanity or pride; so vanity or pride is derivative from man’s nature, and man’s nature as we have seen up to this point, is causal thinking.*⁸⁵⁵

The satisfaction of vanity arises first in the contemplation of oneself as cause, in one’s awareness of one’s own power: “of his superiority to other man and his power.” Vanity is a “derivative” of causal thinking. If vanity is a derivative of causal reason, it follows that vanity cannot be animal passion since animals lack the ability of causal reason. Insofar as we can place or contemplate ourselves as causes of possible effects, i.e. as *potentia*, and compare our power to other men’s power, we are vain.

⁸⁵⁴ In *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, Strauss also gives a reason to why the struggle after power is *over other individuals*: while the striving after the “means of enjoyment over [material] things” can be “increased by mutual aid. Nevertheless, the one in sole possession has the advantage over those who share. Thus the striving after power over means of enjoyment over things develops by its very nature into a striving after *power over other men*” (Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 94).

⁸⁵⁵ Strauss, Session 4, emphasis added.

5. 3. 1. Conclusion: the consequences

I will conclude by considering the consequences of Strauss's discovery of the "fundamental thought of Hobbes" for his earlier studies of Hobbes?⁸⁵⁶ In the fifth class, Strauss tells his students:

Hobbes' fundamental change—man is not a social animal by nature but man remain rational animal. [...] The specifically human rationality consists in considering things as causes of effects, and therefore of course in considering himself as a cause of effect. If you consider, let say, a stone as a possible cause of effect, by implication you consider yourself, by throwing the stone or doing something with it, as a cause and effect. Therefore, man is the being capable or consciously capable of power, becoming concerned with power, and therefore also secondarily, but not unimportantly, losing himself in the mere contemplation of his power; of his superiority to other man and his power. *This, I believe, is the fundamental thought of Hobbes* and it took me about thirty years until it became clear to me in the last seminar of Hobbes when I saw it for the first time, but it is not entirely my fault because Hobbes himself has never set forth clearly this thought. Although he is rightly famous for his clarity, but not in every respect. And of course from this follows necessarily against Macpherson that man's pride, or whatever we call it, is an essential consequence of man's constitution. Man can't beat pride. An essential possibility is a property of the being.⁸⁵⁷

First, the absolute distinction that Strauss draws between humans and animals in his commentaries on Hobbes is altered with the discovery of causal reason. In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss delineates the human-animal binary through the pre-scientific anthropological observation of Hobbes of the human animal as the vain animal, which unlike other animals has an *irrational* passion that is *internally* caused and *infinite*. In *What is Political Philosophy*, and the 1964 seminar, Strauss argues that Hobbes holds that both humans and animals have the capacity for "teleological reason," but *only* humans have the distinct capacity for "causal reason."⁸⁵⁸ The human animal binary is delineated within the faculty of reason alone, between "teleological reason" and "causal

⁸⁵⁶ Strauss, Session 5.

⁸⁵⁷ Strauss, Session 5, emphasis added.

⁸⁵⁸ Strauss, "On the Basis," 176.

reason.”⁸⁵⁹ It is not clear if Strauss accepts Hobbes’s argument that vanity is derivative of causal reason.

Secondly, Strauss’s final observations alter his previous take on Hobbes’s understanding of the relation between rationality and passion/irrationality. Early on in the seminar, a student asks Strauss: “I suppose by the end of the course it will become clear [...] whether *pride* comes before *reason*.”⁸⁶⁰ Strauss responds: “I hope it is not yet clear to anyone because we want to find about that. We can only become aware of questions; we haven’t viewed the discussion of passions. But I believe when you have read the first twelve chapters of the *Leviathan*, you should have an idea.”⁸⁶¹ In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss defined vanity as the “infinite” and “irrational” desire.”⁸⁶² Vanity, the passion, results in *irrational* behavior, while fear of violent death results in *rational* behavior. Reason is dialectically derived out of the fear of violent death. If pride is the root of man’s irrational conduct, and fear of death the root of his rational conduct, unreasonableness precedes reasonableness. In his final insight, Strauss argues the diametrically opposite view: both vanity *and* fear are derivative of causal reason. Vanity as derivative of causal reason is still internally caused and infinite. Unlike Strauss’s Kojèveian-Hegelian interpretation in the 1930s, violent death is now a derivative of reason (causal thought). Strauss ends the footnote by pointing out that individuals become aware of the possible violent death because of their capacity for causal reason, humans are capable of “anticipat[ing] future danger,” and can “be haunted by long-range

⁸⁵⁹ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 176-177n 2.

⁸⁶⁰ Strauss, Session 3.

⁸⁶¹ Strauss, Session 3.

⁸⁶² Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 9, 111.

fear.”⁸⁶³ The final insight marks a re-orientation in Strauss's interpretation of Hobbes that re-ordered passion and reason.

The third and final major consequence of this pertains to the relation between Hobbes's political and natural science. The first cause behind the natural *qua* political antagonism in the state of nature has changed from *vanity* to *causal reason* — vanity is a derivative of causal reason. The new ground for the natural or political antagonism is the human ability for causal reason.⁸⁶⁴ It is causal reason that enables vanity and fear of violent death — what Strauss identifies elsewhere as the basis of Hobbes's philosophy. Strauss traces causal reason to chapter three of the *Leviathan*, part of the first twelve natural scientific chapters. Strauss's reflection on the peculiar human ability of causal reason is thus derived from Hobbes's natural science. Both vanity and fear of violent death are derived from causal reason, and therefore they are also a derivative of Hobbes's natural science. If the antagonism of the state of nature can be explained with reference to Hobbes's natural scientific explanation of human nature, then Strauss locates the root of the antagonism precisely in the place he had rejected in his previous studies. In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss argues that all essential contradictions in Hobbes's thought come down to Hobbes's natural scientific view, which is divorced from Hobbes's political theory in order for the latter to be consistent. Later, in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss argues that the natural scientific view of a non-teleological universe reflects his liberal and modern natural right doctrine. In his final essay on Hobbes, Strauss modifies this further due to the scientific view, not of the whole, but the scientific perspective of human nature. The second footnote in “On the Basis,” chapter seven in

⁸⁶³ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 176n 2.

⁸⁶⁴ Strauss, “On the Basis,” 178n 2; Strauss, Session 5.

What is Political Philosophy thus puts his account of the non-natural scientific basis of Hobbes's political theory into question.

At the end of his life, Strauss remained concerned with what is permanent and what sets human nature apart from animal nature, against Heidegger's (and Macpherson's) historicity of being. Strauss argues that there is something in human nature that is trans-historical — what he identifies, against Hobbes's theory of the passions, as a natural inclination. Macpherson argues that competition is socially acquired, structurally caused. Strauss maintains a pre-modern understanding of the human animal as qualitatively different from other animals. We can see the continuity of his thought over the course of time even though the emphasis changes. In his writings on Hobbes, Strauss defines this essence in human vanity and causal reason. The later Strauss agrees with the young Strauss that it is vanity that set humans apart from other animals, and that the description of the human animal as the vain animal does not fit with Hobbes's natural scientific view, but is more akin to what Aristotle's describes as a human inclination. The later Strauss disagrees with the younger Strauss over the moral status of vanity. Beginning with *Natural Right and History*, he stresses with Rousseau that vanity is a social attribute; but unlike Rousseau, this does not disqualify vanity from being a natural attribute (i.e. having a place in the state of nature), since Strauss sides with Aristotle in maintaining humans are by nature social animals.

6

Conclusion

Stepping back and reviewing the narrative journey of Strauss's Hobbes scholarship presented in this study is to reiterate its two core preoccupations: on one hand, the evolving connection linking Strauss's Hobbes scholarship and his critique of liberalism; and, on the other, the place of Hobbes in Strauss's larger political philosophical project. The method of proof adopted throughout the dissertation has been that of close textual analysis of Strauss's Hobbes texts in light of Strauss's biography and the historical context. In order to conclude this work with some consideration of the place of my study in the broader context of Strauss's oeuvre as a whole and the full scope of the scholarship on Strauss demands that I break with this method and offer general remarks about Strauss's texts without providing comprehensive textual evidence at every step. The words of Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft remind us of the complexities at play here: "Strauss's books are usually commentaries on other texts rather than systematic arguments — they can be extraordinarily difficult to unpack. Furthermore, and frustratingly, to write on Strauss today is also to navigate the labyrinth of his incredibly politicized reception."⁸⁶⁵ My general and concluding remarks here should therefore not be viewed as fully

⁸⁶⁵ Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft, "Friends of Leo", *Los Angeles Review of Books* (October 6, 2014), <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/friends-leo/>

substantiated claims about the rest of Strauss's corpus and the secondary literature, but rather as a provisional sketch of the intellectual background from which Strauss's studies of Hobbes emerge.

I will first provide a basic summary of the gist of the dissertation's theoretical movement before I situate my findings in relation to Strauss's corpus more broadly and the scholarship that addresses it. We have seen throughout the foregoing chapters that Strauss returns to Hobbes several times throughout his career, revising and refining his understanding of Hobbes's thought. I have argued that Strauss's criticism of liberalism from the 1920s until the mid-1960s is key to understanding his evolving scholarly views on Hobbes, and that Strauss uses Hobbes's philosophy to criticize liberalism and modern philosophy against the backdrop of the Weimar Republic and post-War United States.

My interpretation of Strauss's earlier texts in the first two chapters weaves together text and context to the degree that Strauss's own approach dictated. The historicist method is part of Strauss's own approach in his 1936 monograph on Hobbes — but only part, as he had already begun to pursue his own philosophical project through his interpretation of Hobbes: that is, I argue, his quest for a moral-ontological or anthropological insight about the human being *qua* Being. Strauss reads Hobbes in light of his biography, and his philosophy as reflective of the economic, cultural, religious and political context of the time. I read Strauss's thought less as a symptom of the social context of his time, arguing instead that Strauss's scholarship on Hobbes in the inter-war era represents one important lens through which he theorizes the political situation of his moment. More specifically, I have shown how Strauss's approach to Hobbes at this stage is influenced primarily by his engagement with Zionism and liberalism.

While Strauss's Hobbes studies continued to be influenced by the politics of the day also after World War II, I argue in chapter four and five that the development of his analysis of Hobbes results rather from the influence of pre-modern philosophy on his thinking; that is, from his attempt to distinguish between ancient and modern natural right and law, as well as his reaction to the historicist paradigm. In other words, while everyday contemporary politics becomes less of an immediate concern for Strauss after World War II, Hobbes comes to play a central role in Strauss's larger political-philosophical project as the founder of modern natural right. In Strauss's theoretical narrative of the history of political thought, Hobbes is cast in the role of the philosopher who invents liberalism insofar as his modern theory of natural right forms the essence of liberal theory. Strauss also suggests that Hobbes's theory of natural right ultimately evolves into historicism, relativism and nihilism—on display in its most extreme form in the philosophy of Heidegger and the politics of the Nazi's. In his American writings, Strauss adopts an understanding of Socratic-Platonic rationalism and human ontology to counter this double-edged modern trend — modern natural right and historicism — that Hobbes instigates. Strauss argues that Hobbes's individual right and democratic egalitarianism are contrary to the Socratic-Platonic ontology of human nature and an ancient rationalist approach to philosophy, which he in turn advances as a defence against historicism and relativism.

Despite this apparent retreat from much direct commentary on his contemporary political situation after World War II, the political and ideological struggle between capitalist West and communist East did concern Strauss. Strauss sided with liberal capitalist West in general, and the United States in particular, over the Soviet Union and

other communist regimes. This preference appears in Strauss's Hobbes scholarship in his distinction between Hobbesian or theoretical liberalism, liberal constitutionalism and liberal education. While he dismisses the first, he supports the latter two. In Strauss's view, the republican regime in the United States would allow for the preservation of the philosophical and political philosophical tradition and the establishment of a civil service and scholarly community with Straussian ideals. In texts from the 1950s and 1960s, Strauss advises a curtailment of the excess of freedoms and democratic influence over political institutions. What Strauss retains from Hobbes is the necessity for popular sovereignty — or at least the belief thereof, as will be discussed further below — in contemporary politics.

In chapter five, I have accounted for Strauss's attempt to understand Hobbes as he understood himself in his final writing and seminar on Hobbes. His studies of Hobbes at this stage follow their own path of discovery. This late approach to Hobbes reflects the mature Strauss's conviction that philosophical themes and questions transcend the time in which the thinker lives. I nevertheless also note that Strauss still points to a few lessons from Hobbes's observation about human nature that could inform politics of his day, especially for liberalism to separate itself from socialism. Yet Strauss's main argument during this period remains that Hobbes locates reason (or more precisely, "causal reason" as opposed to "teleological reason") as the essential feature distinguishing human nature. According to Strauss's later work on Hobbes, both vanity *and* fear are derivative of causal reason. This final insight marks a re-orientation in Strauss's interpretation of Hobbes that re-ordered the causal relation between passion and reason. Since vanity and fear of violent death are derived from causal reason, they are also a derivative of

Hobbes's natural science. Since the antagonism of the state of nature can now be explained with reference to Hobbes's natural science, Strauss locates the root of the antagonism in the very place he had rejected in all his previous studies. As a consequence, Hobbes's natural science is suddenly and plausibly seen as compatible with his political philosophy: the main contradictions in Hobbes's thought are thus resolved without any appeal to a pre-scientific Hobbes or extra-textual explanations.

6. 1. *Religion, politics and philosophy*

Throughout his life, Strauss published fifteen books and around one hundred articles on a variety of thinkers and topics in the tradition of religious and philosophical thought. His overall body of work in the secondary literature is generally divided into thematic quarrels. The two main ones are: that between the ancients and the moderns, also referred to as the "modernity problem," which passes through a series of variations, such as historicism versus philosophy or natural right; and that between reason and revelation, also referred to as the "theologico-political problem" or "Jerusalem" versus "Athens." Whereas it is around the first of these two themes that this dissertation ultimately turns in chapter three and four, it is the latter quarrel that has received most attention over the last few decades. For example, in their respective studies of the theologico-political problem in Strauss's work, Batnitzky, Meier and Tanguay point to the preface to the German edition of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (1965), in which Strauss states that the "theologico-political problem has since [his first book on Spinoza] remained the theme of my studies."⁸⁶⁶ As we saw in chapter two and three, it was indeed the correlation between religion, politics and philosophy with which the young Strauss was primarily concerned.

⁸⁶⁶ Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 8; Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 4;

The relation between politics and religion is at the core of the second chapter's discussion of Strauss's Zionist texts. In his dissertation on Jacobi, Strauss investigates the relation between religion and philosophy as it pertains to the soundness of the Enlightenment's refutation of religion. There Strauss discusses how Jacobi holds that also enlightenment rationality rests on an irrational decision. Meier has suggested that the study of Jacobi, together with his study of Spinoza, "aroused the suspicion [in Strauss] that the Enlightenment was based merely on a 'new belief' rather than on a 'new knowledge.'"⁸⁶⁷ What this meant, both Meier and Tanguay have explained, is that Strauss thought in the 1920s that religious orthodoxy was defeated not by *theoretical* philosophical arguments but by a *praxis*, or what they refer to as the "Napoleonic strategy":

The goal of this [Napoleonic] strategy was to make man master and possessor of the world, the creator of a world that would forever make the world as simply given—the natural world—disappear. Remaining manifestations of orthodoxy would henceforth appear as relics of a bygone age long since surpassed by the progress of science and civilization. This new civilization does not rest content with promising men an improvement of their condition in some hypothetical beyond, but actively works to transform the world so as to make completely habitable and in the service of human needs. From the moment they are united in the same faith in science, progress, and civilization, men will understand the vain and useless character of persecutions and massacres carried out in the name of religion. But, above all, the modern Enlightenment would deliver humanity from the continuous threat weighting over it of an omnipotent God who inspires fear and humility.⁸⁶⁸

Strauss views the Enlightenment commitment to progress as a new religion, a commitment based on a belief in reason. Strauss's observation of the irrational

Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 4; Batnitzky, "Leo Strauss," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/strauss-leo/>

⁸⁶⁷ Heinrich Meier, "How Strauss became Strauss," in *Enlightening Revolutions: Essays in Honor of Ralph Lerner*, ed. Minkov, Svetozar and Stephane Douard (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007), 366-367.

⁸⁶⁸ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 47.

preconditions of enlightenment rationality as uncovered by Jacobi, and of the inadequate positivist critique of revelation by Spinoza, might leave a window open for the existence of God or gods, but this opening does not turn Strauss into a believer.

Sheppard and Tanguay have both argued that Strauss was unconvinced at the time by the existentialist religious revival of the inward-oriented neo-orthodox theology of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. Tanguay and Meier argue that even after Strauss returns to the battle between the early enlightenment thinkers (Hobbes and Spinoza) and orthodoxy in the late 1920s, disqualifying the theoretical victory of the former over the latter, he sides with the atheistic outlook of the German radical conservatives. The “new atheism” of the radical conservatives, Tanguay explains,

represented the position of the Enlightenment with a radicalism hitherto unknown. Nietzsche had turned the critical arms of the Enlightenment against itself. He rejected the moderate Enlightenment’s soft synthesis of religion and philosophy, as well as the ambiguous respect for religious faith shown in the age of Romanticism. [...] According to atheism from probity, the genuine motive of belief or unbelief is not theoretical, but *moral*.⁸⁶⁹

The atheism introduced by Nietzsche is based in moral probity, not consolation, as Strauss argues that religion had become a source of comfort (the security of an eternal order and meaning to life) rather than anxiety since the 18th century. Dissatisfied with belief as the foundation for politics, Strauss turned to human nature in his first Hobbes studies, searching for a *moral* foundation for politics in human nature. In chapter three, I show how, in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (1936), Strauss replaces God with human nature as the metaphysical (recall that metaphysics is referred to here not as a metaphysical structure of the whole but instead referring to an essentialist view of human nature) basis for moral evil.

⁸⁶⁹ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 47, emphasis added.

In order to arrive at this position, however, it was necessary to unpack — as I do in chapter two — the manner in which Strauss’s interpretation of Schmitt’s concept of the political, like political Zionism, is dependent on an enemy for political unit to form, as the political itself lacks a metaphysical foundation. Schmitt argues that it is the existential necessity and willingness to kill and die that marks conflicts between groups — friends and foes — in various cultural spheres of life as political. In absence of a religious cosmology, death is the ultimate horizon. Strauss, in turn, observes that the moral motive behind Schmitt’s concept of the political is to transcend liberalism, but due to its orientation towards death, Strauss argues, as Meier points out, the morality of the Schmitt’s conception is simply the inverse of liberalism’s preference for life and thus Schmitt’s theorization of the political remains trapped within a liberal moral horizon. In chapter two, I argue that Strauss sets out to complete Schmitt’s critique of liberalism (i.e., to transcend the moral liberal horizon) by attaching the political antagonism to an unliberal moral aspect of human nature. Vanity, the political substance that Strauss extracted from his engagement with Hobbes in the 1930s, is the desire that Strauss argues fundamentally spurred individuals and sets apart humans from other animals. He argues that this substance is distinctively *moral*: due to their vanity — the desire to be recognised by others as superior — humans by nature are evil. I concluded that Strauss builds on Hobbes to extract a political moral ontology that could ground a right-wing authoritarian alternative to liberalism, socialism and Nazism.

In chapter four, I argue that Strauss does not side with religion due to the shortcomings of enlightenment rationality, nor does he revert to a nihilist position after World War II; instead, I suggest that Strauss’s foray into the limits of modern thought

foreshadowed what becomes his rejection of *modern* rationalism. Strauss argues that was Hobbes's philosophy exemplifies a distinctly modern rationalism, defined as the orientation towards survival, as grounded in passion/fear and instrumental rationality. It is his rejection of this modern rationalism that primes Strauss's return to classical political philosophy. The mature Strauss sides instead with the Socratic-Platonic rational and natural right and law tradition, or in the terminology of the late Strauss and school of thought (Straussianism) that he established in the United States, with the "ancients" over the "moderns." It is Strauss's return and adoption of a pre-modern and esoteric political philosophy, and his portrayal of Hobbes as the quintessential modern enlightenment exoteric thinker and founder of theoretical liberalism to which I turned in chapter four.

In my discussion of esotericism in chapter four — the subject in Strauss's scholarship that has generated the greatest controversy — I arrived at a similar conclusion as Lampert, Tanguay, Sheppard and Zank before me: Strauss preferred the medieval Islamic and Judaic tradition rational approach to philosophy and religion. Exoteric rhetoric (religious or otherwise) so understood provides the normative dimension of political philosophy for the many who need guidance by moral precepts, while the few philosophers with supreme rational ability adopt esoteric communication over dangerous philosophical insights. Here, I argue, as Tanguay before me, that both Strauss's discovery of ancient esotericism and his discovery of the possibility of classical natural right are premised on a hierarchical view of individuals' rational capacities. I suggest that the reason why Strauss writes more openly about esotericism than anyone before him is as much to reinforce a hierarchical view of human capacities against Hobbesian egalitarianism, as it is to counter historicism. Speaking of esotericism openly

also serves to create an aura of secrecy and a promise of a path of discovery that lured some people to the Straussian fold and repelled others.

When Strauss scholars speak of a “turn” or “change in orientation” (as Strauss himself named it) in Strauss’s thought they usually have in mind the moment when he realized that a return to the ancients is possible. There are, however, disagreements over when exactly this turn occurred. In his preface to the translation of *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, Strauss dated this realization to his 1932 review of Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political*.⁸⁷⁰ While it is plausible that Strauss had understood that a return to the ancients was possible at this point in time, in chapter three and four I argue that it is first later that Strauss first comprehensively adopts an ancient ontology and ethical outlook. If it is correct that he realizes that a return to the ancient is possible in 1932, this realization does not coincide with the discovery of an esoteric style of *writing*, which I argue, following Tanguay and Lampert, occurred in the second half of the 1930s. In chapter four, I showed that Strauss’s discovery of esotericism is a gradual process, as was his adoption of his Socratic-Platonic outlook. I am therefore inclined to follow Zank in arguing that Strauss’s “change in orientation” is best described as a series of “stages.”⁸⁷¹ As I have mentioned above, Strauss’s exposure of the esoteric tradition is part of his laying the foundation of an egalitarian conception of nature. Intellectual order of rank thus becomes the foundation for the Socratic-Platonic natural right tradition that Strauss adopts, as well as the standard against which he assesses Hobbes’s doctrine. Strauss casts Hobbesian modern natural right as contrary to human nature in his effort to reinforce a hierarchical view of the rational intellect contra Hobbes’s egalitarian rationalism. Most

⁸⁷⁰ Strauss, “Preface,” 30.

⁸⁷¹ Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 13.

significant for unpacking Strauss's overall studies of Hobbes, I argue that the discovery of esotericism does not drastically alter his *interpretation* of Hobbes — this is not to downplay Strauss's gradual realization that Hobbes was an atheist — what it does do, however, is alter his *presentation* of his final insight on Hobbes.

When Strauss returns to Hobbes after World War II, it is his project of creating a narrative of the history of political philosophy that guides his interpretation. Rather than being a result of a planned esoteric design (although this element is also at play), it is his effort to place Hobbes near the dividing line between ancients and moderns that produces the contradictions in Strauss's presentation of Hobbes's philosophy. The stakes for Strauss were both epistemological — the defence of an ancient rational epistemology — and ontological — the defence of an ancient conception of human nature. Put differently, Strauss refuses to let Heidegger close the door on Plato. He continues to toil in the Platonic metaphysical tradition as *zetetic* despite Heidegger's destruction of "Being."

Like Pippin and Rosen before me, I argue that Strauss founds his philosophical ground in human nature. In chapter two and three, I present evidence that Strauss is the first to put forth human *vanity* as the ontological/metaphysical ("Being") ground for *morality* (biblical morality) and *politics*. In chapter four and five, I argue that, after World War II, *human reason* (Socratic-Platonic philosophy) becomes Strauss's new metaphysical/objective ground — one detached from scriptural morality and attached to a Platonic inspired virtue-ethics. While Schmitt's political ontology is groundless or immanent, Strauss's political philosophical ontology appeals to metaphysics: first by means of a phenomenology similar to a basic empiricist (inductive) understanding of human nature (individuals as consumed by vanity from birth); and later to a

phenomenology understood as an ancient conception of human nature (as rational) in that the philosopher engages in a dialog that ascends from common opinions to knowledge.

I also observed that in accordance with Strauss's later world-view, theoretical wisdom is only accessible to the few who by nature have exceptional rational abilities. In *Natural Right and History* (1952), Strauss agrees with Plato and Aristotle that the pursuit of wisdom is the highest of ends. I observed that what Strauss writes of as *just* – the only *just* according to nature – in *Natural Right and History* is the pursuit (often esoteric) of wisdom by means of Socratic questioning (i.e., in the few philosophers' way of life). In chapter four, I pointed out that in his *Natural Right and History*, Tanguay proposes that Strauss thinks that only knowledge of the whole can ground a natural right. The idea of a natural right is thus only tentative until such knowledge can be attained. Tanguay argues that Strauss as an Alfarabian doubted that such knowledge could ever be attained. However, in his adoption of a pre-modern eso-exoteric approach to philosophical and political life, Strauss maintains that *political* philosophy nevertheless should endorse moral precepts as the exoteric or rhetorical part of philosophy. His adoption of Socratic philosophy is thus compatible with a moral or civic philosophy.⁸⁷²

The egalitarian basis of Hobbesian liberalism or modern natural right is contrary to Strauss's Socratic-Platonic virtue ethics that rests on an anti-egalitarian perception of natural inequality. Yet, liberal regimes, such as the one that Strauss discovered in the United States, allow for an education in the great books and the pursuit of wisdom.

⁸⁷² Along these lines, Meier has suggested that Strauss propped up the religious position as an esoteric smoke screen in the best interest of the nation. In other words, while he battle against the priests — over the capital city — had already been won by the philosophers, it was not a victory, however, to be celebrated in public. As a result, Drury has observed, Strauss's double rhetoric allowed for the fight to continue in the coastal areas after his death — a battle that, for example, Harry Jaffa led on the West Coast against Pangle on the East Coast — as to muddy the waters.

Strauss also considered classical liberal constitutionalism and liberal educations as instruments to limit the *democratic* element of liberal democracy. Unlike Schmitt then, whose theorization of the political Strauss builds on in his attempt to transcend liberalism in the 1930s, Strauss ends up supporting some liberal democratic institutions in and after World War II. I will discuss Strauss's standpoint on liberal democracy after World War II in more detail below, but for now, we should stay with the question of Strauss's anti-liberal authoritarianism in the inter-war era.

6. 2. *Strauss's authoritarianism*

I am not the first to suggest that the young Strauss was a radical-conservative authoritarian. This view is today common among Strauss scholars, including, but not exclusively, Sheppard, Zank, Meier, Xenos, Altman, Shell and Lampert. There are similarities across our various interpretations of Strauss's texts that support this view, but also important ways in which we disagree. These differences are not hair splitting.

Xenos builds his case that Strauss was an authoritarian throughout his life around the letter that Strauss wrote to Löwith in 1932 and discussed in chapter three. In Xenos's words, Strauss philosophically "embraces [...] a premodern notion of [...] human nature" that supports, in Strauss's words to Löwith, "fascist, authoritarian, imperial principles" of the political Right.⁸⁷³ Xenos claims that the letter reveals Strauss's political outlook; one, he argues, that Strauss maintained throughout his life. Altman takes this argument up one notch, claiming that Strauss, until the very end, was a Nazi in sheep's clothing.⁸⁷⁴ On the opposite side, Howse dismisses Altman's case without engaging it head-on, and argues

⁸⁷³ Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 70.

⁸⁷⁴ See Altman, *The German Stranger*, 1-28, 235-280. Altman argues that the most revealing letter in respect to Strauss politics and philosophy is not the Strauss wrote to Löwith in 1932; but rather, a letter Strauss wrote to Jacob Klein, London, 23 June 1934 (Altman, *The German Stranger*, 228. Original letter reproduced in Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 3*, 515-18.

against Xenos that Strauss's letter to Löwith is a red herring. Howse suggests that the letter should be read as an exception — sent at a desperate time — that sought to identify a realistic opposition to Hitler, and not as an endorsement of fascist or authoritarian politics in general. Due to his flirtation with the ideas of Schmitt and Heidegger at a young age, Howse argues, Strauss's mature embrace of liberalism and "peace" should be read as *t'shuvah* (Hebrew for "repentance") for his youthful sins.⁸⁷⁵

It is not unusual to write unsubstantiated or hyperbolic claims in letters (or these days, emails). My contribution to the debate over Strauss's anti-liberal right-wing authoritarian stance has been to unpack how Strauss's politics is grounded in his philosophical position as reflected primarily in his scholarship on Hobbes. I have proposed that Strauss's philosophy and political position are mutually constitutive in the 1930s. In chapter two and three, I arrive at a similar conclusion to that of Sheppard and McCormick, and as was first indicated by Meier, and here presented in the words of Xenos, Strauss politics are "predicated on the essential evil of the human being."⁸⁷⁶ The moral-ontological view of human evil, Strauss posits as the anthropological ground for a non-liberal authoritarian political regime, as contrary to the anarchistic (liberal and socialist) conception of human nature as good or educable. The view of human nature as evil, Xenos suggests, is the "grounding he [Strauss] had struggled to find for his rejection of the rights associated with democracy and liberalism."⁸⁷⁷

In chapter three, I argue that Strauss excavates from Hobbes's pre-scientific observation of human nature the specific characteristic that set humans apart from animals and marks the human species as evil: namely, vanity. Xenos's argument that

⁸⁷⁵ Howse, *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace*, 16.

⁸⁷⁶ Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 70.

⁸⁷⁷ Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 71.

Strauss asserts that it is due to vanity that humans are morally evil is the same as my own. However, I dissect in greater detail than Xenos Strauss's conception of vanity, and perhaps most importantly, answer the question of why Strauss deems vanity a moral evil. In so doing, I arrive at a conclusion that departs from Xenos's claim that Strauss grounds an authoritarian politics on his understanding of moral evil after World War II. Along these lines, at the end of chapter three, I show that Strauss's proposition that humans are by nature morally evil is incompatible with the kind of Socratic-Platonic virtue-ethics that he comes to adopt.

I also question Xenos's claim (who follows McCormick on this point) that Strauss adopts fear as the principle for rule in his preferred regime in the 1930s. My interpretation in chapter three suggests that McCormick and Xenos mistakes Strauss's view of Hobbes's politics for Strauss's own in the early 1930s; that is, they think that Strauss attached legitimacy or obligation to fear, which is his interpretation of bourgeois consciousness. Against this view, I argue that, in his attempt to transcend the liberal horizon, Strauss attaches morality to vanity. Strauss's justification for anti-liberal authoritarianism is that humans by nature are evil. It is the bourgeois moral attitude advanced by Hobbes, which Strauss attempts to move away from, that is ascribed by a moral legal right to self-preservation and defined by the fear of violent death. My objection to Xenos and McCormick's case is thus that if Strauss had adopted fear of violent death as the principle of rule, then he would have accepted bourgeois consciousness as the reason of the state. My hesitation with this suggestion is that in the 1930s Strauss seeks to move beyond liberalism; it would thus have been theoretically inconsistent for him to have adopted the same principle of rule that he had argued defines

bourgeois consciousness and morality. A possible way around this objection would to argue that Strauss adopts fear as disconnected from *violent death* as the principle for rule; as for example is the case in the Old Testament or the Hebrew bible, in which *fear* is attached to God and the afterlife. The underlying logic behind this claim is that the authoritarian view of the human animal as evil also requires fear as a tool or the principle of rule to secure obedience. In accordance to this interpretation, Strauss could then mobilize fear for a non-liberal regime.

What then, if not, or beside fear, did Strauss think could serve as the principle of obedience that is in agreement with Strauss's radical conservative critique of bourgeoisie liberalism before World War II? Strauss never answers this question fully. In his notes in the margins of Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*, Strauss raises the question if it was not possible to let aristocratic vanity play out its course in the formation of an empire. At the very end of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss also entertains the Socratic-Platonic conception of rule as based in reason/natural law despite Hobbes's criticism of this tradition as insufficient.

Does Strauss arrive at a place after World War II, in which he thinks fear — rather than fear of a violent death — is a good exoteric principle upon which to secure obedience among the many? In his often read posthumously published essay, “The Three Waves of Modernity,” Strauss states that for both Hobbes and Machiavelli, “there is no evil in men which cannot be controlled [...] by institutions with teeth in them.”⁸⁷⁸ He contrasts Machiavelli and Hobbes's reliance on fear, which he identifies as part of the first wave (of three) of modernity, with the pre-modern perspective that sees “divine

⁸⁷⁸ Strauss, “The Three Waves of Modernity,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*, ed. with an introduction by Hilail Gildin (Detroit–Wayne State University Press, 1989), 87.

grace, morality” and “formation of character” as the basis for order in the state.⁸⁷⁹ Some scholars argue that Strauss not only admires, but is also closer to Machiavelli than he lets on, and that he teaches the lesson in the *Prince* that it is better for rulers to be feared than loved. However, as a professor of political science in the new continent after the war, Strauss seems to have been more engaged in the formation of his students and readers’ characters and intellectual horizon than in advocating for them to adopt fear as the principle for obedience for the many. Fear was certainly already one of the main ideological linchpins during the Cold War, but I don’t see any conclusive evidence that Strauss advocated for fear as the primary exoteric doctrine (for domestic and international policy) for the masses in his published work or seminars in the post-war era for his students and readers to adopt. It is worth noting that he preferred liberal arts to religious education, and that in post-war United States, the liberal arts was becoming mass education. Out of these reservations, Xenos and I differ over whether or not, or at least to what extent, Strauss adopts fear to secure obedience and order after World War II. And as stated above, I fully disagree with Xenos that Strauss remained an authoritarian after he had moved to the United States based on the belief that humans are by nature *morally* evil. The question that remains to be settled, however, is whether or not Strauss remains an authoritarian after World War II on different grounds. Or, to put the question more broadly: what political regime or regimes are reflected, or are compatible with Strauss’s philosophy after World War II?

6. 3. *Strauss’s criticism of liberal theory after World War II*

One benefit of a less detailed textual analysis than the one I have advanced throughout

⁸⁷⁹ Strauss, “The Three Waves of Modernity,” 87.

this dissertation is that such an approach would have allowed me to cover a greater number of texts.⁸⁸⁰ The most relevant of Strauss's works not discussed thoroughly in regard to the question of Strauss's authoritarianism after World War II is his 1948 book, *On Tyranny*. In this close reading of Xenophon's *Hiero*, Strauss applied his recently discovered esoteric hermeneutic of reading to a lesser-known classical dialogue. Xenos turns to *On Tyranny* to make the case that Strauss remains an authoritarian after the war, embracing an ancient form of tyranny as differentiated from the modern tyrannical regimes. In an often-quoted passage from the book that I referred to at the end of chapter four, Strauss discusses the difference between tyranny and rule of law:

The 'tyrannical' teaching, we shall answer, serves the purpose, not of solving the problem of the best political order, but of bringing to light the nature of political things. The "theoretical" thesis which favors beneficent tyranny is indispensable in order to make clear a crucial implication of the practically and hence theoretically true thesis which favors rule of law and legitimate government. The 'theoretical thesis' is a most striking expression of the problem, or of the problematic character, of law and legitimacy: legal justice is a justice which is imperfect and more or less blind, and *legitimate* government is not necessarily 'good government' and almost certainly will not be government by the wise. Law and legitimacy are problematic from the highest point of view, namely, from that of wisdom. We have stated that according to that teaching beneficent tyranny is *theoretically superior* and *practically inferior* to rule of laws and legitimate government.⁸⁸¹

The rule of law is inferior from the perspective of wisdom — from the philosopher's perspective. It is evident from the text, however, that Strauss thinks that both the liberal regimes and communist regimes are ruled by the unwise; and between these two, that the present constitutional liberal regimes are preferable to communist autocracies. Legitimate government is preferable to tyranny as it restricts the actions of the unwise. For the era in

⁸⁸⁰ The most extreme case of a close-textual analysis in the secondary literature is Lampert, Laurence, *Nietzsche's Task: An Interpretation of Beyond Good and Evil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), which is devoted entirely to Strauss's one short essay on Nietzsche.

⁸⁸¹ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 99, emphasis added; quoted in Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 112.

which he lived, Strauss preferred constitutionalism, but at a different historical conjecture or locality, it is not inconceivable, as some Straussians argues, that he would side with his Xenos or Plato, and support beneficent tyranny or government by the wise. While others argue that the model of the rule of the wise, in the form of ancient tyranny, or better, an aristocracy of philosopher kings, is simply a utopian measure to judge imperfect, but no less legitimate, real-world regimes.

As I mention above, my interpretation in chapter four and five contradicts Xenos's claim that Strauss remained an "authoritarian" after the war based on the notion of human nature as moral evil and Strauss's own concealment of this political ontology "by a pseudo-scholarly apparatus and the techniques of exoteric writing."⁸⁸² Instead, I argue that in both *Natural Right and History* and his final texts on Hobbes, Strauss abandons the Biblical presentation of human nature as morally evil, and instead adopts an ancient view of human nature as the foundation for his mature perspective on politics and philosophy in which evil is seen as a vice. His earlier perspective of human nature as moral evil does not fit with his adoption of a Socratic-Platonic virtue ethics. He thus comes to emphasise, just as with his scientific or mature Hobbes, reason over vanity as that which sets humans apart from other animals.

My agreement with Xenos thus extends to his observation that, even after the war, the ground for philosophy remains *human nature* for Strauss, and that he furthermore understands "modernity or modern philosophy" as "a revolt against [ancient] human nature."⁸⁸³ To repeat, where we disagree is over Xenos's claim that Strauss remains an authoritarian based on a conviction that humans are morally evil. Instead, I suggest that

⁸⁸² Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 70.

⁸⁸³ Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 116.

Strauss detaches this biblical moral conception from human nature as the ground for an authoritarian state when he returns to Hobbes in the late 1940s. I have shown that what began as a rejection of liberal thought and liberal morality, and a search for theoretical and political authoritarian corrective in the Weimar era, becomes over time a cautious endorsement of liberal institutions as found in the United States.

To substantiate this position in chapter four, I first offer an interpretation of “German Nihilism” that differed from not only Xenos’s, but also Altman’s, who argues that the American Strauss “is and remains [throughout his life] a committed ‘German nihilist;’ his political leanings are and remain ‘pagan-fascist;’ and his writings aim not just at the articulation of a position beyond but at a destruction of democratic liberalism.”⁸⁸⁴ Against this position, I argue that, in the light of Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s destruction of the history of reason, Strauss understands his role in post-war United States as that of a teacher and defender of pre-modern or classical rationalist philosophy. Strauss also identifies and promotes classical liberal education, or as it is also called, the great books tradition. I also observed, like Shell before me, that in “German Nihilism,” Strauss identifies the constitutionalism that he later comes to endorse, first over Hitlerism and later, over communist authoritarianism. However, as I will discuss at more length below, Strauss argues for the throttle back the democratic component of the liberal democratic regime and supported a limited form of liberalism akin to classical republicanism or a mixed regime. The question to ask then is how authoritarian is the liberal democratic regime Strauss advocates for? Is it liberal democratic in any meaningful way?

⁸⁸⁴ Zank, Michael, “Foreword”, in Altman, *The German Stranger*, xii.

6. 4. *The case of the Weimar Republic*

In his first essay on Hobbes after World War II, I argue, Strauss isolates the principle of liberal theory to Hobbes's modern natural right doctrine. While Strauss dismisses Hobbesian liberalism he endorses a constitutional regime. In his well-known essay, "Liberal education and Responsibility," the argument Strauss offers for the endorsement of classical constitutionalism is that "wisdom" cannot be separated from "moderation":

Karl Marx, the father of communism, and Friedrich Nietzsche, the stepgrandfather of fascism, were liberally educated on a level to which we cannot even hope to aspire. But perhaps one can say that their grandiose failures make it easier for us who have experienced those failures to understand again the old saying that wisdom cannot be separated from moderation and hence to understand that wisdom requires unhesitating loyalty to a decent constitution and even to the cause of constitutionalism.⁸⁸⁵

In chapter four, I observed that Strauss realizes in the late 1930s that there are political reasons for not promoting Nietzschean nihilism or even classical scepticism: the criticism of liberal civilization in public had led to disastrous political consequences. The rise of Nazism and communism had taught Strauss that politics require moderation. That Strauss favors constitutionalism over tyranny is also apparent in his preface to the English translation of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1965). In the "Preface," Strauss returns to the "Jewish-problem" that had preoccupied him throughout the 1920s.⁸⁸⁶

In this text, Strauss, as Tanguay points out, identifies two modern solutions to the Jewish question that he argues originated with Spinoza: liberalism and Zionism. I have argued in chapter two that, in the 1920, Strauss arrived at the insight that it is impossible to find a theoretical (or principled) justification for the foundation of a Jewish nation. What, in the 1960s, refers to as the "theological-political" predicament could not

⁸⁸⁵ Strauss, "Liberal education and Responsibility," 25.

⁸⁸⁶ Strauss, "Preface," 4.

be solved; in other words, a theoretical bridge cannot be built between the orthodox position (that provided Jews with their authentic identity) that waited for the return of the messiah to end the *galut*, and the political Zionists who evolve from liberal rationalism and advocate for human intervention for the creation of a Jewish state. There is, however, Strauss suggests, a more practical solution. In the “Preface,” Strauss partly mends the theoretical impasse by suggesting that it was clear to the political Zionists all along that while the “return to the land of Israel” is the most important “modification” of the *galut* since the Talmud, it is not the end resolution, “culminating in the building of the third temple and restoration of the sacrificial service.”⁸⁸⁷ The end of the *galut* is irresolvable from a human perspective as its resolution depends on divine intervention. Yet, Strauss states that the state of Israel is a “blessing for Jews everywhere,” not the least out of existential necessity as Strauss argues that the liberal state could not “solve the Jewish problem” either.⁸⁸⁸

In the “Preface,” Strauss introduces Spinoza as “the first philosopher who was both a democrat and a liberal. He was the philosopher who founded liberal democracy, a specifically modern regime.”⁸⁸⁹ Spinoza promotes civic equality independently of faith, for which he aims to liberalize Judaism from its nationalist origin in Moses’s law. Cohen has accused Spinoza of an unfair reading of the Jewish prophets, foremost, Maimonides, and for having presented Christianity as more “universalist” and “spiritual,” compared to the “particularistic” and “carnal” Judaism, than it actually is.⁸⁹⁰ Against Cohen, Strauss argues that Spinoza in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* carves his argument with a

⁸⁸⁷ Strauss, “Preface,” 4.

⁸⁸⁸ Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*, xi.

⁸⁸⁹ Strauss, “Preface,” 16.

⁸⁹⁰ Strauss, “Preface,” 18.

Christian reader in mind, and thus he “fights Christian prejudices by appealing to Christian prejudices.”⁸⁹¹ In short, Strauss presents Spinoza as the founder of a liberal democratic regime that he envisions to be ruled by “philosophers” and “artists,” not “priests,” and based on a universalistic and inclusive morality that transcends the particularistic states or religious tribalism in any form — be it Judaism, Christianity or Islam.⁸⁹²

Most German Jews thought that liberalism had solved the “Jewish-problem”:

Prior to Hitler’s rise to power most German Jews believed that their problem had been solved in principle by liberalism: German Jews were Germans of the Jewish faith, i.e. they were no less German than the Germans of the Christian faith or of no faith. They assumed that the German state (to say nothing of German society or culture) was or ought to be neutral to the difference between Christians and Jews or between non-Jews and Jews. This assumption was not accepted by the strongest part of Germany and hence by Germany.⁸⁹³

This brings us to anti-Semitism and Strauss’s assessment of how the Germans had dealt with the Jewish problem: “[the] German Jewish-problem was never solved. It was annihilated by the annihilation of the German Jews.”⁸⁹⁴ The Weimar Republic had been incapable of suppressing anti-Semitism effectively. This shortcoming, Strauss points out in the “Preface” is due to the architecture of the liberal democratic regime with its fundamental private liberties—most important of which is religious tolerance, for which faith is a private affair. Due to the liberal state’s separation between the public and the private, only legislation against public discrimination, not privately held beliefs, is possible.⁸⁹⁵ Echoing Marx on *The Jewish Question*, Strauss therefore observes that “legal

⁸⁹¹ Strauss, “Preface,” 20.

⁸⁹² Strauss, “Preface,” 17.

⁸⁹³ Strauss, “Preface,” 4.

⁸⁹⁴ Strauss, “Preface,” 4.

⁸⁹⁵ Strauss, “Preface,” 1.

equality” does not entail “social equality.”⁸⁹⁶ Unlike Marx, Strauss, however, does not have economic equality in mind when he spoke of social equality, but anti-Semitism.

The strongest part of Germany, Strauss suggests, was “old Germany,” with its longing for the mediaeval Christian unity of the late Holy Roman Empire (with its centre in Germany). Gallstone explains:

For the majority, it was Christianity that defined German cultural identity. Although German Jews placed their hope in a republic whose political institutions were neutral regarding differences between Jews and Christians, most non-Jewish Germans rejected this neutrality outright. The Weimar Republic was weak then because key features of German life stood outside the scope of public law and contradicted the principles of the public realm. In the end, German society proved stronger than the liberal democratic state.⁸⁹⁷

Strauss further notes that the Weimar Republic — the first German liberal democratic regime — does not get off to a good start as it was born out of the defeat of World War I, and blamed for the Treaty of Versailles.⁸⁹⁸ Old Germany was humiliated. Strauss plays down the economic crisis and monopoly capitalism of the late 1920s as the primary reason behind the weakness of the Weimar Republic and points to the fact that other nations were equally affected. That the days of the republic were numbered after the 1925 “election of Field-Marshal von Hindenburg”, he writes, was clear to anyone with “eyes to see.”⁸⁹⁹ However, that the Third Reich would follow in its collapse, Strauss notes, was not inevitable:

The victory of National Socialism became necessary in Germany for the same reason that the victory of communism had become necessary in Russia: the man with the strongest will or single-mindedness, the greatest ruthlessness, daring, and power over his following, and the best judgment about the strength of the various

⁸⁹⁶ Strauss, “Preface,” 5.

⁸⁹⁷ William A. Gallstone. “Leo Strauss’s Qualified Embrace of Liberal Democracy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven Smith (New York: Cambridge Press, 2009), 193-214, 202.

⁸⁹⁸ Strauss, “Preface,” 1.

⁸⁹⁹ Strauss, “Preface,” 1.

forces in the immediately relevant political field was the leader of the revolution.⁹⁰⁰

Even though the liberal Weimar Republic terminated in the hands of Hitler, Strauss stressed to his North American readers that a liberal regime is superior to the communist regime in regard to the Jewish-problem.⁹⁰¹ Totalitarian regimes that lack constitutional barriers to prohibit privately held opinions do not fair better in Strauss's account. While Strauss identifies anti-Semitism as the "only clear principle" of Nazism, the Soviet regime used anti-Semitism opportunistically and the gulags did little to improve their standing in Strauss's description.⁹⁰² Strauss concludes that the Jewish problem can never be fully resolved but needs not turn out as extreme as it had in Germany.

He casts the Weimar Republic as an exception among liberal democratic states: "The weakness of liberal democracy in Germany explains why the situation of the indigenous Jews was more precarious in Germany than in any other Western country."⁹⁰³ There are, however, constitutional instruments in a liberal regime designed to prevent the tyranny of the majority over minorities and checks on the abuses of power. A central question that remains unanswered in the "Preface" is if Strauss believed that a more robust liberal constitutional architecture and institutions would have served as bulwark against the old Germany? Would Hitler's seizure power and dismantling of the rule of law have been possible if an independent and strong judiciary had been in place? Or was it the constitutional clause that allowed for Presidential governing, i.e., too much power vested in the executive partly, to blame? Would corrections of one or all of the above been sufficient to curb the will of old Germany? We do not get answers to these questions

⁹⁰⁰ Strauss, "Preface," 1.

⁹⁰¹ Strauss, "Preface," 7.

⁹⁰² Strauss, "Preface," 7.

⁹⁰³ Strauss, "Preface," 2-3.

in the “Preface,” but more details of Strauss’s criticism of the pitfalls of liberal democracy — of both its democratic *and* liberal components — is found in his writing on the status and practice of political science in post-war United States.

6. 5. *Liberal democracy and philosophy in the United States*

The late Strauss is known as one of the main advocates for the revival of political philosophy in the decades after World War II, and as a stern critic of post-war positivist or “behaviourist” political science, or what he also called the “new political science.”⁹⁰⁴

The new political science, Strauss suggests in “An Epilogue” (1962), was premised on a separation between facts and values. Whereas the new political science generates truth claims, it does not allow for value judgments (“ought”) to be derived from facts (“is”).⁹⁰⁵

The new political science’s methodological objectivity thus comes hand in hand with a relativist position that value judgments are no longer scientifically valid and all values are of same order, such as Strauss’s often-mentioned double edge example that liberal democracy is superior to tyranny.⁹⁰⁶ In his chapter on Weber in *Natural Right and History*, “Natural Right and the Distinction between Facts and Values,” Strauss argues that a value-free social science is unattainable since a fact-value distinction is impossible to maintain. Strauss places this methodological relativism at the heart of the “crisis of liberal democracy,” which he sees as part of the decline of the West in general, on the

⁹⁰⁴ Leo Strauss, “An Epilogue,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*, ed. with an introduction by Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 125. First published in *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*, ed. Herbert J. Storing (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962); also republished in Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).

⁹⁰⁵ Historicism on the other hand, which Strauss finds more sophisticated – historicist held the view, like Strauss, that a separation between fact and values are not tenable. Unlike Strauss, however, the historicist’s reason for this is that all values and facts are historically specific.

⁹⁰⁶ Furthermore: “By teaching the equality of all values, by denying that there are things which are *intrinsically high* and others which are *intrinsically low*, as well as by denying that there is an essential difference between men and brutes, it unwittingly contributes to the victory of the gutter.” (Strauss, “An Epilogue,” 154, emphasis added.)

grounds that it lost confidence in its traditional values, which he argues, has “become concealed by a ritual which calls itself methodology or logic.”⁹⁰⁷ As a result of this, Strauss judges that the new political science “does not know that it fiddles, and it does not [even] know that Rome burns.”⁹⁰⁸

Despite this blindness, Strauss concedes that the new political science “had learned certain lessons” from recent history — specifically, a wariness about the “*irrationality of the masses*,” and a recognition of the “*necessity of elites*.”⁹⁰⁹ He nevertheless adds that if the new political science

had been wise, it would have learned those lessons from the galaxy of antidemocratic thinkers of the remote past. It believed, in other words, it had learned that, contrary to the belief of the orthodox democrats, no compelling case can be made for liberalism (for example, for the unqualified freedom of such speech as does not constitute a clear and present danger) nor for democracy (free elections based on universal suffrage).⁹¹⁰

This goes some way to identify what Strauss might have thought had gone astray in the Weimar republic: democratic universal suffrage (which enabled the NSDAP to form a minority government) and liberal unqualified freedom of speech that allowed anti-Semitic discourse to spew. These reflections also point to an answer to how democratic and how liberal (or alternatively, how authoritarian) is the constitutional regime that Strauss endorsed in the United States and elsewhere.

In “What is Liberal Education?” a speech Strauss delivered in Chicago in 1959 (and published in 1961), he defines democracy, from a mix of ancient and modern conceptions, as the rule of the many virtuous, not the majority simply, but a “universal

⁹⁰⁷ Strauss, “An Epilogue,” 155.

⁹⁰⁸ Strauss, “An Epilogue,” 155.

⁹⁰⁹ Strauss, “An Epilogue,” 155, emphasis added.

⁹¹⁰ Strauss, “An Epilogue,” 155.

aristocracy.”⁹¹¹ While a universal aristocracy might have been the aspiration of moderns like Montesquieu and Rousseau, Strauss thinks that only a few have the capacity by nature to be wise and rule well and thus a universal aristocracy can never be actualized. Instead, Strauss suggests: “Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant. Liberal education is the necessary endeavour to *found an aristocracy within democratic mass society*.”⁹¹² To establish an intellectual aristocracy within a democratic mass society is of course not the same as establishing a universal aristocracy. So, would not such aristocracy, if it truly meant the *rule* of the best/wise undermine rather than support the rule of the majority? Or does Strauss think that it is possible to marry elite rule with a modern liberal democratic regime? Or did Strauss have in mind here merely an intellectual aristocracy divorced from the operation of the state? The answers are not readily available in the short pamphlet. Instead we must look for the answers in his follow-up essay, “Liberal Education and Responsibility,” commissioned by The Fund of Adult Education, who had asked Strauss to clarify the ambiguous relation between liberal education and democracy in the above quotation.⁹¹³

In this longer essay, Strauss first provides a definition of ancient democracy that aligned closer with a conventional view. Democracy in ancient Greece entailed that the collective majority rules or decides over matters deliberated by all male household heads in the polis or by those selected by lot. As a consequence, Strauss writes: “Roughly

⁹¹¹ Strauss, “What is Liberal Education?,” 4

⁹¹² Strauss, “What is Liberal Education?,” 5, emphasis added.

⁹¹³ “Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant. Liberal education is the necessary endeavour to *found an aristocracy within democratic mass society*” (Strauss, “What is Liberal Education?,” 5; Strauss, “Liberal education and Responsibility,” 10.

speaking, democracy is the regime in which the majority of adult free males living in a city rules, but only a minority of them are educated.⁹¹⁴ In his analysis of this regime, Strauss shifts from simple observation to an evaluation of democracy from a Platonic standpoint: “The principle of democracy is therefore not *virtue*, but *freedom as the right of every citizen to live as he likes*. Democracy is rejected because it is as such the rule of the *uneducated*.”⁹¹⁵ In this judgment of democracy, Strauss adds a feature of modern liberal democratic states since a collective majority decision does not necessarily entail the right of every citizen to live as they like.

In post-war United States, Strauss thought that pluralism defined present day liberalism in so far as individuals were left to choose their own ends — live as they like. These ends, he argued were limited by the influence of mass society, and were in most instances not virtuous ends. Liberal education or the study of the great books could serve as a counterbalance to this peril of mass society. Pangle explains:

[Strauss] found in modern liberalism a native space for the highest ingredient of that older liberalism—the liberalism that consists in liberation of the mind through the study and debate of the alternative vision of human excellence developed in the great books. In the liberal university at its best the ancient idea of liberal education continues to shine as the crown jewel of modern liberalism.⁹¹⁶

Strauss notes that in ancient Greece, it was only the small class with landed property who had time to study, as they need not concern themselves with administrating their property (like the merchants), or engage in manual labour (like the peasants or wage-labourer). Or if we include also non-citizens in the analysis, Strauss explains that classical understanding of “liberal” plainly meant citizens that are not “slaves” — they are free to

⁹¹⁴ Strauss, “Liberal education and Responsibility,” 12.

⁹¹⁵ Strauss, “Liberal education and Responsibility,” 12, emphasis added.

⁹¹⁶ Pangle, *Leo Strauss: An Introduction to His Thought and Intellectual Legacy*, xxv.

spend their time as they wish.⁹¹⁷ Strauss suggests that modern technological innovations allows for a larger number of people to have idle time to study and thus there is a larger pool to draw from and thus the chances that individuals that are more fitted by nature entered the educational system is higher. Strauss sees the role of liberal education not only in the training of an intellectual aristocracy, but also the schooling of statesmen, and thus education directly relates to the question of rule in present-day liberal democracies and not only isolated to the educational sphere.

In chapter four, I suggest that in the late 1940s Strauss adopts from Hobbes the insight that popular and expressive consent is a necessary evil in the time in which he lived. Strauss's description of the modern liberal doctrine in "Liberal education and Responsibility" is based on his studies of Hobbes's (and to a lesser extent, Locke's) doctrine without naming him: "The modern [liberal] doctrine starts from the *natural equality of all men*, and it leads therefore to the assertion that *sovereignty belongs to the people*; yet it understands sovereignty in such way as to guarantee *the natural rights of each*; it achieves this result by distinguishing between the *sovereign [people] and the government* and [Locke:] by demanding that the *fundamental governmental powers be separated from one another*."⁹¹⁸ Strauss does not believe in the "natural equality of all men," and he advocates for minimizing the role of the many (the majority) in the decision-making process (i.e., the degree in which the "higher is responsible to the lower") as the representatives are largely drawn from an educated (and economic) elite: "a regime in which the gentlemen share power with the people in such way that the people elect the magistrate and the council from *among* the gentlemen and demand an

⁹¹⁷ Strauss, "Liberal education and Responsibility," 10.

⁹¹⁸ Strauss, "Liberal education and Responsibility," 15, emphasis added,

account of them at the end of their term of office.”⁹¹⁹ By popular consent, the liberal modern democratic regime is *de facto* ruled by an elite of well-educated statesmen. This is what Strauss has in mind when he writes in *What is Political Philosophy*: “liberal or constitutional democracy comes closer to what the classics demanded than any alternative that is viable in our age.”⁹²⁰ So what about the Lockean separation of powers?

In chapter four, I suggest that in Strauss’s eyes the American republic and Britain resembled a mixed regime. Straussians disagree over Strauss’s assessment of the philosophy of the American founders and the constitution; more specifically, they disagree over how much Strauss believed the constitution owes to Locke and how much it owes to pre-modern ancient practical form of constitutionalism.⁹²¹ If much is owed to Locke, it’s a regime that is inferior to ancient regimes but in comparison to contemporary regimes, good. If there is more of an ancient element to the constitution, it is a higher form of regime close to an ancient ideal. It seems to follow from Strauss’s argument in *On Tyranny* that the statesmen must be kept in check by the constitution (written by wise individuals) as these gentlemen, are not truly wise.⁹²² One would then assume the constitution (or “code” as Strauss also calls it) is best safeguarded by an independent judiciary. However, Strauss says little concrete about the separation and checks on power.

As we have seen, Strauss thinks that a modern democratic regime allows for rulers that are better educated than in ancient democracies, yet these statesmen are not

⁹¹⁹ Strauss, “Liberal education and Responsibility,” 15.

⁹²⁰ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, 113.

⁹²¹ Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problems of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2014) chapter 4-7.

⁹²² When he wrote the chapter on Hobbes and Locke in *Natural Right and History* and *On Tyranny* in the late 1940s, Strauss held the view that the statesmen or gentlemen are unwise.

wise. So what is the role for the wise philosophers — the authors of the constitution — in the liberal democratic regime? Strauss is aware that aristocratic rule easily evolves into oligarchy or tyranny, and thus it seems that he sides with his Aristotle that the praxis of politics is better left for statesman, and the wise are better left as teachers of the liberal arts or left alone in their quest for wisdom.

Strauss's view on the place, or even, the possibility of philosophy in a liberal state, is nevertheless questioned in the secondary literature. In chapter two, I note that Strauss reads Schmitt in the early 1930s in order to argue that liberalism and economic rationality de-politicized the political. The late Strauss worried less about liberalism's effect on politics than on philosophy. Lampert, suggests that for Strauss, the liberal democratic state presents a totalizing horizon, presaging the arrival of Nietzsche's the last-man, and with that the end not only of history, but also of philosophy.⁹²³ On this basis, Lampert has questioned Strauss's support for liberal democracy on the ground that Strauss ultimately sees the end of philosophy in Kojève's "rational and homogenous" liberal democratic state.⁹²⁴ Surely, Strauss opposes Kojève's Hegelian liberal regime, which he thinks is simply another expression of socialist or communist "universal and classless society".⁹²⁵ In Kojève's state, citizens, as individual and autonomous rational subject, are reflected in the rational state as the concrete manifestation of modern reason.⁹²⁶ In Lampert's analysis, liberal education is thus not sufficient to counter this trend, i.e., to serve as the defence against the end of philosophy. In light of this, Lampert, like Altman, suggests that Strauss wrote for a future in which philosophy was again

⁹²³ Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*; Lampert, *Nietzsche's Task: An Interpretation of Beyond Good and Evil*.

⁹²⁴ Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*, vii

⁹²⁵ Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*, vii

⁹²⁶ Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*, vii.

possible—a future that could only come into being after the liberal democratic state had been transcended. On the contrary, I have suggested above that Strauss thought that the liberal democratic regime in the United States, as it was composed during the time he lived there, and which he attempted to modify, allowed for philosophy.

Furthermore, Lampert, like Drury before him, claims that Strauss does not reveal himself as the Nietzschean anti-metaphysical thinker he is.⁹²⁷ Should then Strauss's ontological postulate of the natural constitution of human beings and natural hierarchy of human capacities be read along the lines of his assessment of Nietzsche's eternal return of the same?

For Nietzsche all genuinely human life, every high culture has necessarily a hierarchic or aristocratic character; the highest culture of the future must be in accordance with the *natural order of rank among men which Nietzsche, in principle, understands along Platonic lines*. Yet how can there be a natural order of rank, given the, so to speak, infinite power of the Over-man? For Nietzsche, too, the fact that almost all men are defective or fragmentary cannot be due to an authoritative nature but can be no more than an inheritance of the past, or of history as it has developed hitherto. To avoid this difficulty, i.e. to avoid the longing for the equality of all men when man is at the peak of his power, *Nietzsche needs nature or the past as authoritative or at least inescapable. Yet since it is no longer for him an undeniable fact, he must will it, or postulate it*. This is the meaning of his doctrine of eternal return. The return of the past, of the whole past, must be willed, if the Over-man is to be possible.⁹²⁸

According to this line of reasoning, Strauss, like his Nietzsche, is then actualizing the doctrine of the eternal return by championing a natural order of rank along Platonic lines. While I argue in chapter four that it is in part the prospect of the “end of philosophy” that prompts Strauss to promote the existence of an esoteric philosophical tradition to ground the Platonic view that there is an intellectual order of rank among humans, it is not due to an agreement with Nietzsche's ontology.

⁹²⁷ See Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*.

⁹²⁸ Strauss, “The Three ways of Modernity,” 97, emphasis added.

In contradistinction to the idea that Strauss's is a closet Nietzschean, I argue throughout this dissertation that there are *philosophical* or *anthropological* differences between Strauss and Nietzsche. Strauss, in all his Hobbes studies, gives Nietzsche's will to power a metaphysical (but not metaphysics of Plato's ideas) footing; he finds the answer to what wills the will to power in human nature—in vanity. This analysis, which originates in Strauss's pre-war interpretation of vanity in Hobbes's thought, is also apparent in his comment on Nietzsche's will to power in "The Three waves of Modernity":

Surely the nature of man is will to power and this means on the primary level the will to overpower others: man does not *by nature* will equality. *Man derives enjoyment from overpowering others as well as himself.* Whereas Rousseau's natural man is compassionate, Nietzsche's natural man [like individuals in Strauss's Hobbes] is cruel.⁹²⁹

In *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss asserted through the young Hobbes that vanity is what marks the qualitative difference between human and other animals. The differences between Strauss and Nietzsche are ever more visible in Strauss's adopted classical ontological conception of human as intrinsically rational, and for whom there exists a hierarchy of natural ends, and the epistemological status of Socratic-Platonic rationality/phenomenology. I argue in chapter four that in "German Nihilism," Strauss sets out to resuscitate ancient rationality against Nietzschean nihilism (of which the Nazis were a crude political manifestation) and against liberals, and ultimately also against Marxists (like Kojève), who subscribed to the rational historical materialist world-view that liberalism evolves into a classless society. In his studies after World War II, Strauss defends a neo-classical ontology of Being and conception of reason against not only a Nietzschean, but also Heideggerian nihilism and relativism, or what he identifies as the

⁹²⁹ Strauss, "The Three waves of Modernity," 97-98, emphasis added.

zeitgeist of a third wave of modernity. Before I turn to reflect on this third wave and Strauss's relation to it, I will account for Strauss view of Hobbes's role in the first two waves of modernity.

6. 6. *Strauss's evolving interpretation of Hobbes: first and second wave of modernity*

In "The Three Waves of Modernity," Straus presents Hobbes as representative of the first wave. In his book, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958), Strauss expanded on his presentation of Machiavelli as the first modern philosopher in his chapter on Hobbes and Locke in *Natural Right and History*. It was the secular struggle against orthodox, exemplified for Strauss in Machiavelli's thought, that marked the first wave of modernity. Machiavelli introduces a radical new political philosophy that moves away from the ideals of ancient natural right and turns to how humans actually are. Strauss argues in his post-war writings that Hobbes follows Machiavelli in that he takes as first principle humans for what they are as opposed to what they ought to be.⁹³⁰ Human passions provide the axioms from which Hobbes deducts a commonwealth that secures peace, or at least, the end of *civil*-religious war, since Hobbes maintains that there can exist no single sovereign in the international realm.

As I accounted for in chapter four, Strauss argues that Hobbes brings the secular battle against religion into the open and grounds his modern natural right in human nature alone. Unlike Hobbes, Spinoza — who Strauss argues in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* writes in the Averroist tradition — sees a natural difference between the wise and vulgar and therefore arrives at the conclusion that religion is required to secure obedience and form a social contract. By the mid-1930s, Strauss had concluded that Hobbes was an

⁹³⁰ Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity," 86.

atheist. While he makes note of Hobbes's atheism in the late 1940s, it is first in his final essay on Hobbes in the 1950s, "On the Basis," that Strauss presented the evidence for his readers.

In chapter two and three, I point out, like others before me, that Strauss claims that what was new in Hobbes's political science is not his application of a new science to the study of politics, but his normative project; that is, the introduction of a bourgeois morality — based on the preservation of life — as distilled in his introduction of an individual natural right to life prior to social obligation. As I note in chapter four and five, Strauss presents Hobbes as the first philosopher who attempts to build a new moral or scientific political philosophy on the new continent that Machiavelli had founded. Hobbes's new morality is liberalism. As Strauss puts it in "The Three Waves of Modernity":

One can describe the change effected by Hobbes as follows: whereas prior to him natural law was understood in the light of a hierarchy of man's ends in which self-preservation occupied the lowest place, Hobbes understood natural law in terms of self-preservation alone; in connection with this, natural law came to be understood primarily in terms of the right of self-preservation as distinguished from any obligation or duty—a development which culminates in the substitution of the rights of man for natural law (nature replaced by man, law replaced by rights).⁹³¹

Already in the inter-war period, Strauss had argued that Hobbes's modern natural right positions individual right prior to, and above obligation to the state (the role of the state is to secure these rights) and, consequently, fundamentally alters the ancient conception of natural law. The Hobbesian natural is divorced from nature and dependent on human will. Strauss identifies this as the theoretical core of the liberal doctrine after World War II.

⁹³¹ Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity," 88.

In “The Three Waves of Modernity,” Strauss argues that it was the political and philosophical reactions to Hobbes’s natural right that resulted in the second and third wave of modernity. According to him, it is Rousseau who instigates the second wave, in essence, by replacing *human nature* with *history*. Rousseau criticizes Hobbes’s portrayal of humans in the state of nature, specifically arguing (as Macpherson would two centuries later) that vanity is a socio-historical attribute that Hobbes mistakenly reads as essential to human nature as such. Rousseau attempted to go back further in time by peeling back the layers of civilization that had shaped and tainted Hobbes’s description of humans in order to uncover the authentic state of nature and the human savage that dwells there. In so doing, Strauss argues, Rousseau waters-down the essence that defines the human animal as rational animal in *Natural Right and History*. In “The Three Waves of Modernity,” Strauss restates this verdict: “Rousseau's natural man lacks not merely, as Hobbes's natural man does, sociality, but *rationality* as well.”⁹³² In chapter five, I point out that Strauss believes that at a certain point in the evolutionary history of homo sapiens, humans acquired a kind of capacity for rational thought; this capacity, for Strauss, came to define the human animal as such, and as different in *kind* from other animals. This view aligns with Socratic-Platonic rationalism that holds the view that reason is part of our natural constitution. It is from this perspective that Strauss defines Rousseau’s “noble savage” in both *The Natural Right and History* and “The Three Wave of Modernity” as a “subhuman”:

Man in the state of nature is subhuman or pre-human; his humanity or rationality have been acquired in a long process. In post-Rousseauan language, man's humanity is due not to nature but to history. [...] The concept of history, i.e., of the historical process as a single process in which man becomes human without

⁹³² Strauss, “The Three Waves of Modernity,” 90, emphasis added.

intending it, is a consequence of Rousseau's radicalization of the Hobbesian concept of the state of nature.⁹³³

In “The Three Waves of Modernity,” Strauss argues that for the thinkers of the second wave of modernity, history replaces human nature. Rousseau’s revolution, Strauss argues, culminates in Hegel’s understanding of history:

The most powerful philosopher of history was Hegel. For Hegel the historical process was a rational and reasonable process, a progress, culminating in the rational state, the postrevolutionary state. Christianity is the true or absolute religion; but Christianity consists in its reconciliation with the world, the *saeculum*, in its complete secularization, a process begun with the Reformation, continued by the Enlightenment, and completed in the postrevolutionary state, which is the first state consciously based upon the recognition of the rights of man.⁹³⁴

The liberal state is understood as a result of the historical process. As we have seen in chapter four, in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss argues that Hobbes’s modern conception of human rationality (as a method of mathematical deduction and based on an ontology of the human in their natural state as the passionate animal). Liberalism as rational, with its source in Hobbes, is thus based on a faulty ontology of human nature, and an egalitarian view of rationality that realizes itself in the post-revolutionary state. The basis for the social contract, and popular sovereignty, follows from the insight that each and every individual, independently of their natural abilities, agrees to a covenant due to fear of a violent death. This, Strauss concludes in *Natural Right and History*, is the modern regime of folly.

In all his studies, Strauss argues that Hobbes believes he has discovered the passion that made the human animal rational, namely fear of violent death, and with that, made the modern and bourgeois doctrine of natural right possible. In the pre-scientific

⁹³³ Strauss, “The Three Waves of Modernity,” 90.

⁹³⁴ Strauss, “The Three Waves of Modernity,” 95.

Hobbes (or in his thinking of the human that is not tinted by his adoption of a scientific approach), Strauss identifies vanity as the primary cause behind the war of all against all. In Strauss's final work, however, he argues that Hobbes in his scientific description of the human animal identifies human's capacity for causal reason as the root of vanity. Strauss's final insight is that the peculiar human ability for causal reason is causally prior to both power and vanity. By placing human reason at the root of both vanity and power, Strauss makes a case against the idea that the source of reason is passion, on the one hand, and against the notion that Hobbesian science is dependent on the arbitrariness of language, on the other. In so doing, Strauss brings us to nihilism and relativism and the third wave of modernity.

6. 8. *The third wave of modernity: relativism, fascism and the possibility of natural right*

It is Nietzsche, in Strauss's account, who initiates the third wave of modernity. Hobbes, Strauss argues across all his studies, was convinced that he had discovered an absolute ground for a science of politics and a social contract in human nature. In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss argues that Hobbes's position deteriorates into relativism over time. In the 1950s and 1960s, Strauss diagnoses present liberal theory, and the West in general, as having lost its confidence in its own principles. Present liberal theory, he argues, suffers from the same illness that for him marked the third wave of modernity — relativism:

The theory of liberal democracy, as well as of communism, originated in the first and second waves of modernity; the political implication of the third wave proved to be fascism. Yet this undeniable fact does not permit us to return to the earlier forms of modern thought: the critique of modern rationalism or of the modern belief in reason by Nietzsche cannot be dismissed or forgotten. This is the deepest reason for the crisis of liberal democracy. The theoretical crisis does not necessarily lead to a practical crisis, for the superiority of liberal democracy to communism, Stalinist or post-Stalinist, is obvious enough. And above all, liberal

democracy, in contradistinction to communism and fascism, derives powerful support from a way of thinking which cannot be called modern at all: the premodern thought of our western tradition.⁹³⁵

Until the late 1930s, as I point out in chapter two and three, Strauss viewed liberalism and socialism as two sides of the same coin, both sharing the premise that humans are by nature good. In chapter five, I noted that Strauss in the 1950s and 1960s uses an amoral conception of human evil to instruct liberals to separate themselves from socialists. As seen in the above quotation, Strauss believes that liberal democracy, through its adoption of pre-modern thought, and with that the separation of modern/Hobbesian liberalism from pre-modern liberalism, offered another tool to distinguish liberalism from communism. He also asserts that liberal democracy is a viable practical political alternative. I will now conclude by investigating further Strauss's claim that this third wave, as initiated by Nietzsche's critique of modern rationalism, and as reflected in the politics of the fascists, hinders us from returning to modern reason or earlier waves of modernity, but does not preclude a return to an ancient kind of rationalism.

In his lecture, "Introduction to Existentialism," Strauss appraises Isaiah Berlin's conception of negative and positive liberty as symptomatic of the crisis of contemporary liberal theory. Berlin's value pluralism, Strauss contends, falls into a logical contradiction as it seeks to maintain a distinction between relative and absolute values. He reads Berlin's position as evidence of a larger loss of confidence within the liberal tradition and the overall decline of the West. Liberal relativism, in Strauss's account, is the soft side of existentialism: "The situation to which existentialism belongs can be seen to be liberal democracy, or, more precisely, a liberal democracy which has become uncertain of itself

⁹³⁵ Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity," 98.

or of its future. Existentialism belongs to the decline of Europe.”⁹³⁶ The hard side of relativism was reflected in Heidegger’s existentialism. The effect of Heidegger’s destruction of the history of Being, Strauss argues, had left the world without philosophical positions or schools, with the exception of “neo-Thomism and Marxism crude or refined. All rational liberal philosophic positions have lost their significance and power.”⁹³⁷ Strauss notes that “one may deplore this, but I for one cannot bring myself to clinging to philosophical positions which have been shown to be inadequate.”⁹³⁸ And little hope remained: “I am afraid that we shall have to make a very great effort in order to find a solid basis for rational liberalism. Only a great thinker could help us in our intellectual plight. But here is the great trouble: the only great thinker in our time is Heidegger.”⁹³⁹ The question over the survival of theoretical or Hobbesian liberalism then becomes, Strauss continues, whether Heidegger is right or wrong. The question is not easily answered because only a great philosopher can judge another great philosopher and Strauss does not think he is competent to be that judge, presenting himself as merely a scholar of the history of political thought. Yet, Strauss, as several scholars have argued, may have thought higher of himself than he let on: Strauss was a philosopher who, as Meier points out, offered his philosophy through his textual commentaries. Even so, Strauss did not consider himself on par with Heidegger, nor in his view was anyone else alive.⁹⁴⁰ Heidegger, he further notes, had not yet been fully understood by any of his contemporaries i.e., the jury is still out on Heidegger’s fundamental ontology. However,

⁹³⁶ Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism,” 39.

⁹³⁷ Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism,” 29.

⁹³⁸ Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism,” 29, emphasis added.

⁹³⁹ Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism,” 29.

⁹⁴⁰ Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism,” 29-30.

this, as I have argued in the second half of the dissertation, was not Strauss's last word on the matter.

In the lecture, Strauss mentions the political reason why one might not want to consider Heidegger's philosophy in the first place: "Heidegger became a Nazi in 1933."⁹⁴¹ This statement does not only refer to his political deeds; Heidegger's decision to join the National Socialists was *not* simply a political miscalculation by a philosopher removed from society, but a decision Strauss sees reflected in his philosophy — and the third wave of modernity in general — or as he put it a few years later:

Heidegger, who surpasses in speculative intelligence all his contemporaries and is at the same time intellectually the counterpart of what Hitler was politically, attempts to go a way not yet trodden by anyone, or rather to think in a way in which philosophers at any rate have never thought before. Certain is that no one has questioned the premises of philosophy as radically as Heidegger."⁹⁴²

It was Heidegger's "contempt for *reasonableness*," besides the praise of "resoluteness," that "encourage[d]" the Nazi "movement."⁹⁴³ In chapter four, I argue that Strauss, at the outset of World War II, identified as his task to recover ancient reason as a defence against Heidegger's destruction of reason. Until the end of his life, Strauss worked tirelessly to defend ancient rationality among the pre-moderns in his many studies of ancient and pre-modern thinkers — as seen in his books *Liberalism: Ancient & Modern*, *City and Man*, *What is Political Philosophy* and the posthumously published, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* — and perhaps kept alive the possibility of a natural right

⁹⁴¹ Strauss, "An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism," 30

⁹⁴² Leo Strauss, "An Unspoken Prologue to a Public Lecture at St. John's," *The College* 30, no. 2 (January 1979): 3, quoted by Hilail Gilden, "Introduction" to Strauss, Leo, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays* (Detroit– Wayne State University Press, 1989), xix.

⁹⁴³ Strauss, "An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism," 30.

grounded in an eternal nature of the whole, where Heidegger identified only an “abyss” and the impossibility of any ethics.⁹⁴⁴

I also argue in chapter four that Strauss does not prove that human nature is *not* conditioned by the historical horizon. In other words, he does not prove philosophically that there is an essence in the Being we are that defines the human *qua* human, extending across historical horizons and societies. Instead, he brackets the historicist thesis by arguing that it falls into a logical contradiction, and much like Spinoza’s Napoleonic (practical) strategy, Strauss goes on to argue in *Natural Right and History* as if historicism had been refuted and his basic proposition about human nature is sound. However, Hilail Gilden has suggested that Strauss did not think that the “objection” that he had raised against historicism in *Natural Right and History* refuted Heidegger’s radical historicism:

The radical historicist faces the objection Strauss raises by ascribing his insight into the historicity of human existence to the unique and unprecedented historical situation of modern man. He claims that the manner in which his insight is achieved confirms the content of that insight. This claim is accompanied by an analysis that is meant to lay bare the ultimate assumptions which formerly guided and were thought to justify philosophy as the attempt to achieve comprehensive knowledge of eternal order. This analysis attempts to show that those assumptions are by no means ultimate in character, that they are derived from a deeper root to which earlier thought had no access, that their validity is derivative and severely limited, and that they lack the power to justify philosophy in the traditional sense of the term. A fundamental part of this analysis is a wholly new account of human existence. That new account is held to be superior to all previous accounts precisely because it is not based on the questionable assumptions which all previous philosophers are alleged to have taken for granted.⁹⁴⁵

We saw in chapter five that Strauss, on the basis of an essentialist view of human nature that he found confirmed through the history of human evolution, he refused to abandon the Socratic-Platonic tradition and remained an outpost against the anti-metaphysical

⁹⁴⁴ Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism,” 28.

⁹⁴⁵ Gilden, “Introduction” to Strauss, Leo, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*, xviii-xix.

relativism of the third wave of modernity. In his talk on Heidegger, Strauss describes himself as someone “who sits at the feet” of the “old philosophers.”⁹⁴⁶ Indeed, I argue that Strauss in the late 1930s began to reach back in time for a mooring line with which to secure the philosophical enterprise within the historicist storm that pitted relativism and nihilism against eternity and rationality. My dissertation thus contributes to the debate over whether or not Strauss is a pre-modern or post-modern (i.e., in the camp of the third wave of modernity) thinker: Strauss sides with the pre-modern rational enterprise, but agrees with the thinkers of the third wave that that “the critique of modern rationalism or of the modern belief in reason by Nietzsche cannot be dismissed or forgotten.”⁹⁴⁷

I also argue across the dissertation that Strauss came to differentiate his understanding of Socratic-Platonic and Aristotelian rationalism from Hobbes’s understanding of reason as a mathematical calculation and grounded in the passions, at least until his last insight on Hobbes. For Strauss, it is our capacity for rational thought, our natural constitution that sets humans apart from other animals in the whole. Strauss adopts the ancient view that human beings are by nature rational animals and have natural ends that are determined by their place in the hierarchy of cognitive abilities. This ancient view is different from moderns like Hobbes and Spinoza, for whom, Strauss argues, it is not nature that provides the standard but human will. Spinoza, however, arrives at the same position as Strauss that the highest end is the life devoted to philosophy:

For Spinoza there are not natural ends and hence in particular there is no end particular to man. He is therefore compelled to give a novel account of man’s end (the life devoted to contemplation): man’s end is not natural, but rational, the result of man’s figuring it out, of man’s ‘forming an idea of man, as of a model of human nature’. He thus decisively prepares the modern notion of the ‘ideal’ as the

⁹⁴⁶ Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism”, 34.

⁹⁴⁷ Strauss, “Three Waves of Modernity,” 98.

work of the human mind or as a human project, as distinguished from an end imposed by nature.⁹⁴⁸

Strauss does not seek to demonstrate or claim, however, that the universe is structured according to rational laws as do Spinoza or Plato. The foundation for Strauss's rationalism is not that the universe is structured according to rational laws — whether non-teleological natural laws or those of a teleological design — but that nature is rational insofar as humans have an inborn rational capacity and are oriented toward the perfection of this constitution of their being *qua* Being.

We have seen in the preceding pages that Strauss pursued his philosophical and political project primarily through textual commentaries — his extended study of Hobbes is exemplary of this approach. Strauss thought through political and philosophical problems by means of his engagement with Hobbes (as the founder of modern natural right and liberal rationalism), who, over time, appears more and more as the philosophical counterpoint to Strauss. In the American Strauss's account of the history of political philosophy, the main difference between the ancients and the early or first wave moderns like Hobbes in their notions of the relation between philosophy, politics and religion lies in how the philosophers elect to pursue their philosophical and political enterprises. Socrates took the battle for truth to the streets and paid with his life — a lesson Plato never forgot. Plato and Aristotle's medieval Jewish and Muslim disciples knew how to conceal their craft. For the founders of modernity and liberalism — Machiavelli and Hobbes — the war against theology was a central component of their political philosophies — indeed a war over the foundations of politics — and brought the struggle back into the open. Hobbes sought to establish a secular political order and

⁹⁴⁸ Strauss, "Preface," 16.

universal enlightenment without appeals to religion. Hobbes was of course forced to make amends, but yet, he was far too bold for Strauss's taste. When questioning the foundational truths on which societies rest, or sought to instate a new social order, philosophers ought to employ an esoteric rhetoric—at once out of care for the moral fabric of society on the one hand and to protect themselves against persecution on the other.

Yet, ironically, Strauss spoke openly about the esoteric art of writing and employed esotericism for more than the above stated reason. One reason for the candour, I argue, was to counter historicism and destroy Hobbes's modern egalitarianism on which liberal individual rights rested. The use of esotericism was thus a weapon in this battle, i.e., Strauss's openness about the esoteric tradition was part of enforcing a natural order of rank to serve as the foundation for Socratic-Platonic rationalism (and the possible philosophical quest for ancient natural law and right) and to counter liberal and democratic rights. In his studies in 1930s Weimar, Strauss approaches Hobbes's state of nature as a ground zero for politics and the site to investigate the anthropological and moral nature of humans. In his last seminars and writings on Hobbes, he returns to the 17th century philosophers' investigation of human nature, which he no longer sees as the source of a moral ontology for an authoritarian alternative to liberalism, but rather now as an enduring site that still provides insights about human nature, rationality, and what political regimes are possible or advantageous. Until his last studies, Strauss argues that Hobbes's liberalism, as the doctrine of modern natural right and a rational system, is faulty, but by then he had come around to support a practical and limited form of liberal democracy as a regime form for the times in which he lived. His engagement with

Hobbes, stretching over four decades, was thus as rewarding as it was combative. Strauss read Hobbes with great admiration, and later in life, even with fondness, as is ever evident by the words he chose to introduce Hobbes to his readers in *Natural Right and History*, and with which I end this text:

Thomas Hobbes—that imprudent, impish, and iconoclastic extremist, that first plebeian philosopher, who is so enjoyable a writer because of his almost boyish straightforwardness, his never failing humanity, and his marvelous clarity and force. He was deservedly punished for his recklessness, especially by his countrymen.⁹⁴⁹

⁹⁴⁹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 166.

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